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Transforming Communities through Local Information Networks - The Case Study of Manchester

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Transforming Communities through Local Information Networks – The Case Study of Manchester
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Abstract

This paper looks at the growth of community information networks in Manchester, UK and their contribution to urban regeneration. This is put into a historical context which discusses the impact of the Manchester Host Computer and the Electronic Village Hall in the 1990s. The paper then assesses Manchester Community Information Network (MCIN) and how its commitment to regeneration through the innovative use of information and communication technologies, is threatened by political agendas which have weakened Local Authority roles, strengthened regionalised decision making, centralised funding and put pressure on community groups to become social enterprises

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Manchester Community Information Network (MCIN) was formed in 1993 to bring together information providers across the public and community sectors, to identify gaps in information provision and to provide an electronic public information system for the benefit of Manchester citizens[i]. MCIN follows in a tradition of Manchester based community ICT initiatives. By the year 2000 Manchester had 100 local ICT centres and networks established, more than anywhere else in the country[ii].

In 1991, Manchester launched the UK's first public access information and communications and information system, the Manchester Host, run by a not-for-profit company, Poptel[ii]. This was followed by the establishment a year later of Manchester's Electronic Village Halls (EVHs). The EVHs were a logical consequence of the Manchester Host in that in order for it to be used by local communities there needed to be places which could provide access to the new online technologies and training so that people could be able to use them. To put it in context, at this time the World Wide Web had only just been invented at CERN by Tim Berners-Lee[ii] and the Internet was largely the preserve of the scientific community.

Those involved in the development of the Manchester Host and the EVHs very much saw their role as one which focussed on enabling *local* social and economic regeneration. There was a heady mix of genuine innovation, pioneering spirit and what would now be called 'spin' to create sense of Manchester as *the* Information City. The specific social and political context in Manchester was one in which the City Council's economic development department, a research unit (CER) at what was then Manchester Polytechnic and a technologically savvy workers cooperative (Poptel, later Soft Solution) were able to combine to produce something quite new. However, they could only do this by securing government and (for the EVHs) BT funding to enable this to happen. This required creative marketing and a 'placing' of the initiative in a local, historical context of Manchester innovation – from its role in the Industrial Revolution, through to the development of the first stored-program computer in the world at Manchester University which made its first successful run of a program in June 1948[ii]. The analysis of the social context of the Manchester Host and other such initiatives has been made elsewhere[ii], but it is important as MCIN had its origins in this local policy context. A section in the original Manchester Host report[ii] had a section entitled "What Manchester Does Today" which explicitly compared the Host with other Manchester-based "forward-looking, infrastructure developments which have contributed much to the regional economy". These included the Bridgewater canal (1760's), the first passenger railway service (1830's), the Manchester Ship Canal (1890's) and the first municipal airport (1938).

"All the earlier infrastructural developments involved new ways of moving goods and people around more efficiently. The Host involved new ways of moving information around and it too has the potential to play an important role in the 1990's in the development of the region's economy" (Leach et al, 1990 p3, op cit)

The development in the 1990s of the Host computer and the EVHs did not fully live up to these historical antecedents, or to the hopes of those who developed and promoted them. The Host was overtaken by events, as commercial Internet Service providers and the development of the World Wide Web left municipal ventures behind. Two of the three EVHs chosen in a competition were based on existing community groups – Chorlton

Workshop and Greater Manchester Bangladeshi Association (GMBA). The third, the Women's EVH was originally going to be developed by another community group, The Pankhurst Centre, but they dropped out at the last moment when they did not think they could achieve the outputs (mainly training places) that the funders demanded. The initiative was saved when a group of women got together to steer the project through.

It is interesting that both Chorlton Workshop and GMBA failed to develop the EVH concept. Both have survived (just) as community groups, but for both the EVH era is just a memory and neither, for example, has an up-to-date website. The Women's EVH on the other hand, which was specifically developed for the purpose, whilst it has gone thorough difficult periods, has emerged as a success story. It is now based in new premises and as a staff of 14[ii]. It is no coincidence that the only EVH to adapt and survive was the one which was specifically set up by a committed group of women for whom this was a central interest rather than by community groups adapting, chameleon-like, to the latest funding priorities. We would argue that the EVHs were in some ways ahead of their time. Their aims were very similar to the current government-funded Community-based UK Online centres. By February 2004 there were over 6000 such local ICT centres which had been used by over half a million people[ii].

MCIN was formed therefore in a historical context of a city with a tradition of technological leadership and which was struggling to recapture the pre-eminence. Manchester had faced a sharp decline in its industrial base in the 1980s when in Greater Manchester, "textile mills were closing at the rate of 3 per fortnight and engineering firms were closing at the rate of one a week"[ii]. The two other key ideas were a belief that being at the cutting edge of new technologies could contribute to economic regeneration (unemployment was running at 23.5% in 1984 in Manchester) [ii] and a commitment to ensuring that initiatives would be community-based rather than elitist. This last point reflects an ideological stance of many of the key participants, including officers from the City Council Economic Development department, and academics based at the Centre for Employment Research (CER) at Manchester Polytechnic. CER had been formed out of the Manchester Employment Research Group (MERG) which itself had been formed by a group of left wing academics to assist trade unionists to fight the large scale redundancies in the 1980s, particularly in engineering[ii]. At about the same time that CER had been commissioned to research the Manchester Host computer network, it also received some funding to look at the possibility of developing a Teleport in Manchester – the first one outside London. To research this CER commissioned a freelance consultant, Haydn Shaughnessy, who produced a report strongly supporting the Teleport concept. The Host and the Teleport came to represent two very different approaches to the implementation of ICT strategies.

A Teleport is an Earth Station Hub or Uplink Facility. The idea was that by providing access to state-of-the-art ICT infrastructure, it would enable Manchester to gain an international profile and competitive advantage. It was very much a 'top down' concept to attract multinational hi-tech companies to an area and also one that involved a marketing hype built round images of large satellite dishes on hi-tech industrial parks. The contrast with the community orientated, 'bottom up' approach of the Manchester Host and EVHs was stark. This was brought to a head at a promotional event for Teleports at the Greater Manchester Economic Development Association in 1989 when Haydn Shaughnessy came under attack from the newly appointed Manchester City Council technology officer, Dave Spooner, who called the whole concept elitist and out of touch with local needs. Following this, and the momentum towards the Manchester Host (in which Dave Spooner played a leading role), the Teleport concept never really took off in Manchester.

As Haydn Shaughnessy has himself pointed out, this is too black and white an interpretation of the debate that went on at the time, since Teleports were not all purely business orientated – "teleports were supposed to be community facilities as well as real estate developments (a point made at that meeting by Willem Gooijer - Amsterdam's included a Trades Union facility and social housing, well wired). British Telecom refused to countenance anything other than their own solution."[ii]
However, In local political and academic circles it was the community-based approach which won out in this particular contest, though the tension between the two approaches has continued ever since in Manchester. This can be seen in the next stage of development with the introduction of the 'top down' Greater Manchester Information Network Group (G-MING) initiative and the more 'bottom up' approach of Manchester Community Information Network (MCIN).

G-MING was largely financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), supported by the local electricity utility, Norweb, and led by engineers and computer specialists based at Manchester University. Its aim was to construct a "high performance multi-service telecommunications infrastructure"[ii] which would link up the universities network with the City Council and other public sector organisations to create a "Manchester Area Network". Being very much technology driven it was always in search of potential applications and users. It eventually fizzled out as broadband provision became more widely available commercially.

G-MING was very much in a line of European funded ICT initiatives which were technology-driven and had the aim of creating European-wide, second city networks. The first of such networks was Infocities[ii] which then became integrated into a wider network , Telecities[ii], established in 1993, which itself was in the framework of yet another European network - Eurocities[ii] which represents over a hundred of Europe's major cities. The latest incarnation of such technology-driven, EU-funded initiatives is the

Manchester Digital Development Agency (MDDA)[ii]. This is headed by Dave Carter, who from his position in the City Council Economic Development department has been central to the funding of almost every council supported ICT project since the Manchester Host.

There are two contrasting strands of ICT development in Manchester since the 1990.

Table 1 ICT Initiatives in Manchester, 1990 - 2004

Community based, 'bottom up'	Technology driven, EU based, 'Top down'
Manchester Host (1990)	Teleports (1990)
Electronic Village Halls (1992)	G-MING/Infocities (1992) Telecities/ Eurocities (1993)
Manchester Community Information Network (1993)	Manchester Digital Development Agency (2003)

Table 1 is a simplification in that there is much overlap between the two categories. The two most recent initiatives in different ways straddle the two strands. The UK Online centres are obviously a government-led and centrally funded initiative, but their focus is "to provide everyone in the UK with access to computers near to where they live"[ii] using intermediaries such as local colleges and community groups (including MCIN). Similarly the MDDA has a technology-defined Broadband Programme, but which "aims to attract and sustain inward investment, reduce social exclusion, enable businesses to be more competitive in a worldwide market, and bring communities closer together"[ii]. However, MDDA can still be considered a primarily 'top-down' and technology driven initiative in that its approach to local communities is as a funding body intent on identifying local groups which can help implement its broadband infrastructure agenda

MCIN clearly arises out of the Manchester tradition that emphasised locality, social inclusion, community capacity building and a belief in the transformative potential of ICTs. MCIN started off an offshoot of a community mental health service project in Moston, North Manchester. Its aim was to make public information accessible to people in what were (and still are) deprived and unfashionable areas in the North and East of the city.

One of MCIN's first projects was TARDIS (Targeted Delivery of Information and Services). This was an Infocities project "to provide access for the

disadvantaged to online information through the use of multimedia kiosks"
[ii].This brought it into contact with the 'techies' involved in the G-MING
project. A good description of the clash of cultures this led to is described
by Jon Agar et al, 1999:
"The problems of linking MCIN's community-based approach with the
dynamics of Infocities and the Council led to serious ruptures, which in the
end were irresolvable. In this case, the rupture had to do with fundamental
disagreements about the purpose, nature and in a sense, *location,* of public
information. The history of MCIN made it committed to a sector of the
population and an area of Manchester which was increasingly invisible in
both the city council's and the EU's rhetoric about urban regeneration and
ICTs" [ii]

MCIN's focus increasingly became one based on a community
development model in a period (the 1990s) where paid community
development as a profession was undergoing casualisation and instability[ii].
We would argue that this approach has been one of MCIN's strengths but
one which leaves it vulnerable to the vagaries of local, national and EU
funding policies. In this context it is interesting to compare MCIN with two
initiatives with similar origins- Brixton Online in London and Manor Training
& Resource Centre (MaTReC) in Sheffield.

Brixton Online (BOL) was started as a community network project in 1997[ii]
but has survived, and thrived, by tapping in to the huge number of small to
medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in London that require ICT training and
support. It has an online business club and has developed viable products
such as its Community Content Management System, and aims to be a
"quality provider of services to the business community"[ii]. Whilst BOL has
retained its community links it comes across overwhelmingly as an SME
support agency. However, it has recently tried to re-vitalise the community
agenda and take a lead role nationally through Communities Online which
"aims to address issues of sustainability, regeneration, social inclusion and
healthier economies by focusing on the use of new communications
technologies in communities and neighbourhoods"[ii]. This is a fairly sparse
website though it does host the Communities Online Network discussion
list which aims to link up community based activists and initiatives
nationally and internationally.

Manor Training & Resource Centre (MaTReC) was established in 1987 to
provide community based ICT courses in disadvantaged areas of Sheffield.
It arose out of The Manor & Castle Community Information Network
(MACCIN)[ii]. Whilst MACCIN now seems to be largely inactive, MaTReC
disappeared altogether when the funding ran out. However, it gave birth to
MEDIAC, The Manor and Castle Multimedia Company, a not-for-profit,
community-owned, social enterprise[ii]. MEDIAC's strategy for survival has
been to become part of an academic-led consortium in a project called "IT
for me", a three-year EU Objective 1 funded project with match funding
from the four South Yorkshire public library authorities and the University of

Sheffield[ii]. In doing so it might offer some lessons for MCIN and its developing relationship with MMU

MCIN is in some ways unique, in that it has been based on long-lasting community ICT initiatives and has stayed close to its community grassroots. It has done this by maintaining close links to Manchester City Council (there are 3 council officers on its executive committee), by succeeding in moving from one funding regime to another and, above all, by being successful at what it does. To quote from the director's report in the MCIN 2004 Annual Review:

"Capacity building work to further develop sustainable e-communities continues across Greater Manchester with work being carried out in 6 geographical communities and 3 communities of interest……This means that MCIN will have supported the development of 14 community portal sites in Greater Manchester with over 250 people from 70 different organisations involved in steering groups"[ii]

Whilst the grassroots model used by MCIN has been successful, it cannot survive unchanged. It faces a similar choice to those faced by the Sheffield and Brixton projects which is to realise that as ICT technology becomes ubiquitous and simple to use, there needs to be a clear shift move to the provision of a range of services. To this end MCIN is developing a number of agendas.

1. Create diversity in income streams.To ensure it does not become reliant on just one source of funding
2. Mainstream its services. This may include MCIN being seen more as a network that supports community and client engagement rather than just being seen purely as a community capacity builder.
3. Continue to innovate. By piloting activites such as community wireless and broadband content projects. One of the challenges will be to reconcile the mainstreaming and innovative agenda within the same organisation.
4. Maintain its charity status. At the same time it will need to develop a business to generate income. This will probably take the form of of a community social enterprise

One could argue that MCIN, as a community development organisation with charitable purposes, may not be required as ICT services become mainstreamed. As a recent Economist IT survey concluded:
"A lot of things that are complex today will get simpler in the coming years. Like other technologies in history, IT and telecommunications seem destined gradually to recede into the background of human activity, leaving more time and energy to get on with the infinite complexities of business, and of life in general." [ii]

However, it is clear that the disadvantaged communities that MCIN works with still benefit from the innovative support that MCIN provides.

Nevertheless, other organisations, higher up the funding food chain like Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation (GMCVO) and MDDA, are benefiting from national policy changes which mean that there is a potential for them to take over the infrastructure support role (and funding) that MCIN previously fulfilled.

There are three important national policy initiatives that impact directly on MCIN.

1. **Regionalisation**

The first policy change is the increasing emphasis on regional (North West) and sub-regional (Greater Manchester) initiatives. The key player locally in ICT terms is MDDA. MDDA is the sub-regional body that works with the NW Development Agency, through which most funding for ICT initiatives in Greater Manchester may eventually come. The risk is that MCIN becomes more marginalized as it gets pushed down the "food chain". This has already had an impact. Once MCIN was routinely invited to the policy table, where they are now being seen as just another community and voluntary sector organisation and not invited. In addition the NWDA sees community wide webs or portals and the sort of long term capacity building that MCIN specialises in as an 'old' agenda. MCIN have started to call them information and service gateways to get over the terminology problem, but this term does not encompass all the community interactive mechanisms which MCIN has on its sites, such as discussion forums, audio content and streaming video. Whilst community capacity building is still seen by all as being important, what funders don't understand is the role that portals play in motivating local people to build their own capacity and as a place to store content, showcase the community and allow local groups and residents opportunities to engage. For example, MCIN has over 250 people and 70 organisations involved with steering groups

2. **Social Enterprise Agenda**

The second policy area is the community and social enterprise agenda, through which the government is trying to shift voluntary organisations away from what they see as an over-dependency on grant funding. This is typified by the Home Office's "ChangeUp" initiative, which has as its aim "to strengthen the support and assistance available to voluntary and community organisations"[ii]. The key player in Manchester is GMCVO. "ChangeUp" means that voluntary organisation infrastructure is more clearly on the agenda and that ICT infrastructure to the voluntary and community sector is recognised. This could be an opportunity for MCIN as it would allow MCIN to mainstream its ICT services as well as broaden out its geographical base across Greater Manchester and make MCIN a truly sub regional player. The Home Office's "ChangeUp" agenda is also a potential threat .A specialist agency such as MCIN is in danger of losing out and being marginalized unless its specific expertise in providing ICT services to the voluntary and community sector is recognised. The danger for MCIN is that GMCVO (who have no track record on ICT initiatives) or

other community and social enterprises will incorporate ICT services. Already GMCVO is administering the local community broadband community chest grants system, which will "fund innovative projects which use broadband Internet technology to develop new services or add value to current ones, with the aim of promoting social inclusion"[ii]. Again, in the short term this fund contains no capacity building component The risk is that other large voluntary organisations or social enterprises may jump on to the bandwagon of ChangeUp" and replace MCIN in this role. Whilst MCIN has no right to monopolise such a role, the danger is that these larger voluntary agencies will reinforce a top-down model rather than MCIN's commitment to real community involvement in decision making

3. **Centralisation of Local Funding**

The third policy initiative is aiming to centralise local funding to achieve public sector service agreement targets (PSA), through the creation of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). MCIN's central aims links with Manchester LSP thematic priorities on social inclusion and empowering communities, developing sustainable neighbourhoods and providing more efficient services. However, bigger players involved with the general education training and employment are squeezing out MCIN from attracting in such funding.

On the plus side, MCIN's commitment to overcoming the digital divide also remains a government priority. For example the Social Exclusion Unit is about to "conduct a 12-month programme to promote inclusion through innovation in new technology"[ii]. MCIN's ultimate charitable aim of social inclusion and using ICT as a way to achieve this is one way that it can maintain its charitable not- for-profit services. By ensuring that MCIN doesn't become too closely aligned with only one agenda MCIN hopes to avoid becoming too vulnerable to changing funding regimes and fashions.

What funders routinely require is evidence of 'assists' to SMEs (small to medium sized enterprises) and community adoption of broadband technologies. In this sense therefore they are competing with MCIN by pressing this agenda directly on to communities. To use the analogy of a Lord Mayor's parade, funders drop in to a community (the grant), put on a show (the launch), leave some technology behind (PCs, broadband links) and then move on to spread the word elsewhere. It would be a caricature to say that MCIN plays the role of the man with the shovel who follows after the parade, but its approach has always been a much longer-term one. This is best illustrated by a recent example.

In November 2004 the North Manchester community launched a North Manchester ICT Strategy[ii]. Because MCIN had been working in the area it had the established contacts to develop and lead a multi-agency multi-sector strategy. These contacts and creditability also allowed MCIN to assemble a consortium of agencies including the local authority, further education and voluntary groups to develop and showcase a locally

organised broadband event. This included an online photography exhibition, e-learning on wine-tasting, an online games competition and a play which will be streamed live online. The irony is that there was no MDDA funding for such capacity building activities, and as a result means that further activity to implement the strategy may not be possible. MCIN therefore finds itself between a rock and a hard place. MCIN will find it harder to receive grants as a result of local authority centralisation and the involvement of the NWDA and yet it is not big enough to act as a lead organisation who could receive direct government funds. MCIN's response has been to develop a new model for its future development which takes into account this analysis and will lead it in radical new directions. This model aims to build on its extensive community links and expertise in capacity building which, if successful, will overcome the funding squeeze that has already led it to reduce its staffing from a high of 15 in 2003 to its current 9 staff.

MCINs new structure (agreed by the management committee in November 2004) splits the organisation into three sections, each of which if successful could become spin-off social enterprises. At the core of MCIN will remain its policy and management function which will undertake research and offer project management support and administer the three functions:

1. **ICT services** – this section will provide ICT support services and products, such as ICT advice, facilitate the purchase of equipment and provide one-to-one training. In addition this business function will use the emerging portal development and the open source content editor that is currently being developed. The hope is that this will 'go commercial' and be attractive to SMEs as well as community groups in the long run. There is a possibility of working with academic partners in such technical developments and in developing MCIN's skill base

2. **Web Connect** - this section will develop and provide web-based content for local communities and provide access to information and services for them. The current 14 community-wide webs that MCIN supports will become a portal network, which will give them some negotiating power with potential funders. Unlike many 'top down' websites, which are high on technology but low on content (e.g. Eastserve), the MCIN supported portals are low on technology (the websites are fairly basic) but high on content and local community group participation

3. **Learn Net** – this is a continuation of the UK Online partnership that MCIN successfully managed in East Manchester. This includes 15 partners of which 9 are UK Online centres, 4 are education providers and 1 is the local regeneration company. The next stage will be to form a larger consortium with other providers in North and South Manchester in order to bid for Learning and Skills Council funding for community based training. This section could also include research functions,

linking with MMU particularly around evaluating the effectiveness of
community based provision for first step learners

For this strategy to succeed MCIN needs to build on the strategic
partnerships it already has and forge new ones. For example, on the MCIN
board are representatives from Manchester Metropolitan University,
Manchester City Council, MANCAT, the Health Authority, voluntary and
community groups, and the private sector. MMU can support MCIN through
joint funding bids, research and by helping MCIN to gain a wider European
profile. MANCAT is already closely linked with MCIN through Learn Net.
Above all, what MCIN has got is credibility at grass roots level, which is
where its real strength lies. You have only to look at the flowering of the
Partington and Carrington Community Portal [ii] or the Deaf Community
Gateway[ii] to see the results of the 'deep ties' that MCIN develops over a
period of time with local communities. MCIN often succeeds in getting
groups and agencies who have never worked together before to participate
in such projects.
Over time MCIN has moved from its first project to develop Information
Kiosks, to providing web access, to capacity building, to community portal
development and to its current provision of broadband based services.
Future developments might include the development of a wireless network
for community based activity and connectivity, and the incubation of
business and formation of a social enterprise network. In addition, some of
the "old agendas" that MCIN has moved away from, such as technical
support, have recently resurfaced and MCIN is looking at developing this
as a community social enterprise as there is still a clear market gap.

In all this there is a central philosophy that ICT is only a catalyst for
community development and regeneration. It is about capacity building and
handing over initiatives to local communities and the recognition that the
relationships built up over time are the most effective ones. MCIN might
'finish' a project with a particular group of community groups and agencies
it got together to create a portal, but the calls for assistance and support
continue for months and even years after. Such relationships ebb and flow,
so if there is a new initiative, MCIN can quickly draw on its links and local
credibility to bring groups together (e.g. for the launch of the North
Manchester ICT strategy).

In the future MCIN will survive if it is successful in mainstreaming some
core activities but yet remains innovative. Central to this will be its ability to
forge long term links with key partners – possibly private sector, but more
likely with public and community sector organisations. It is already
expanding from Manchester to a Greater Manchester base, and aims to
become a player at a regional level. The big test will be whether MCIN can
adapt quickly enough, widen its skill base and yet retain its distinctive
community capacity building philosophy which is at the core of what MCIN
is about.

There are lessons in the MCIN experience for many other small community groups. They have no choice but to learn to adapt to new funding regimes and be adept at negotiating local, regional and national agendas. If they fail to do so then it will be larger, regional and national based voluntary agencies, whose links with funders are often stronger than their links with actual communities, who will sweep up the available funding. This would be disastrous for MCIN and groups like it, but it would also be a serious loss for the communities they represent and serve.

Please note that the following end notes include estimates where possible of when the webpages quoted were last updated. The web pages were visited in January 2005

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[ii] Welcome to UK Online Centres, http://www.ufi.com/ukol/, (page last updated 02/11/04)

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