DIGITAL NEIGHBOURHOODS WITH PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY

https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/research/digital-neighbourhoods
and www.digitalneighbourhoods.net

This EU project has studied how access to high speed internet affects rural communities, and whether it contributes to overcoming digital and social divides. Working with rural villages in Cornwall, South West UK, one of the most deprived regions in Europe, the project investigated the impact of EU Convergence superfast broadband rollout on local communities. The research seeks to address the following questions:

What are the effects of superfast broadband introduction to rural communities? Does digital connectivity in rural villages bring people together or drive them apart?

Challenge

Rural communities often suffer from geographical isolation, which can contribute to deprivation. Broadband access is seen as a solution to the overcoming such divides, by enabling access to a world beyond the village. Yet how do rural communities really benefit from being hyper-connected, and how does it change how rural neighbourhoods function as a community?

Project Stages

The Digital Neighbourhoods research project uses qualitative research in a series of case study villages in rural Cornwall. The first stage of the work is to identify a pattern of social connections at neighbourhood places and how people operate within ICT social networks. In the second stage of the study we are working with local community centres and village halls in our case study villages to study how they form digital hubs. The final stage of the work has been to share and disseminate the results of the research with four key audiences; local community, academics, general public and agencies or organisations concerned with future planning of communities.

Partners

The project studies the implementation of EU Convergence funded Superfast Cornwall, a project that involves building a brand new fibre-based superfast broadband network. The first stage of the project is linked of Superfast Cornwall Labs (http://www.superfastcornwall.org/programme/research-innovation): a collaborative project investigating current thinking, research, technological developments and trends to push the boundaries of what is possible through superfast broadband in Cornwall.

The project has worked closely with a range of partners, including four villages; St Breward, Pendeen, Stoke Climsland and St Dennis in Cornwall. The research work has been undertaken in conjunction with Cornwall Rural Community Charity (CRCC) and Cornwall Council.

Outcomes

The project delivers both a theoretical framework and empirical results on how links between online and offline activities, enabled through high speed broadband, affect social cohesion and overcomes digital divides. See below for a summary of key findings, together with outcomes and recommendations.

One of the key outcomes from the research is the importance of community centres and village halls for creating a place for digital inclusion. This is addressed in the publication of the Digital Venue Toolkit document which can be used by community centres and village halls as a guide as to how to get online and help to overcome digital divides with the support of the local rural community. This will impact on policy for regional ICT access and neighbourhood renewal in UK.

Key Findings

A digital infrastructure requires a social and spatial infrastructure

Even though a 'digital divide' is recognized as a condition, it is mostly framed from an economic perspective, and the approach to bridge it still focus on delivering technical infrastructure rather than a social one (Demo 2007). Rural communities have many 'soft assets' and are skilled at managing for themselves; they often have the (non-monetary) resources and capacities to enable change for the community. The delivery of a digital transformation can only be achieved through 'affective use', that is not access to technical hardware and software, but a mobilisation of resources to meet the needs of the community. This requires a 'place' for digital inclusion (a community centre, library or village hall), a set of people (the community networkers to tell people about it and create a social network) and access to equipment and connectivity.

Recommendations

1. Measuring digital inclusion

The current measure of digital inclusion impact is at the scale of the individual, which misses some of the community digital 'social capital' and corresponding community benefits. The functioning and resilience of a rural community is to some extent increasingly linked with acquiring and applying digital skills in the context of the everyday life of a community. In this context it has been shown that village halls or community centres play a vital role in supporting the delivery and 'usefulness' of digital inclusion within a community. The village hall becomes the context for which digital skills become useful and relevant in a person life.

Recommendation: There needs to method to evaluate the readiness of village halls to deliver and enable digital inclusion. This can be mapped back against the background demographic and local factors. The typology of village halls could be used in much the same way as a typology of digital individual inclusion, with specific measures and toolkits made available depending on the venue's stage on the digital inclusion scale.

2. The need for a broader definition of Access

Statistics of broadband access (e.g. 95% in Cornwall) do not reflect actual use. According to Gurstein (2003 par 43) affective use is "the capacity and opportunity to successfully integrate ICTs into the accomplishment of self or collaboratively identified goals." Where digital inclusion training is delivered outside of the home, it needs to be linked with a venue that has an 'ongoing organizational base for financial management, physical presence and access to skilled personnel; and perhaps most importantly gives it a framework which would allow for continuity and the potential for growth'

Recommendation: There needs to mode of evaluating the access a person has to digital inclusion in relation to the ability they have to access these resources.

3. Rural communities' resources and capacity to go online

Rural communities need to determine the function and role of technologies in ways that are appropriate to their community. The application of technologies must take account of the specificities of community and place in order to maximise the impact for the neighbourhood. This includes upskilling of community stakeholders (Digital Champions).

Recommendation: There needs to be a background study of village halls and community centres in UK to assess their current typology on the digital inclusion 'readiness' and an action plan to enable digital inclusion in these venues, including a toolkit. This should be combined with negotiating a 'community' tariff for broadband connection with IT delivery companies.