

The Knowledge Democracy: Challenges and opportunities

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Communities are a set of human relationships, focused around a set of shared values that we call the common good. The common good is necessarily balanced on a day to day basis and on an issue by issue basis with individual wants and needs. In a civil society, respectful discourse, or conversations, are used to help the community find the fulcrum point that balances the common good with individual and organizational wants and needs.

In the past, the concept of the common good was based on finding a common balancing point among many individual needs. Typically, individuals or organizations might agree to compromise on an issue in return for a concession on some other issue. Put another way, the common good was often found using the “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine” method of conflict resolution. But this reflects an underlying “I win--you lose” philosophy that can create division in the community at the same time a balance on an issue is sought.

But there is another way, in which individuals and organizations in a community agree that they are all interdependently connected, and because of these interdependent connections, it makes more sense to find the locus of the common good by adopting a “I win---you win” philosophy. If everything we do is connected to other people and organizations in the community (directly or indirectly), it is both more effective and more efficient to seek the common good with the goal of making everyone involved in the conversation a winner.

A conversation requires an attitude of mutual respect by all parties to the conversation, and there are three necessary components to a respectful discourse: speaking, listening, and understanding. Unfortunately, in many communities, and on a national level as well, speaking has turned into shouting, and far too often, the acts of listening and understanding have been abandoned. Who has not been embarrassed by televised scenes of town or county council meetings where citizens scream at council

members? Who has not been embarrassed by the outcome of so many of these meetings--when hardly anyone in the community is satisfied by the decision? All parties leave the table feeling aggrieved and angry.

Today, we are assaulted by change. Population growth, complex technological growth, and a focus on individual rights at the expense of the common good have created crises that have left our traditional forms of governance struggling to manage. Formerly stable communities are dealing with issues that citizens are not well-equipped to solve. Crises bring about changes in the fabric of the community that can lead the community in two directions, as shown in Figure 1 on the next page.

Communities that continue to use traditional, topdown, hierarchical methods to address community issues are able at best to make reformational changes that do not address the underlying and fundamental issues. A crisis may be averted, but like squeezing a balloon, other, unanticipated problems usually pop up. Over time, failure to address these fundamental, structural issues lead to destabilization of the community, and eventually disintegration. Suburban sprawl and the resulting disintegration of communities is an example of this phenomenon. Sprawl has created unanticipated and often nearly insoluble problems in transportation, public services, education, and community development at large.

Sprawl, fundamentally, is the result of putting private wants before the common good. When individual rights are consistently placed before the needs of the community at large, over time, the community begins to break down. Too often, discussions about community development are not conducted respectfully, but instead are pursued as legal exercises with an "I win--you lose" mentality.

Sprawl is not the only problem communities face, but the phenomenon is well known. Many rural communities face the opposite situation, in which reliance on traditional methods of community planning have resulted in shrinking communities with a constant outflow of the young from the community--most never return. Despite overwhelming evidence that traditional economic development and educational methods are not working, these communities struggle mightily, continuing to rely on strategies that were appropriate forty years ago, but no longer apply in a wired world and in an economy driven not by the geographic solidity of manufacturing but by the permeability and boundarylessness of information.

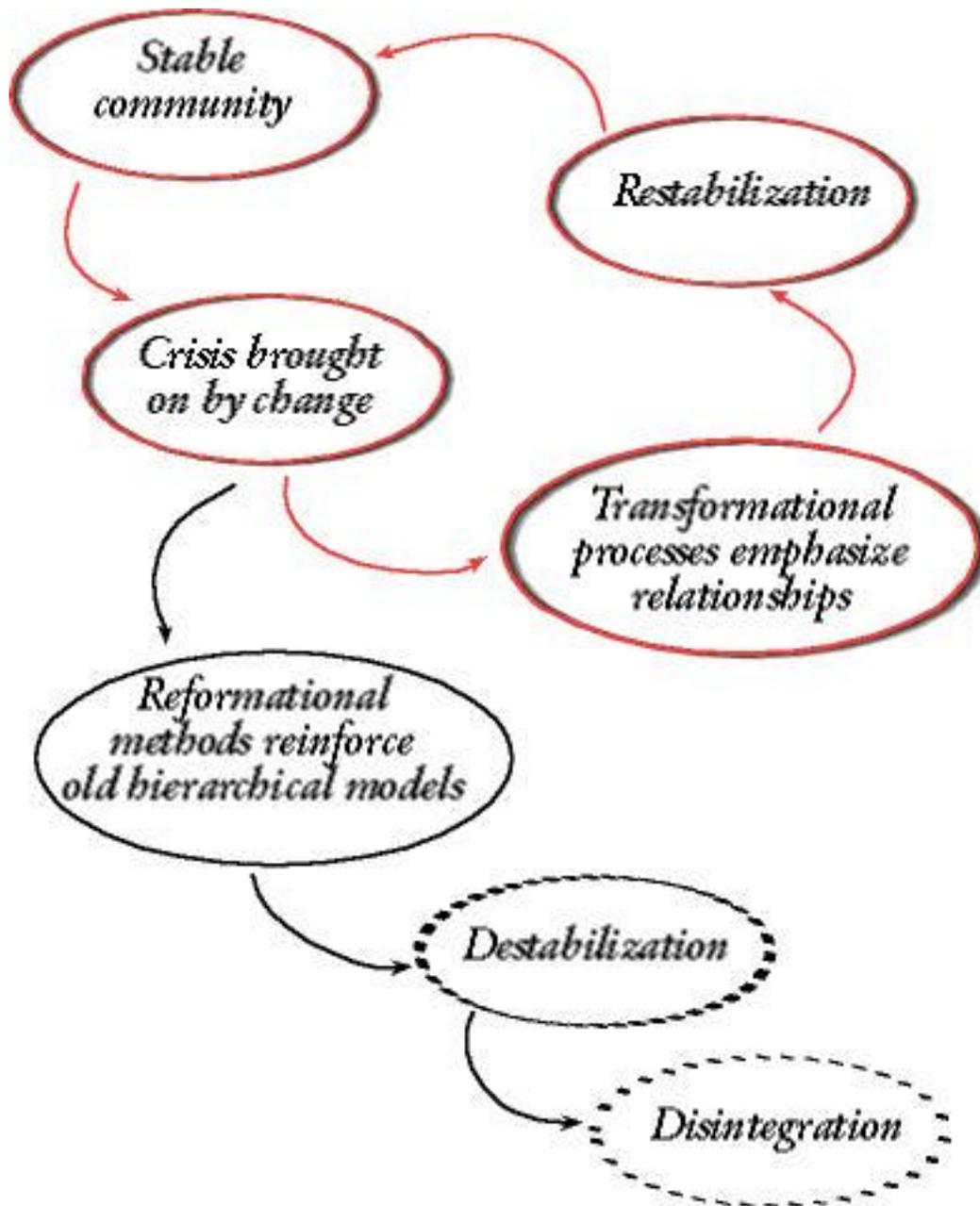


Figure 1: The cycle of community change

Communities and relationships

How did communities come to this perilous state? Our society today has come to value individual needs and wants over the common good. But underpinning that idea are the myriad relationships that constitute a community. As we devote less time and energy to developing and maintaining our relationships with other individuals and organizations in the community, and as we spend less time speaking with and listening to others, our understanding of the needs and wants of those individuals and organizations decreases correspondingly.

But what has changed? The rise of the Information Economy has created simultaneously two kinds of organizations that have had enormous impact on communities and individuals--the global enterprise and the microbusiness.

The free flow of information has enabled global enterprise on a scale that was scarcely imagined twenty years ago. Even companies that sell real goods (of any kind) are manageable as global enterprises only because the global telecommunications network makes it possible to aggregate in real time the massive amounts of data needed to keep the parts flowing to factories, to keep finished products moving onto trucks and planes, to keep the trucks and planes carrying those goods to their destination, and to keep the stores in individual communities stocked with the right level of goods.

The dilemma for communities is that it is often very difficult to have a conversation with or maintain a relationship with a global enterprise whose headquarters may be many states or many countries away. And if conversations occur, they are often extremely complex because of the many layers of company managers and company lawyers that may be required just to talk, let alone reach consensus on an issue.

Conversely, the fluidity of information and ease of communications has led to many more individual and small enterprises that often have tremendous impact on the community. Increased ease of information distribution has led to an increase in nonprofit and community groups that use highly-organized and sophisticated lobbying techniques to argue single issues before local government. Small businesses and microbusinesses have global reach and are able to employ highly skilled lawyers to litigate for special considerations from the community. Local government leaders, exhausted by the barrage of conflicting information, the intense demands for individual consideration at the expense of the common good, and the threat of costly litigation from both business and community groups, often end up doing nothing or simply taking the path of least resistance (that course least likely to provoke a lawsuit). In the end, the

community disintegrates because relationships have become formalized in lawsuits or do not exist at all. Community becomes an exercise in shouting, rather than speaking, listening, and understanding.

The maintenance of relationships among key groups in the community is a never-ending, complex, interconnected spiral, as represented in Figure 2. Each group is continuously related to, allied with, or in opposition to other groups and individuals in the community.



Figure 2: The spiral of community relationships

The knowledge democracy

The concept of the Knowledge Democracy involves three key points:

- First, the acknowledgment that telecommunications and the rise of the Internet have permanently altered the way people acquire and use information. In the past, distribution of information about community issues and affairs was expensive and tedious. Information was often passed informally through the maintenance of human relationships in the community. Today, information is widely available from many sources, and human relationships are no longer needed to obtain information.
- Second, a civil society trying to make decisions will be most effective when the process of finding the common good is regarded as a mutually interdependent effort in which the goal is to help all parties to the process succeed. This approach requires constant maintenance of relationships through mutual respect of the opinions of others, gained by speaking, listening, and understanding.
- Third, that the American model of democracy works best when approached as an ongoing set of conversations about issues, leading to a consensus within the community about the best course of action. These conversations are purposeful, parallel processes designed not just to talk about the issues but also to reach consensus on how the community should proceed. These processes are aimed at rebuilding trust by letting citizens participate fully in all aspects of deciding what to do about a key issue.

America's representative democracy is intentionally designed to avoid the tyranny of the majority by using elected representatives to mediate these conversations and make decisions based on understanding the content of those conversations. Representative democracy permits lawmakers to make decisions that may be at odds with a majority of individuals, but that may best represent the common good. Note that a key feature of representative democracy, as compared to other forms of government, is that it permits such an outcome, even though making decisions for the common good is not an automatic outcome of the process.

A community operating on the principles of the Knowledge Democracy will:

- Make equitable use of information technology to encourage broad participation in

conversations by as many individuals and organizations as possible. Information technology will also be used to gather, interpret, and disseminate widely all opinions and information about an issue, to those interested individuals and organizations.

- Make a commitment to place the highest priority on human relationships, which are the basis of a healthy community. Participants in community discussions will agree to speak with care, to listen with respect, and to make every effort to understand the needs and wants of others (even if they disagree).
- Make a commitment to seek consensus on issues and to respect the basic principles of representative democracy, rather than automatically resorting to litigation when outcomes reflect a consensus for the common good rather than self-serving wants.

Ray Connor [3], a member of Parliament in Queensland, Australia believes the real issue is about knowledge. Connor, who coined the term “knowledge democracy,” believes that owning a computer and having Internet access in the home does not automatically enable a person to find a better job, become more involved in the community, take a more active role in civic affairs, or to better participate in the practice of democracy. Connor notes that as the cost of computers continues to fall and more homes have computers, the real gaps will begin to emerge, between the knowledge have/ have nots, and between the skill have/ have nots.

In Connor's vision of the knowledge democracy, communities that are serious about solving the digital divide will focus less on acquiring "stuff" (i.e. buying computers) and focus more on comprehensive training programs at all levels, including K12 schools, higher education, and adult education. In the knowledge democracy, one's level of participation will be based heavily on one's ability to acquire information, turn that information into knowledge, and use that knowledge to improve one's own socioeconomic situation or that of someone else in the community.

It is important to remember that humans create and use knowledge; the computers and the networks are just convenient tools. Digital information systems store and manipulate data and information, but these systems cannot create knowledge or foster understanding--those are uniquely human abilities.

There are nine challenges that communities must be prepared to discuss openly. Figure 3 below shows the key issues that will affect communities over the next twenty to forty years.

In a world where an increasing rate of change affects every part of our world, the only constant in our lives is our relationship with others.

The proper role of technology is to strengthen and support human relationships.

Challenges and questions for communities

Information is not knowledge.

How will communities reach consensus on important decisions in a world with too much information and not enough knowledge?

Changing rights to information
– who owns information and
how is it distributed?

The right to communicate as
a basic principle of democracy.

Technology is changing the relationship
between government and citizens.

Privacy issues, especially as they relate to personal
information and the needs of the community for
open communication.

Transforming youth into
the leaders of the future.

Futures orientation for the
community--asking what ought to be,
rather than looking backward.

Who should own telecom infrastructure?
How can communities ensure a sustainable
future by prudent investment in
telecommunications?

The confusion over knowledge vs. information and
the ability of citizens and organizations to transform
information to knowledge.

Figure 3: Challenges for communities

Ownership and distribution of information

Who owns information? Who can distribute it? Does the malleability of pure data change ownership rights?

Napster is a network-enabled software program that has, depending upon whom you believe, is freeing musical artists from the tyranny of record company contracts, or crushing the music industry and any incentive musicians have to create music. Right now, the Napster debate has touched few of us.

Unless you are a recording artist or a college student, you are not likely to have a strong opinion about Napster. But Napster is only the start of many such struggles, and each struggle will draw nearer and nearer to our own lives and livelihood. Today, there are companies that provide “free” online forums and other services, but only after you agree that anything you write or express in those forums becomes the property of the company. As we speak, people’s rights to their own thoughts and ideas are being transferred to companies far from where they live and work.

Many companies involved in the commercial distribution of information (most typically, books, music recordings, and video recordings) are trying to fundamentally change laws regarding copyright. In the past, if one purchased a book or a recording, it belonged to the purchaser, and that person was free to make copies for personal use, to sell the item, or to give it away. Today, there is great pressure and much lobbying to have states adopt a new approach to the ownership of digital information. One expression of this is called UCITA (Uniform Code for....). UCITA can greatly restrict individual rights to purchased information.

In one instance, consumers would purchase only the right to use information like books and recordings, and would not own that information. Companies would be free to charge annual fees to continued use, and if you did not pay, hidden software in the ebook or the recording would lock out any additional use. Another scheme involves placing software on hard drives that detects when a person is making a copy of protected information and prevents the making of the copy. This would directly oppose long-established (by the courts) fair use rights of consumers.

If technology changes more quickly than the courts and lawmakers can reasonably

respond, who protects communities and consumers? Government regulation often provokes unintended and costly consequences. One alternative is for individuals and communities to intentionally develop and support open source software and hardware that places no artificial limits on how information is used .

The right to communicate as a basic principle of democracy

Companies that provide network access are often contractually restricting our rights to use the network to express ourselves

In the past, the great fear of censorship was directed toward the government. Today, a greater concern is companies that are willing to provide Internet access only after customers sign contracts that greatly restrict their ability to use the network to express themselves. These companies reserve the right to deny service to anyone who says anything with which the company disagrees.

It is as if the telephone company monitored all telephone conversations and cut off service if they heard anything that violated company policy (like complaining about your phone bill). Companies like AOL and Time Warner routinely place restrictions on what you can say and do on their services. This is their right as private companies, and it is not clear how to structure laws that respect free speech and also respect the rights of these private companies to do business in the manner of their choosing. But if that is the approach they intend to pursue, then we need alternative, community–managed networks to provide public forums for community and civic discussions.

A more troubling scenario is when government uses the network to monitor private conversations indiscriminately. The FBI's Carnivore system has the capability to monitor all email passing through it. Again, if we were talking about the phone system, it would be as if the FBI said they wanted to monitor all telephone conversations, all the time. The FBI has expressed interest in placing a Carnivore system at the network gateway of every ISP in the country. Robert Cringely, a well know technology commentator, suggests that the ultimate goal of the FBI is to be able to turn off the entire US Internet at will; if they

succeed in placing Carnivore systems in a majority of ISPs, that would indeed be possible.

Suppose a community is served primarily by a single Internet Service Provider (ISP) called BigNetworks, Inc. Using a community-sponsored online discussion forum, citizens and local leaders begin discussing plans to introduce competition in the community by encouraging an regional ISP to expand service into the area. Today, BigNetworks, with a few lines of software, could cut off access to that community online forum for all their customers in the community.

Privacy issues

The need for the privacy of personal information must be balanced against the need of the community for open communication

Privacy is another issue, where, in the past, we were concerned about what the government knew about us. But today, things have again shifted; A greater concern now is what companies know about me, about my family, and about my community. There may be a role for government here if the industry does not self-regulate effectively. Unfortunately, it takes only one company that ignores voluntary regulations to not just inconvenience customers but to divulge sensitive personal data that does real harm to some individuals.

I do not believe voluntary industry controls on personal information will work, and that we do need laws that prescribe what companies can do with personal information and how it is used.

There is another dimension to privacy that is directly related to communities. Most Internet services today (.e.g. email, the Web) make it easy to hide one's identity by using an alias or a screen name. This is both useful and appropriate in many situations (e.g. children should never use their real name on email accounts).

However, if a community is having a discussion on a sensitive local issue (e.g. zoning), it is both important and necessary to know all the speakers. There must a process and system in place in communities to hold civil and respectful discussions about issues without the threat of anonymous individuals making slanderous or deliberately provocative remarks.

A basic tenet of democracy is that we know the speaker. Before the rise of the Internet, most discussions were held in a physical place (the town hall meeting), where it was easy to recognize who was speaking. This recognition process is a powerful social incentive to be civil. Online, those social incentives are very weak, hence the common “flaming” where people write things online that they would never say in a face to face conversation.

Ownership of telecommunications infrastructure

Communities can ensure a sustainable future only by prudent investment in telecommunications infrastructure

For the past hundred years, we enjoyed the best telecommunications systems in the world because we awarded private companies public monopolies for those services. But those times have past; the world has changed. In a competitive telecommunications marketplace, who is considering telecommunications services for the common good? Can we imagine what traffic would be like in our communities without stop lights and traffic laws? Can we imagine what travel in our communities would be like if roads were not managed by the community? The private sector does not have an inalienable right to dictate the level of services provided to communities without regard to the common good. If we truly believe that every person in our communities should have reliable, affordable, high speed telecommunications services, then communities must begin making modest investments in telecommunications to create competition in the marketplace.

Small and rural communities are particularly at risk. In a regulated environment, companies provided universal access in return for a monopoly marketplace. But in a deregulated environment, there is no legal incentive for telecommunications companies to provide service in markets (communities) where they do not feel there is sufficient profit. Which is as it should be; deregulation was the right thing to

do, and there is no turning back.

But if that is so, what are communities that lack either adequate service or adequate competition, or both? Historically, this is not a new problem. Rural communities were faced with this issue in the early part of the twentieth century. At that time, telephone service and electric service were “new,” and many rural and small communities were not being served properly. Many community leaders were told that there was “no way to wire your area.” For many parts of the country, customer-owned electric and telephone coops were the answer. Somehow, the coops found a way to wire the unwireable. Coops, with their customer base representing the community, are a community-owned private enterprise that is vested in providing quality service at affordable prices.

Often, a discussion about community-owned telecommunications tends to focus on wired vs. wireless, or copper vs. fiber, or more generally, about technology rather than service. Wired and wireless services already coexist seamlessly in the telephone world, and will do so as well in the Internet world. Rapid changes in technology mean that there is never a “right solution” or a “permanent” technology choice. Telecommunications ventures have to be managed carefully so that electronics (with a short life) can be amortized quickly, and that transmissions systems (cable, fiber, antenna towers) are designed carefully for long lifetimes.

Confusion between knowledge and information

Citizens must have the skills to transform information into knowledge

Information overload has become a chronic complaint, and one of the negative consequences of the Internet. More information does not automatically lead to better decisions, and in fact, having too much information available can lead to information paralysis, in which one can always delay a decision while obtaining yet more information. This is a profound problem for communities; how are complex decisions to be made when someone in the community can always find more, different (and often

conflicting) information?

Today, we see a tremendous emphasis on technology skills development rather than critical thinking. If we were talking about mechanical skills, the discussion would center around what brand of screwdriver you owned rather than whether or not you really understood how to use various kinds of screwdrivers. The fact that most people use Windows does not mean it is the best choice, or the only choice. And the idea that our kids won't be able to get jobs if they don't know how use Microsoft Word is just silly. A more appropriate concern is their ability to write and to think.

Children are wonderfully capable: if they can learn one word processing program, one can be quite sure they can learn another, or even learn to use three or four, if they need to, just as most of us can use both flat head and Phillips head screwdrivers. Judging a person's abilities by what brand of software they use is wrong, just as wrong as judging them by what designer name appears on their clothes, and just as wrong as judging them by the color of their skin or by their religion. In a world drowning in information, rote learning is less important than being able to transform information into knowledge. This process of transformation of information into knowledge (and wisdom) is a uniquely human one--no computer can do that.

If communities want to be able to reach consensus on complex issues where a plethora of information is available on all sides of the issues, a process is needed to collect information equitably, to allow citizens to access and read that information, to discuss the issues civilly and respectfully, and finally to reach a consensus. Simply having citizens with email accounts will not achieve this. Reaching consensus is a human activity, not a machine activity.

Changing relationship between government and citizens

The network and its ability to distribute information quickly and inexpensively creates a more equitable balance of power in the community

In the past, information was scarce and expensive; as a citizen, it was often difficult and time-consuming to remain informed and engaged in governance issues like zoning, growth, and the environment. And it was easy for government to hide the decision-making process behind the high cost of disseminating information. But things have changed.

Today, the Internet makes it affordable for governments large and small to reveal completely the workings and activities of government to citizens. This means citizens no longer have an excuse for not being informed, and it means that local leaders no longer have an excuse for not informing. This is a radical change. We do not fully understand the implications yet, but we must begin to experiment and to try new ways and approaches to local governance.

More, better-informed citizens presents an opportunity for communities to make better decisions with less rancor, if those involved trust the decision-making process and regard it as fair and equitable.

Time is a precious commodity today, and many community members find it difficult to participate in community affairs simply because of the time involved. Internet services--email, mailing lists, Web sites, and discussion forums--offer new channels for distributing information and new ways of engaging people in the life of the community. But human-led processes are needed to ensure that discussions are fair and equitable, respectful of all, and to ensure that discussions actually lead to outcomes supported by a consensus of participants.

Leadership crisis

Where will the leaders of future come from? How will they learn to lead with respect and civility?

Today, at every level of government, we read about the people we call leaders doing things we are ashamed to discuss with our children--graft, embezzlement, bribes, mismanagement, and worse. While there are still many good people serving as our leaders, many of us have the same uneasy feeling that

something is not right. Part of the problem is that in an increasingly complex, fast-paced, and interconnected world, our leaders do not have the the experience and knowledge to lead effectively. There are many reasons for this, but in local communities a key factor is the death of the merchant class [4].

As transnational corporations like Wal-Mart have driven locally owned businesses out of communities, we have lost our many of our local leaders. In the past, local business people often played a key role in local community development as well as provided important role models for our youth. In the past, as young people worked in the local drugstore alongside the owner, they learned not only how to work responsibly but also learned that it was possible to grow up to own your own business and to take an active part in community affairs.

Today, our youth are not learning that at Wal-Mart and Burger King. What they learn is that they are interchangeable, replaceable cogs in a global corporation that is barely aware of their individual contribution. If we have youths that perform well in those jobs, they are often moved away and out of the community. These corporations are mining our communities for intellectual and social capital, without any reimbursement for the loss suffered by the community as our youth keep moving away, never to return. Where will our next generation of local leaders come from? What are we doing to help our youth become the leaders of the future?

As we seek to support our current leaders and work to nurture the next generation of leaders, it is important to focus attention on leadership processes. Project leadership, using traditional strategic planning, is a common approach--each challenge or opportunity a community faces is managed by leaders on a case by case basis, often without investigating the interconnectedness of the issue with other community issues and problems. For example, zoning decisions are often made without considering the long term impacts on education, transportation, and other community infrastructure.

Process leadership provides ongoing, deliberate ways of looking at, discussing, and reaching consensus on community issues holistically. Leadership is still required to achieve success, but it requires a shift in thinking by leaders from trying to be in charge of the project to facilitating the process of reaching consensus on solutions.

Leaders must be developed locally, from within the community, using locally-managed programs that provide appropriate opportunities for potential leaders to learn how to

become effective process leaders. Nonprofit organizations are providing new sources of leaders to replace the now lost businesspeople. Youth programs crafted intentionally to provide leadership opportunities and training help ensure communities have a sustainable future.

Decision-making crisis

How communities make decisions affects not just the present but potentially reaches far into the future

In this interconnected, global society, the old top down hierarchical decision-making systems no longer work. When everyone has complete access to any and all information, it becomes important to find new ways to enable citizens to play a broader role in discussing community issues and challenges, and then to reach a consensus in the community on how to meet those challenges. Communities must move away from “I win--you lose” adversarial decision-making, and embrace new approaches that can be “I win--you win” for all parties.

The processes now used by most communities reflect a society that no longer exists. In the past, it was not unusual for communities to leave most key decisions to a few well-respected elder leaders in the community. For better or for worse, that was commonplace, and still is. But in part, that system represented a time when information was very expensive and costly to distribute. It was difficult to inform all potentially interested parties in the community about all aspects of an issue. There were well-defined and well-understood routes of power in a community; not everyone agreed with or liked the the people making the decisions or the outcomes, but society was more civil in the past. Personal relationships in community helped to soften bruised feelings and those relationships helped keep the fabric of the community whole and in good repair.

Today, we live in an age where society has been weakened for a myriad of reasons and where personal relationships have been replaced by litigation. Information is inexpensive and easy to distribute widely;

an unanticipated outcome is that everyone is empowered to be an “expert” on almost any topic. Unfortunately for communities, having an excess of “experts” join a debate on an issue often leads to polarization of views, and too often, screaming and shouting.

There are few issues in a community on which all will agree. In a civil society, the next best choice to seek consensus. Consensus is developed by an active process of respectful speech, thoughtful listening, and a commitment to understanding the point of view of others (note that understanding someone is different from agreeing with them). Consensus is reached when all sides agree to respect a decision and to move on. This is best done intentionally, with a well-defined process, rather than leaving it to chance.

Futures orientation

A vision for the future embraced by a majority of citizens and organizations is critical for the long term health and viability of a community

Too often, communities know they must change, but continue to look backward to the ways and systems that worked twenty or thirty years ago. The second half of the twentieth century was remarkably stable with respect to how things were done in communities. But we must now accept the notion that we have entered a new era in which the rules of the past no longer fit.

Communities that want to thrive in the new Information Age economy must adopt a futures orientation that encourages citizens and local leaders to look forward rather than backward. A futures orientation does not always come easily.

A useful way to start a futures-oriented discussion is to ask the question, “Are the decisions we are making in the community today likely to ensure a prosperous and healthy future for our grandchildren?” Or as Polly LeBarre [6], editor of Fast Company magazine, put it, “Would smart people want to live here?”

A process for conversations

To develop a widely supported consensus on a complex issue, a conversation requires facilitation. Rick Smyre of Communities of the Future [4] has successfully used the Direct Consensus Democracy (DCD) successfully in many communities. Direct Consensus Democracy is a well-defined process that provides a framework for intentional conversations about community issues. DCD can be used to set an annual agenda to deal with the issues perceived as most important by the community. Second, DCD provides a way to make decisions for the common good when an unexpected issue requires attention. In each case, the DCD process focuses on three phases.

- The survey phase. Its objective is to identify issues and concerns that are perceived as the most important. An electronic survey will establish the most important issues in the opinion of the participants.
- The appropriate knowledge phase. This phase emphasizes the ability to understand the issue while minimizing personal bias. The objective is to identify key factors identified as the most important in the Phase One survey and to engage in deliberative, generative dialogue about those issues to insure a true context of understanding prior to any decision being made. A combination of face to face and electronic “citizens’ congress” are designed and facilitated to identify these key factors. Teams of diverse citizens will be organized for generative dialogue in the citizen congress phase, followed by full and equal collaboration between citizens and local leaders to identify a course of action.
- The strategic decision phase. This phase focuses on developing specific alternatives to resolve any issue to the benefit of the common good of community residents. Once all duplicative strategies have been eliminated, an electronic vote will be taken to define which strategy will be implemented.

Direct Consensus Democracy utilizes electronic and face to face means to integrate appropriate information from different points of view with direct decision making processes leading to a shared vision for the common good.

eGovernment and eGovernance

Egovernment has become a buzzword, even while few understand what it means. Does it mean electronic voting? Does it mean delivering water bills via email? Does it mean paying parking tickets via the Web? Does it mean citizens barraging elected officials with hundreds or thousands of form letter emails in a transparent attempt to unfairly influence the outcome of an issue? It is important to have a clear understanding of the difference between egovernment and eGovernance.

- eGovernment is the efficient use of technology in the administration and delivery of government services.
- eGovernance is the effective use of technology to facilitate communication which will allow either representative or direct citizen decision making to be used appropriately on issues affecting the common good.

Note that egovernment is concerned with efficiency, and eGovernance is concerned with effectiveness. The two terms are very different. In particular, there is nothing “efficient” about human relationships and the conversations that take place in support of those relationships. Government is more efficient when it reduces the cost of processing parking tickets by taking payments via the World Wide Web instead of requiring a visit to the town hall. Government is more effective when relationships between elected and appointed government officials are strengthened by respectful speech, thoughtful listening, and deepened understanding.

The role of technology in our lives

Many of us are plainly becoming exhausted by “change.” Change has become a relentless presence in our lives. We are told constantly “...to adapt to change,” “...to adapt faster,” “...to get used to change,” “...to become accustomed to an accelerating rate of change.” But who benefits from rapid change? Certainly the manufacturers and vendors of technology do. The life cycle of computer hardware and software is now about nine months. How is it that we have come to accept that as normal? Do we replace refrigerators every year? Do we throw away our toasters regularly? Do we discard perfectly good furniture because it “needs an upgrade?”

If we must accept the notion that everything around us is changing, where is the stability in our lives? What are the anchors in our lives? What is the bedrock that we can cling to in this storm of change?

In a world where change is a constant, the only things we can rely on are our relationships with others—our family, our friends, our neighbors, and the larger community of people with whom we live and work.

We dare not cede the future of our communities to the technologists--those who profit by selling technology. Technology has just one role that can be stated plainly and simply.

Technology should and must support human relationships.

If we are going to use technology, then technology must make it easier for us to communicate with those with whom we have a relationship. This is the proper role of technology, in the classroom, in the family, in the workplace, and in the community.

What does this mean for communities?

It means first and foremost that communities must stop worrying about what stuff to buy and start paying more attention to relationships. How does your community get along with the surrounding county? Or vice versa--How does your county get along with local communities? One thing that is critical to understand: the network simply does not care about geographic boundaries. This very simple fact bears repeating: the network ignores boundaries. To put it another way, the network loves aggregation--more users sharing resources makes the network more efficient and less costly for each user. Or, finally, regions that collaborate constructively on technology issues will prevail. What does collaboration mean? It is all about relationships, and valuing them above stridency, valuing the relationship above being right, and valuing the relationship enough to give as well as to take.

The chief challenge of the Information Economy and of the Knowledge Democracy is not, and again, IS NOT, understanding and using technology. The chief challenge over the next forty to fifty years is to be able to reach consensus on key issues. Communities that learn how to do this will flourish. Communities that do not will wither away.

When we decide to buy stuff for people without knowing clearly what people might do with the stuff, it denies the marketplace the opportunity to respond-- the marketplace of human capital--the people that make up our communities. If we are using technology, individually and/or as a community, it should be making our lives better.

We have this national obsession with stuff. We need more stuff. We are bombarded with ads to buy more stuff. We worry that we don't have enough stuff. But not long after we buy our stuff, we often throw it out. And then complain that we don't have enough landfills for all the stuff. Communities that prosper will do so by focusing on relationships and making technology investments based on the ability of technology to support those relationships.

Investing in community

We talk constantly about "investing" in a community, but how often do we offer citizens the opportunity to actually do that? Often, investment means getting someone or some organization outside the community to "invest", in the belief that we cannot prosper without external help. Why not rethink the notion of "community investment" to include meaningful investment by residents and citizens?

If we are serious about investing in our communities, communities need to realize that the one of the best strategies may be to simply do it yourselves. Fortunately, the roads of the 21st century are built of fiber. An interstate highway typically costs about a million dollars a mile. A mile of fiber, of the kind that might be used to wire up a downtown area, can cost as little as \$15,000/mile for materials if installed by the community itself.

If communities need funds to get started, they can form a nonprofit telecommunications business and sell shares to the community, for \$1/share--this will ensure that every man, woman, and child in the community can invest in and take ownership in this endeavor. When someone buys a share of stock, print out a stock certificate and give it them. Today, all we read about and talk about are Internet stocks. But buying an Internet stock usually just ends up making someone else rich. If we are going to buy stock, let's buy stock in where we live, creating public/private partnerships that create locally owned and operated telecommunications systems and jobs--and keep our stock investments and telecommunications fees at home.

There is ample precedent for this kind of enterprise in the community-owned electric and telephone coops that were started in the early twentieth century because the large electric and telephone companies would not provide services to rural areas. Every community, no matter how small, has the human and financial capital to start now. Abingdon, Virginia, a small town of 7000 in southwest Virginia, followed this model, and today in Abingdon, you can get a fiber connection to your home for \$35/month. And this not fiber to the neighborhood or fiber to the curb--the fiber comes right into your home or business. The county government cut their telecommunications costs in half by moving county

offices onto the fiber backbone. You can stand in the middle of Main Street in Abingdon, and as you look down the street, nearly every single business is connected by fiber to the Internet. In the twentieth century, communities that were not located near public highways had great difficulty participating in the economy. In the twenty-first century, communities that do not build public information highways will have great difficulty participating in the Information Economy.

As a community begins to invest in its own future, it is important to have the end goal in mind. And once again, the end goal is not to buy a lot of stuff and hope something good happens. Defining community, defining what it is we think we are trying to save, is critically important. If we do not take the time to define our communities, do not take the time develop a consensus decision-making process that gives everyone an opportunity to speak up, if we do not nurture the next generation of leaders, and if we do not take the time to make thoughtful decisions, the technology will be all for nought.

I categorically reject the notion that the purpose of the Information Age is to get us all to buy more stuff. The Information Age should really be called the Communication Age. For the first time in human history, we, as individuals, as people with valuable thoughts and ideas--human capital--can communicate directly with whomever we choose, without any intermediaries.

We all have stories to tell. But today, communities and citizens are being challenged by a myriad of technological and legal changes that threaten to strip away our privacy and the right to tell our stories in our voices, without intermediaries. Instead, we are being asked to buy more stuff, or to pay more fees to access our own stories. We need to stop worrying about what stuff to buy, and think more about teaching ourselves and our children how to use the stuff we already have--to learn to speak clearly, to tell our stories.

As individuals and as members of organizations and communities, our wealth and our abundance is rooted in our ability to tell our stories. Small business entrepreneurs have a story to tell. Neighborhoods trying to regain a sense of community have a story to tell. Senior citizens and second graders have a story to tell. Local government has a story to tell. The vision of the Knowledge Democracy should be to unleash the potential to have everyone in the community--regardless of who or what they are--possess the skills to tell their story without needing permission from someone else.

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For more information, visit the following Web sites

The Knowledge Democracy Center

The KDC has a special focus on communities, technology, and local governance issues.

<<http://www.knowledgedemocracy.org/>>

Communities of the Future

COTF is a nationwide organization focused on helping communities create transformational change, with a special focus on consensus decision making.

<<http://www.communitiesofthefuture.org/>>

Association For Community Networks

The AFCN provides peer support, technical advice, and other services to member communities starting or managing networks.

<<http://www.afcn.net>>

About the author

Dr. Andrew Michael Cohill is an information architect with an educational background in architecture, ergonomics, and computer science. He is the Executive Director of the Knowledge Democracy Center. He served as Director of the world famous Blacksburg Electronic Village from its start in 1993 to May of 2002.

He is a widely published writer, and author and coeditor of the popular book about the Blacksburg Electronic Village (*Community Networks: Lessons learned from Blacksburg, Virginia*), now in its second edition. He served as co-chair of the Governor's Task Force on eCommunities for the Commonwealth of Virginia in 2000-2001. He recently advised Hewlett-Packard on their \$15 million dollar Digital Village initiative.

Cohill has an international reputation for his efforts in connecting technology and rural communities. He is a member of the National Advisory Board for Communities of the Future, a national coalition of thinkers and policy makers concerned with the sustainability and health of communities. He served two terms as President of the Association For Community Networking and is serving his second term on the AFCN Board of Directors. He is a founding member of the International Community Learning Centers group, and is currently working on a new book on communities and technology that will be published in the spring of 2003.

As head of the BEV effort, Cohill led Blacksburg to become widely known as the "most wired community in the world." In the fall of 1999, more than 87% of the town's residents were using the Internet, and over 75% of the town's businesses had made the Internet a regular part of their marketing. Virtually all residents one or more broadband options at home, at work, or at both. As Director of the BEV, he was responsible for the design and development of electronic village services, supervised a research and development group, and managed an operations group that ran the BEV office and network services.

The BEV project has been as a model for "smart communities" being developed across the country and around the world; dozens of other communities have modeled their technology efforts after Cohill's pioneering work.

His consulting and advisory work includes consulting for public and private economic development councils, community developers, and many communities across the country and around the world. He has published numerous papers, articles, and book chapters. He is in wide demand as a speaker and consultant because of his shrewd insights and his plain-talking approach to complex technology issues.

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