# Thinking Chaordically:
# The future of communities and technology

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> *We have to look for power sources here, and distribution networks we were never taught, routes of power our teachers never imagined, or were encouraged to avoid...We have to find meters whose scales are unknown in the world, draw our own schematics, getting feedback, making connections, reducing the error, trying to learn the real function...[1]*

Community networks (CNs) and community technology centers (CTCs) have evolved over the past fifteen years to provide a wide variety of services, ranging from training classes in neighborhood access centers (relatively low tech) to providing sophisticated networks that include Internet access and commercial quality information services (e.g. email, Web hosting, database design, network management, etc.). For many years, these organizations (CNs and CTCs) were largely ignored, but the rise of the digital divide as a political issue and the changing landscape of the telecommunications industry have led to an interesting set of interlocking and conflicting challenges and opportunities.

The challenges focus on competitive pressures, a changing regulatory climate that continually redefines the "rules," and the need to constantly extend technological expertise. But opportunities also abound--increasing demand for services and a fragmented private sector that leaves many communities without adequate access and services.

## A Chaordic Alliance

> *We now live in a world of such complexity, diversity, and multiplicity of scales that there is little possibility of achieving constructive, sustained governance with existing concepts of organization. People, everywhere, are growing desperate for renewed sense of community. Shared purpose and principles leading to new concepts of self-governance at multiple scales from the individual to the global have become essential. [2]*

Dee Hock, the former CEO of VISA, the multinational credit card company, coined the term *chaordic alliance*. A combination of the words *chaos* and *order*, Hock's vision is to create a new organization that is based not on traditional, hierarchical, topdown decision-making, but rather on shared purpose and consensus.

A chaordic alliance does not rely on heroic leadership to make decisions (and having the organization blindly follow), but rather the alliance does only those things that all the partners agree to in advance--that is, the organization initiates actions and activities only when all members of the alliance agree. This is a fundamentally different approach that discards the I win--you lose antagonism for a collaborative model based on I win--you win. Consensus is most likely to be reached when all parties find something of value in the outcome.

A chaordic technology alliance would have three primary, equal, and autonomous organizations, each with its own goals and services. These three organizations are:

- The Community Technology Center (CTC) which provides intra-community services. There may be one or more CTCs in a community.

- The Community Network (CN) provides services across an entire community, and may collaborate on programs and services with local CTCs.

- The Regional Technology Alliance (RTA) provides services across an entire region, and works collaboratively with CNs and CTCs on service and infrastructure projects too large for any individual CN or CTC to handle alone.

CTCs would continue to be independent organizations, but they find it in their self-interest to collaborate with the local community network on projects or to share service costs (e.g. a community network may run a mail server for several CTCs). Similarly, CNs may collaborate with CTCs and other CNs as needed. The Regional Technology Alliance provides an organizational mechanism to facilitate the "coming together" of individual projects.

**Regional Technology Alliances**

The RTAs could play many important roles, limited only by the interests and needs of the participating partners.

- Regional network access and network administration--network access and administration is most effective and efficient (i.e. lowest cost) when aggregated over a large area (ignoring political boundaries). RTAs can act as brokers to purchase Internet access and provide a Network Operations Center (NOC).

- Server and services administration and support--most services (e.g. email, Web hosting, etc.) also benefit from aggregation. By spreading the cost of the most expensive technical support across many organizations, costs for all are reduced and the local organizations have more staff time and budget to spend on delivering core services and avoiding much of the expense of back end systems.

- Research and development--RTAs could provide R&D support for member organizations, helping to push more sophisticated services and support out into user hands more quickly.

- Training--Support and training/education of staff who would work on the local level in CNs and CTCs. RTAs could provide less expensive and more frequent training opportunities.

- Infrastructure development--Telecommunications infrastructure development (fiber and wireless transmission, colocation facilities, etc.) is also best done at the regional level, and requires technical expertise than most individual CNs and CTCs lack.

Each RTA might have a staff of 7-8 people plus a director. As the service arm of the chaordic alliance, the RTA would be dedicated to the success of the community networks and community technology centers. The RTA would never initiate projects on its own; it would always provide services and support to projects started by the member organizations of the alliance. These services and systems would never be forced upon a member of the alliance; a consensus would be needed before the RTA initiated an effort.

It would be essentially "invisible" to the public, because it would have no public mission. The community networks and community technology centers would work on behalf of the public common good; the RTA would work on behalf of the common good of the chaordic alliance.

**Summary**

We live in a time when technology is becoming not just ubiquitous but pervasive--nearly every device we touch at home and at work may be "wired" in just a few years. Most of this wiring is being done by transnational corporations with little or no thought about the consequences and effects on individuals, communities, and the common good. Dee Hock asks:

*Is this how things ought to be?*

The work of community technology centers and community networks is to ensure that technology supports human goals and aspirations, and that technology supports the growth and development of human relationships (not machine relationships). This commitment to the common good suggests that CNs and CTCs can become not just technology pioneers but organizational pioneers as well, seeking out and enacting new collaborative structures like Regional Technology Alliances.

**References**

[1] Pynchon, Thomas (1972) *Gravity's Rainbow*.

[2] Hock, Dee (1999) *Birth of the Chaordic Age*. San Francisco: Berett-Koehler, p. 90

## About the author

Andrew Michael Cohill is an information architect and has been the Director of the Blacksburg Electronic Village <www.bev.net> since it's start in 1993. The Blacksburg Electronic Village is a model for the development of community networks around the world, and much of Cohill's efforts are related to teaching others how to create healthy electronic communities. He is co-chair of the Governor's Task Force on eCommunities for Virginia.

Cohill is on the Board of Directors of the Association For Community Networks, and was recently reelected President of that organization for 2001-2002. He has published numerous papers, articles, and book chapters, and has spoken widely on networked information systems, the Internet, and software systems design. He is an author and coeditor of *Community Networks: Lessons Learned from Blacksburg, Virginia*, now in its second edition. He can be contacted on the Web at <http://www.designnine.org/>.