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# LOCALITY IN THE GLOBAL NET
## The Internet as a space of citizen communication and local  publicness

The final report of the project Locality in the Global Net
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# Locality in the Global Net

## The Internet as a space of citizen communication and local publicness

The main outstanding features of Locality in the Global Net project were its local and grassroots orientation. The aim in the project was to explore the social meaning of new communications technology and information networks (and the Internet in particular) from the vantage-point of everyday practices, linking technology with people's everyday life and communications needs. The approach adopted may be described as participatory action research, which in practice meant carrying out research interventions in local communities. Rather than contenting themselves with observing and reporting events from the outside, project researchers worked closely with community members, giving them the opportunity to use new communications technology and offering hands-on advice on how to use it.

The study was organised in three projects, two of which focused on the development of local citizen communication and one on the development of local journalism by means of modern web technology. The publishing platform created for this purpose was the web site we named Mansetori or Manse Square (at <http://mansetori.uta.fi>). This umbrella site hosted Manseyhteisöt or Manse Communities <http://manseyhteisot.uta.fi>, a site covering the neighbourhood component; Mansefoorumi or Manse Forum <http://mansefoorumi.uta.fi>, the site for citizen debate; and Mansemedia or Manse Media at <http://mansemedia.uta.fi>, the local journalism site. In Oulu, a local community site called Raksila Online at <http://raksila.kaleva.fi> was also opened as part of the project and linked to Manse Communities and the electronic version of the local newspaper Kaleva.

The idea in the communities projects (Manse Communities and Raksila) was to work closely with local residents to produce their own online publications. Depending on the community, content production involved writing news items, publishing stories, introducing the local area, running online discussions or compiling local information. The local residents involved felt the project had helped to develop their neighbourhood, increased interaction, improved access to information and offered new publishing avenues. On the

other hand the new communications technology was so difficult to use that this effectively thwarted its broader use as a community publishing means. Indeed one of the main conclusions of the project is that the hardware and software required for online publishing needs to be much more easily accessible to people who want to use them.

The main concern in the civic debate project (Manse Forum) was with the question of how the Internet is suited as a platform for local civic debate and more generally for interactive public communication. For this reason Manse Forum was designed and consistently developed in relation to local journalism. On the other hand the project also sought to challenge established communication practices in local administration. Among the most important objectives in Manse Forum were to develop and test different types of citizen communication, different web-mediated genres of civic publicness. Another focal concern in the Forum component was with the obstacles to the public use of the Internet at grassroots level. These obstacles are essentially reduced to questions about the control of the Internet as a 'place' or 'space', about the technology and skills required to access the Net and about the practical meaning and cultural definition of the Internet.

The primary objective in the Manse Media project was to develop dialogical online journalism with a view to promoting public debate. At the same time the component was aimed at finding new ways of dealing with local issues by means of a concerted treatment of new ideas and the use of a wide range of different types of sources. The possibilities of the Internet were also used in the presentation and archiving of stories. Through their collaboration with Manse Forum and Manse Communities, active civic groups managed to make their voices heard in the public sphere of the Internet. A further concern in the Manse Media project was to broaden the traditional role of the journalist: the editorial staff involved in this component did not content themselves with monitoring events from the outside, but they joined forces with local residents to generate new ideas for stories and to produce those stories. One of the specific areas of work in this component was to develop a simple and easy publishing system. Experiments were also carried out in the area of multimedia journalism, including programmes that integrated radio and online journalism.

Technical implementation in the Locality project was divided into three parts. First, the pilot phase involved a study of the technical background of Finnish online publications. This was followed in the second phase by work to create the general structure and design of the Manse Square web site as well as the pages linked to the umbrella site. The third phase involved developing and testing the publishing system designed to meet the requirements of the project's basic concept. The system (which became known as Square) was

tested in student groups and developed on the basis of feedback received to make it easier to use.

The lessons of the Locality in the Global Net project with regard to the possibilities of new communications technology can be summarised as follows:

– Online community communication is a learning project. Lively exchange and debate at the grassroots level cannot be generated simply by placing the hardware at people's disposal. As well as having access to the Net and the technology, people must also have the opportunity to learn the skills required by new communications technology.
– New online genres can be created. The project developed new kinds of content models that serve as embryo forms for civic-oriented, local genres of online communication. These include interaction genres, information genres, influence genres, memory genres, service genres and synergistic genres.
– New communications technology does not in itself generate activity and interaction, nor do existing technical solutions meet the challenges of citizen communication and local publicness. Hardware and software need to be developed from the vantage-point of the communications needs of local communities and local citizens and by working closely with civic groups.
– The global Net can change local publicness. The concept of local network publicness developed in the project opens up new avenues for grassroots participation both in relation to journalistically produced local publicness and in relation to official publicness. The basic premise for this is the creation of an interactive, open and public space in the Net.

During the course of the project the Manse Square website has grown into an important arena of local interaction in the city of Tampere, providing a public meeting-place for a wide range of different kinds of actors. It has evolved from a publishing platform developed initially for one research project into a significant public space that makes an interesting addition to the domain of local publicness. All this has been made possible by conducting the project in close collaboration with civic groups and local communities.

The Locality in the Global Net project was carried out in 1998-2000 by the University of Tampere Journalism Research and Development Centre. Funding was received from the National Technology Agency's USIX programme. The project's business partners were Alma Media, Kaleva, TPO and OPOY. Consultancy was received from MIT Media Laboratory researchers.

# Preface

In more senses than one the Locality in the Global Net has been quite a unique project. It has been a technology project driven by people and methods from journalism research and from the social sciences more generally. It has been a study that has not contented itself with recording and explaining what has happened, but it has taken an active and direct part in social life; it has created, it has explored, it has done. Nor has all the work been done by hired researchers, but a major resource, indeed a vital resource for the project has consisted of the networks created with grassroots communities. Finally, this has been an Internet project in which people have not been approached primarily as consumers or clients, but as active citizens through whom it is possible to find a social meaning for new communications technology at the local level.

It is obviously no easy task to report this kind of complex effort. During a period of almost three years the project has seen many successes and many frustrating moments; it has made progress, paused to ponder, and made progress again. Although it is clearly impossible to convey all the steps and setbacks that have happened in the project, we have tried in this report to record most of what we have considered important and relevant.[1] It describes the basic approach and concept adopted in the project as well as its main results. In the first chapter we describe the basic frame of reference and starting-points of the project. The next chapter deals separately with each of the project's components, again discussing their results. We then return to the broader picture and discuss the general significance of the research results.

The project team would like to take this opportunity to thank all their partners. The most important sources of support have been our colleagues at the Journalism Research and Development Centre and the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, as well as other research and teaching staff at the University of Tampere. The representatives of our business partners who were involved on the steering group also provided invaluable support to the project; in particular we wish to mention Mauri Mattson, Juha Tolonen and Marko Turpeinen who were directly involved in project implementation. Jouko Salo, our contact person at the National Technology Agency, helped to resolve various issues of project administration: the project was funded through the National Technology Agency's USIX programme <http://www.espoo.com/usix>. Walter Bender and Ken Haase from the MIT

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[1] Before this final report researchers and students involved in the project have produced a total of more than 30 working papers, articles and reports.

Media Laboratory provided food for critical thought and invaluable advice throughout the duration of the project. Thank you all!

Most importantly, though, the project group would like to extend its warmest thanks to the dozens of people in local communities who made this project possible. It was their voluntary and enthusiastic contribution at the grassroots level that gave the project its soul in Tampere and Oulu. Unfortunately we cannot name each and every one of them; so it will just have to be one big collective Thank You!

Ari Heinonen

# Introduction: the global Net, locality, publicness

## Background of the study

### In search of the social meaning of new communications technology

Outlining an agenda for research into new communications technology and information networks in 'The Rise of the Network Society', Manuel Castells (1996, 4) reminds us that in our explorations we need to look beyond technology itself and into society. While we 'must take technology seriously', we should also recognise that its development is deeply interwoven with the societal: the process of technological change needs to be examined in 'the social context in which it takes place and by which it is being shaped'.

This is precisely what our research and development project Locality in the Global Net is all about. As will be reported in this volume, we have been studying new communications technology and the Internet in particular from a societal vantage-point and in the context of everyday practices. By embedding technology in its social context, by weighing technical applications in practical terms and by applying technology to everyday communications needs, the project has produced material that will help to shape technology for the better and steer its development in a socially justified direction.

The motivation for our research project lies in the fact that in spite of all the hype that continues to surround new communications technology, its impacts and meaning in modern society remain very much an unresolved issue. To an extent it is no doubt legitimate to talk about an upheaval or revolution in society that has come about as a result of 'breakthroughs in information processing, storage and transmission' leading 'to the application of information technologies in virtually all corners of society' (Webster 1995, 7). From a social point of view the new significance of information technology is also highlighted by the growing impacts that new ways of thinking and new patterns of action are having in all spheres of society. Underlying all this is the convergence of different kinds of technologies (e.g. microelectronics, computing and telecommunications) and its ever greater pervasiveness that is further enhanced by the general 'interface' of the digital language (Castells 1996, 29-30).

However, we need to bear in mind that although these upheavals have a technological foundation, the overall picture is far more complex than that; the change is not reducible to technology alone. In the process which is seeing industrial society transform into a so-called information society, not only is the technological dimension changing but also the economic, cultural and occupational dimensions. It is particularly important to recognise that the processes involved are inherently interactive. At the same time as the process of technological change, or the growth of information technology is impacting the economy, culture and the workplace, these are for their part shaping technology and steering its development (see Webster 1995, 6-23 and Heinonen 1999, 27-29).

One of the key aspects of the ongoing process of change and at once of the Locality in the Global Net project is the change in the way that society and its actors are seen in relation to one another. Industrial society has traditionally been portrayed through the metaphors of straightforward yet separate assembly lines and smokestacks. Industrial society has been organised in terms of linear, well-ordered practices and patterns of action, in which separate agents interact with one another through usually rigid and hierarchic structures such as mass communication and representative democracy. These structures have defined the position of different agents along such axes as subjects vs. those who wield power, controlling their interaction for instance by means of journalistic practices.

The development of new communications technology is one of the most prominent trends which suggests that a new kind of organisation might well be in the making. A good metaphor for this new order is the Net that consists in principle of an unlimited number of interconnected nodes. At the same time as the possible number of interactions is multiplied, a one-way and hierarchic organisation of relations becomes increasingly difficult: network communications is two-way traffic and any existing node can be bypassed along alternative routes. The abstraction of this 'network society' is concretised precisely in new communications technology: it is this that provides the material foundation for the networked form of social organisation spreading throughout the social structure (Castells 1996, 469). The Locality in the Global Net project is for its part concerned with the question of how the concept of networked society works in practice when the Net of all Nets, i.e. the Internet is put at the disposal of ordinary citizens.

## The development of technology can and should be steered

Looking at the role of technology in modern society it is easy to make the mistake of exaggerating that role, indeed to fall into the trap of technological determinism. The prognoses that have been inspired by new technologies

– whether they are dreams or horror scenes – regarding profound social changes, are an integral part of the shaping of the meaning of technologies. Inflated technoprophecies are not typical only of the present day, but technical products have always been coated with an icing of social progress. When new technologies are brought to the marketplace, they are often closely followed by visions of change in people's life, economy and society at large. And the changes are of course always changes for the better – at least in the eyes of the people marketing the products and those who benefit from them (Heinonen 1999, 34).

A good example in the field of information technology is provided by telegraphy, which when it was first introduced was seen or at least presented as an instrument of democracy and world peace. The opening of the first telegraph communication between Europe and America caused quite a stir that can be compared with the present-day Internet hype in the sense that these technical achievements were seen as innovations that would radically change society (see e.g. Marvin 1988 and Standage 1998). Accordingly there is reason to suspect that the promises and expectations attached to the Internet will prove to be exaggerated and that in the end, this really is just another new application in communications technology rather than a broader phenomenon affecting the basic organisation of society.

Indeed it is essential to recognise that we are talking about a process that is still very much ongoing and about a technology that is in the process of making. The networking of society is in both a symbolic and a concrete sense a phenomenon that can and should be steered and shaped. Technology and its products are shaped in continuous interaction with the interests and needs prevailing in society, not in isolation of them. A technological innovation does not always mature from the prototype stage into a commercial product, nor does the product necessarily serve the original intention (see Williams and Edge 1997 and Winston 1998). This also applies to the Internet and to Net technology in general: we still do not have any answer to the question as to what kind of place and role the Internet will assume in the field of social practices.

It is also important to note that the role of the Internet is not taking shape autonomously without external intervention, but as a result of conscious and active choices. The key question is, who will have a say in shaping the uses of technology and its development, whose voice will be listened to when new technologies are developed. The Locality in the Global Net project was designed to develop Net technology and to study that technology from a grassroots perspective, from the point of view of people's everyday communications needs.

# Research setting

## Basic premises

Apart from its concern with everyday communication practices, a key premise for our project has been its orientation to the element of locality in the development of web technology. In the search for the social meaning of new communications technology we have looked at that technology in the context of people's everyday environment, in spheres of life that are an integral part of their everyday existence. It is worth pointing out that at the time the research plan for this project was being drafted in 1997, this was by no means a very common perspective on the Internet; on the contrary it was commonplace to emphasise the global dimension of the Internet.

It is true that the Internet has a very major influence on the meaning of time and place; in a sense it has redefined the boundaries of both (see e.g. Webster 1995). However the true meaning of a new technology is usually revealed through more familiar practices: there are not many people for whom global interaction is the primary dimension of everyday communication. Communication with people living in the same neighbourhood, exchanging views on everyday concerns and participating in local public debate are all aspects that make the Internet part of people's everyday life. Indeed the Internet in our project was 'localised': we have explored and developed web technology with a specific view to local contents and local publicness.

We set out in this project to explore local communication and publicness from the vantage point of local journalism. The point was made in the research plan that newspapers are having to carve out a new place for themselves in the age of online communication, most probably by establishing closer ties with the local community. The new role of newspapers in online communication could be to provide a local communications channel and a means of community organisation. This vision is grounded in the assumption that journalism will open up and genuinely adopt the normative goal of becoming an actor in civil society and in so doing make the best possible use of new technology (cf. Rheingold 2000, Strategic developments... 1996).

On the other hand it was plainly clear even at the time that the project was being launched that journalistic content production was not the only way in which the Net could be used to promote local communication. In fact it has become clear that newspapers in particular are having considerable difficulty adapting to the new environment of online communication. This is largely due to the fact that interactive, virtually real-time web technology is better suited to a dialogical and direct form of communication than to typical journalism.

In the research plan these distinctive features of online communication were recognised in the statement that new technology should allow for the participation of people in public communication on as broad a basis as possible both in the capacity of producers and recipients. This kind of shift in emphasis from mass communication to citizen communication would strengthen local democracy. Indeed the purpose specified for the project was to develop technical applications, production methods and strategies of action through which newspapers and other communication businesses can contribute to the emergence of lively local communication and debate at the grassroots level (cf. Rheingold 2000).

From the very outset then we adopted a very broad approach in the Locality project to studying local communication based on Net technology: the role of technology in local communication is seen from both a journalism and citizen communications point of view. This is how the goals of the project were defined:
● The development of Net technology, working methods and content models in such a manner that newspapers and other media can contribute to the emergence of lively local communication and debate;
● and, simultaneously, the development of local citizen communication both in itself and as a resource of local journalism.

## The research setting operationalised

At the pilot stage of the project its objective was operationalised by dividing it into three specific tasks. One of these had to do with the development of local journalism by means of Net technology, the two others concerned the development of local grassroots communication. In the latter components the focus would be on using the Net for purposes of inspiring public debate at the local level and on the other hand on developing communication among local communities. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of all about the project was that these three components were in constant and close interplay with one another. Although the projects have operated quite independently throughout the programme, it has been one of the key ideas of ours that different genres of local communication flow into one another to create synergistic effects, with new technology offering (at least in principle) new opportunities. Underlying all this is the view that local journalism shall be developed with a view to making it more sensitive to the signals of citizen communication, at the same time as journalism can promote local debate and communication among local communities. The diagram on the next page illustrates our operationalised research setting.
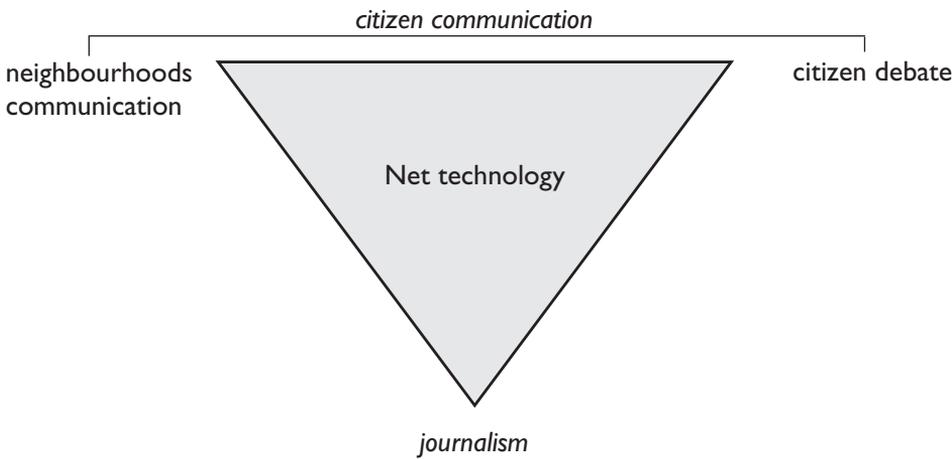
*Locality in the Global Net:* research setting

We set about our task by creating an open www publication. This has served as the project's main tool, although it was not an objective in itself but rather a platform for experimenting and studying the concepts developed. In line with the research tasks specified for the project, the following main sections were set up in this publication: the journalistic component, the neighbourhood component and the citizen debate component. At the same time – and this was a necessary precondition for the development of the publication – the project developed and tested Net technologies and software specifically designed for this purpose. The research and development effort was started in the citizen communication component because the objective was to develop journalism specifically in relation to the new forms of citizen communication made possible by the Net. This solution was also geared to conveying the message that new communications technology can indeed break down the traditional settings of public communication.

The online content for our web site was created in two cities, Tampere in southern Finland and Oulu in the north. In Tampere, a web site was launched under the name of Mansetori or Manse Square (Manse refers to the city's traditional nickname) at <http://mansetori.uta.fi>. This umbrella site hosted the following components: Manseyhteisöt or Manse Communities at <http://manseyhteisot.uta.fi>, covering the neighbourhood component; Mansefoorumi or Manse Forum at <http://mansefoorumi.uta.fi>, the site for citizen debate; and Mansemedia or Manse Media at <http://mansemedia.uta.fi>, the local journalism site. In Oulu, a site was opened for local residents of the Raksila neighbourhood at <http://raksila.kaleva.fi>, named Raksila Online. Figure 2 illustrates the structure of the project.

Manse
Communities
+ Raksila

Manse
Forum

Manse Square

Manse Media
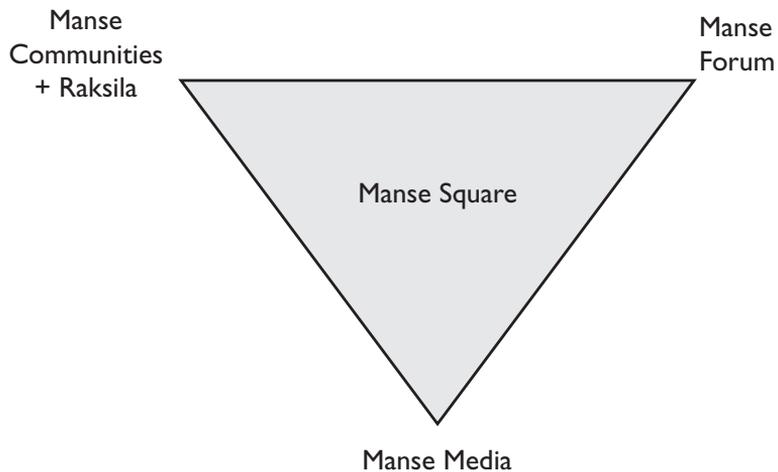
*Environment set up* for the Locality in the Global Net project: Manse Square, with the Raksila web site attached to the overall structure.

The concrete research tasks set for the three project components may be sum-marised as follows (more detailed descriptions are given later on in connection with the respective project reports):

● Neighbourhood communication (Manse Communities + Raksila Online): This project was concerned to develop and study the technical requirements and skills needed in citizen-oriented communication, with a local (neighbour-hood) online publications created in the Internet together with community members;
● Citizen debate forum (Manse Forum): This project used web technology to create a virtual and interactive space of citizen publicness that allows for the parties concerned to exchange views on important and disputed local issues.
● Local journalism (Manse Media): The objectives in this project were to support a form of Net-mediated online journalism in which the accent is on the citizen perspective and which is dialogical; to develop publishing systems that are suited to this purpose; and to test the possibilities of multimedia journalism.

The three projects worked closely with one another at all levels of practical implementation. Firstly, the Manse Square web site has been designed and developed with a specific view to producing a coherent site structure and visual appearance so that each site can easily be recognised as part of the same project. Secondly, the components of Manse Square have also been technically linked to one another, if for no other reason then because they have been located on the same server (with the exception of the Raksila web site, which has been on one of the project partner's servers). The third and most important feature has been the close integration of the different components

in terms of substance. Links and cross-references have been used to promote the synergy of active citizen communication and journalism. Additionally, the journalistic component (Manse Media) has made use of the themes covered in the citizen communications components Manse Communities and Manse Forum. The latter, for their part, have made use of the contents published in Manse Media as background material. In this sense Manse Square has been much more than the sum total of its constituent parts.

## Research approach

Our research design presupposes quite a special kind of research approach. For purposes of technology development it would not have made sense in our case to arrange laboratory tests or to use a selected target population. Instead, the approach we applied is one that may be described as participatory and action-oriented research and development. In practice this has meant that we have carried out research interventions in local communities. Project researchers have not contented themselves with observing and reporting events, but they have taken an active and open role within communities, offering members an opportunity to make use of new communications technology. This applies most particularly to the citizen communications components of the project, where the researchers have first identified the civic groups and organisations interested in taking part, established forms of collaboration and together with the participants produced forms and contents based on the communications needs of the communities themselves.

Closely related to this is the second distinctive feature of our research approach, i.e. its interactivity (again most particularly in the citizen communications components). Apart from the direct involvement of researchers in the communities, concrete forms of interaction have included planning meetings to design and organise the production of the contents for the Manse Square and Raksila web sites, regular sessions with the communities to update materials, training provided to communities in web skills, information support provided to communities, etc. Basically, the course the project has taken has been determined by the interests and aims of the local communities, while the project itself has sought to offer the knowledge and the practical skills that are needed to pursue those interests and aims.

The third distinctive feature of our research approach has been its openness and transparency, as reflected in the project's open web site that has allowed anyone to monitor its progress – every innovation that has gone through to publication has been available for public scrutiny on the Manse Square and Raksila web sites. Openness has also meant that at the same time as the project has been studying and developing local communication, it has in itself, through the contents it has produced, been an active player in local communi-

cation and thus for its own part shaped that communication. Although the project has aimed at pilot-type strategies of action, it has in itself contributed to the creation of an existing, living local space of publicness, occasionally as a very specific, individualised factor. The contents of Manse Forum and Manse Communities and Raksila have been cited, they have prompted responses and reactions and they have been an integral part of local public debate both in traditional media and in other discussions. Indeed the project has succeeded in researching and developing new technology in an usually real-life social context.

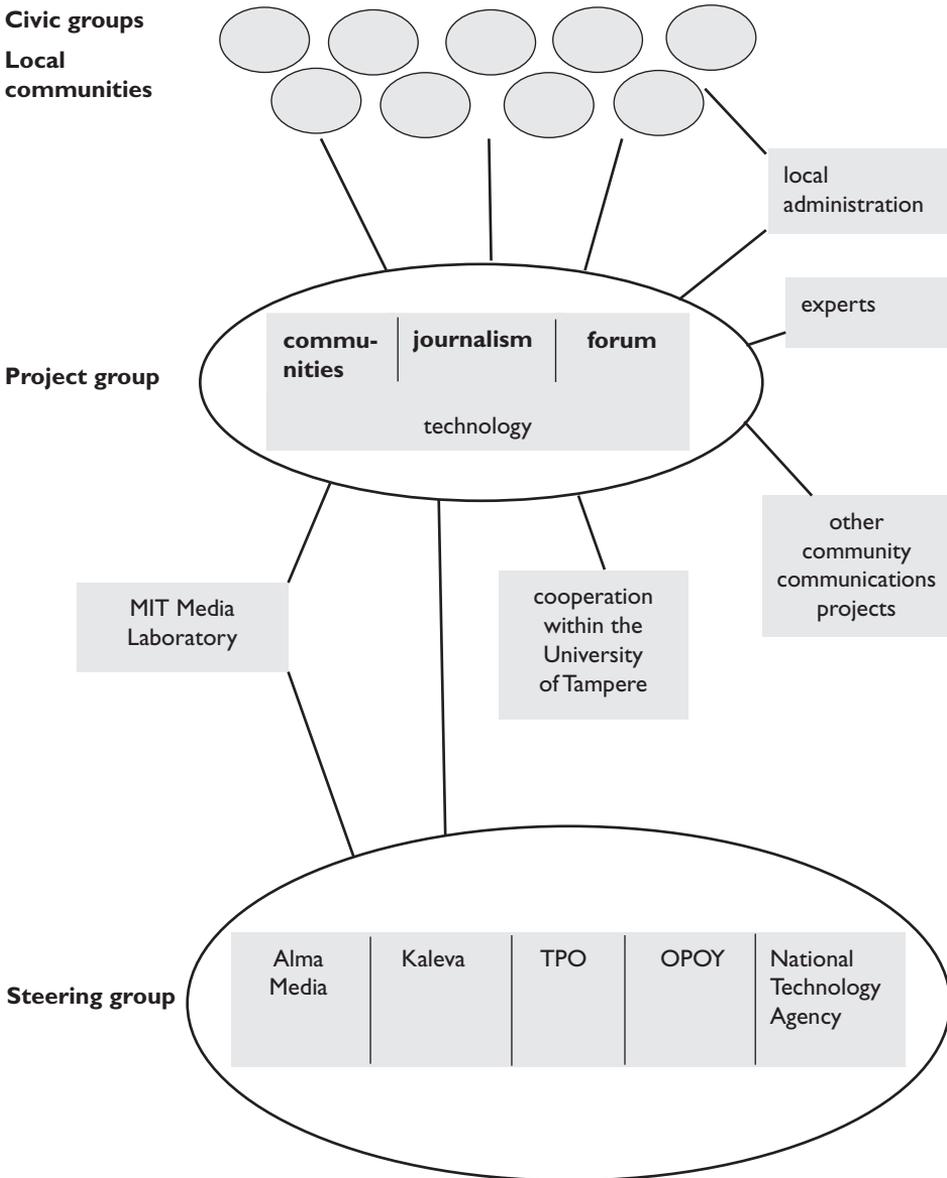# Project organisation

## Facts

- Locality in the Global Net
- Coordinated by the University of Tampere Journalism Research and Development Centre <http://www.uta.fi/jourtutkimus/>
- Principal funding from the National Technology Agency as part of its User-Oriented Information Technology (usix) programme.
- Business partners Alma Media (publishing house), Kaleva (newspaper), TPO and OPOY (telephone companies)
- Research consultation from MIT Media Laboratory
- Duration 1 March 1998 – 31 Dec 2000
- Project www address <http://mansetori.uta.fi>

Launched in March 1998, the project's organisation was designed around its three main research objectives. Throughout its lifetime the project has had close contact with outside organisations as well. The Figure on the next page illustrates the overall structure of the project organisation.

The Locality project was coordinated by the University of Tampere Journalism Research and Development Centre. The Centre set up a project group and appointed one researcher to each of the three components, i.e. journalism, citizen debate and neighbourhoods. In spite of this division into three components the project has all the time worked in a close teamwork setting. The project benefited also from the decision by the Academy of Finland to award a post for one postdoctoral researcher, which was taken up by one of the project group researchers.

A steering group was appointed with representatives from the Research and Development Centre, the National Technology Agency and all business partners. Apart from its management functions the steering group also took an

exceptionally practical part in project implementation. The steering group has also been instrumental in gaining extra resources for the project beyond those allocated through core funding, such as hardware and telecommunications links as well publicity, both for the project itself and for the concepts it has advocated. In addition to the businesses represented on the steering group, the project has been in cooperation among others with the City of Tampere and Nokia.

**Civic groups**
**Local communities**

local administration

experts

**Project group**

commu-nities | journalism | forum

technology

MIT Media Laboratory

cooperation within the University of Tampere

other community communications projects

**Steering group**

Alma Media | Kaleva | TPO | OPOY | National Technology Agency

*Locality in the Global Net:* project organisation

Cooperation with the Media Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has been particularly valuable to the project, providing important additional resources both for generating new ideas and for practical implementation. Media Lab researchers have provided consultancy to the project on a regular basis, and during the course of the project two of the project group researchers made a one-month working visit to the Media Lab. The project's steering group also visited MIT and attended a seminar with Media Lab researchers.

Because of its citizen orientation the project's organisational cornerstone has been to create a cooperation network with local civic organisations and groups in Tampere and Oulu. These civic groups have been the main resource for the project: the practical creation and testing of the possibilities of web technology in local communication has been done on the strength of this grassroots resource. The network has included local residents' associations from different neighbourhoods, local cultural associations specialising in different fields, civic movements and broader groups interested in grassroots influence. These are introduced in closer detail in the next chapter of the report.

The practical research effort has been carried out in close collaboration with the relevant disciplines at the University of Tampere. Cooperation has been closest with the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication; for instance journalism students at the Department have produced contents for Manse Media as part of their studies. There has also been close cooperation with the Department of Information Studies, the Department of Computer Science, the Department of Regional Studies and Environmental Policy and the Department of Political Science and International Relations.

The project has also had the opportunity to exchange experiences with a number of similar research and development projects, both at home and abroad.

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Maarit Mäkinen

# The Internet as a community media

## Making information networks part of everyday life in local neighbourhoods

The Internet has opened up an entirely new kind of environment for communication, organisation and grassroots participation in local communities: it is in itself a powerful tool of democratic participation and communication. The grassroots perspective means we can expect to see the Internet pave to new types of content production and to new technologies developed on the basis of the needs and interests of ordinary users.

The Communities component of the Locality in the Global Net project set out to develop a local online media for local communities, working closely with the members of those communities throughout the project. The action-oriented project involved both the practical development of technology and content production and the complex process of handing over the whole process and the necessary skills required to the local communities.

The local community - such as a suburb or a neighbourhood - is an important resource in society that can greatly benefit from information technology.[1] Information networks can at best strengthen the sense of community and togetherness, facilitate communication, give community members a greater say on issues of common concern and in general promote the interests of its members. The key thing is not the technology itself, but the way that the community understands and uses it.

This chapter of our report describes the web projects of the neighbourhood communities involved in the Locality project, how they unfolded, what they

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[1] Information technology provides a useful tool for community networking (e.g. telephone, local papers or television). The Internet offers many useful properties that can benefit communities in particular: it provides easy, inexpensive and fast communication within the community; a platform for the publication of opinions and work produced by local residents; a community information channel, a local paper that is continuously updated; a virtual notice board for pole advertisements; a channel of participation in issues of common concern; and a storage facility for local history.

achieved and what kinds of problems they experienced. It also reflects upon certain questions of continuity and sets out some ideas on new concepts developed in the project, looking at how they could be applied and further developed. We begin with a brief description of some major international community projects with which the researcher has familiarised herself during the project, especially through its cooperation with the MIT Media Laboratory. [2]

# Community web projects in Finland and abroad

## The diversity of web communities

Interest groups and communities have made use of mailing lists and newsgroups ever since the early beginnings of the Internet, but the development of publishing technologies with the evolution of the www system has now encouraged communities to create their own web spaces. Community web projects have indeed enjoyed growing international popularity in recent years.

A distinction can be made between Internet communities that are based in a specific geographical region and that have grown up out of common concerns and interests; virtual opearting environments for communities that already exist in the real world; and online communities that operate exclusively on the Net. Very often these different types will overlap; one example is provided by a local community project. The following list gives some examples of different kinds of web communities:

| A geographic community | The web site of a village society or a local neighbourhood association. |
|---|---|
| Community based on common interests | The web site of hobby circles and special interests groups. |
| Virtual online community | Interest groups formed in the Internet, with members joining in to discuss common interests and to publish related material. |
| Projects carried out in a regional community | Sponsored or voluntary projects with a specific and clear objective, such as building a technical infrastructure or teaching new media skills within the region. These kinds of projects are often supported by universities, polytechnics, towns, municipalities or Internet service providers. |

The concept of community is widely used to refer to both regional and interest groups. A community network,[3] then, is a service that will comprise different kinds of activities and interest areas such as health, household, jobs, politics

and suburbs or neighbourhoods. In other words this kind of community network constitutes a generic concept that is used by many different kinds of communities.

The interest groups within a web community may also be called channels; a regional community may also be part of such a channel.[4]  These groups are also called circles, clubs, rooms or groups. The subcommunities that form part of a certain community are sometimes called microcommunities[5] which have different kinds of profiles. The different group profiles mean that the communities' web sites also differ quite widely.

## From interactivity to ready-made formats

The main distinctive features of Internet publishing include its hypermedia characteristics as well as its non-linearity and interactive elements. The most common interactive applications are chat rooms, forms, e-mail links, polls and notice boards. However, interactivity is not in itself enough to define a web site as a community site. Sometimes an interactive service such as a chat room is called a community, even though in reality it is only a real-time chat group. [6]

There are various do-it-yourself concepts that provide an easy way for communities to set up on the Internet without any need for publishing skills. For instance, Microsoft's community concept[7]  provides a library of templates on the basis of which groups can set up their own community site in a matter of minutes. The template includes for instance a bulletin board, photo album, discussion group, e-mail and member profiles. Other similar community concepts include Digital City[8], Geo Cities[9], KOZ Communities[10] and Region Online[11]. These offer either a free or a fee-based, usually sponsored platform for both regional communities and interest groups. This makes for easy community publishing, but on the reverse side of the coin the community has to accept the common concept as well as advertising. The web community will effectively be integrated into the commercial operation of the company concerned.

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[2] Mäkinen (1999). Internet yhteisöjen palveluksessa. Raportti eräiden yhteisöjen Internet-verkkohankkeista Yhdysvalloissa, Paikallisuus verkkomediassa -projektin osaraportti.
[3] E.g. Seattle Community Network, http://www.scn.org
[4] E.g. Libertynet, http://www.libertynet.com
[5] Cliff Figallo (1998) uses the term microcommunities.
[6] A chat group is not bound into a community by an interest or geographical area.
[7] http://communities.msn.com
[8] http://www.digitalcity.com
[9] http://www.geocities.com
[10] http://www.koz.com
[11] http://www.regiononline.com

Ideally, the community web media will support interactivity through activities that allow the users to shape and influence the outcome. However, it is quite rare that the local community takes part in the development and in the content production of a web media. In particular, the basic concept for its own operation is rarely developed by the community itself.

An online web project produced and administered by the community itself is an interesting case because here the community is not forced into a set mould but it has the freedom to define itself on the Internet. Given the immense diversity of different kinds of communities, the shape and appearance they take on the Net also exhibits great variety: they are highly distinctive and best serve the interests of their members.

In most cases the primary function of a community web site is to facilitate internal communication and information and to promote the community's interests. On the other hand a community web site may simply describe the local region or its history. Sometimes community web sites serve primarily as publishing channels, as 'local papers' posting stories written by its members. A web space may also become a battlefield for differing opinions. The audience-driven Net defines its own functions.

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**The functional objectives of a web community may include:**

– Internal community communication
– Dissemination of information
– Publishing
– Expression of opinions and influencing decisions
– Access to new technology and learning how to use it

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The following description of some international and domestic community projects provides a useful backdrop to our discussion later on. [12]

## International community projects

Community projects may be launched by ISP and other new media companies, research projects, local administration and by various combinations of these actors, such as joint projects of public administration and business corporations. Especially in the United States these projects are widely and quite

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[12] For more background on different community projects, see Mäkinen (1999). Yhteisöt verkkomediassa. Raportti alueellisista ja sosiaalisista yhteisöistä verkkomediassa. Paikallisuus verkkomediassa -projektin osaraportti.

openly sponsored by business. US-based web communities are closely networked with one another, they often use the same technical support services, they have the same sponsors and are linked together with one another other (e.g. Maine Communities[13], North Jersey Community[14]).

The following are interesting regionally-based community web projects in which the main accent is on providing technical infrastructure and on teaching technical skills:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Blacksburg Electronic Village**[15] | Launched as early as 1993 in the town of Blacksburg, this is a joint project involving Virginia Tech, the town authorities and a telephone company. The aim of the project is to create a virtual space for the community that complements and supports the sense of community in its various forms. The emphasis in the project is on building a user-oriented technical infrastructure. |
| **City of Santa Monica Public Electronic Network**[16] | An internationally renown project started up by the University of California. The web site provides residents with various channels for participation in decision-making and contacting the authorities. |
| **Seattle Community Network**[17] | A major voluntary community project in the Seattle region that has been influenced by FreeNet type citizen networks. Provides Internet connections, training and publishing space. |
| **Antigonish Community Network**[18] | Regional web project set up by an association called 'Grassroots' in Canada. Provides Internet connections, programs and guidance and lends equipment. |
| **Communities Online**[19] | Non-commercial community concept in the UK, open to both regional communities and organisations and clubs. |

[13] http://mainetoday.koz.com

[14] http://www.njcommunity.com

[15] Technical infrastructure development project in Blacksburg, Virginia (http://www.bev.net). Mäkinen (1999). Internet yhteisöjen palveluksessa (report on visit).

[16] http://pen.ci.santa-monica.ca.us

[17] http://www.scn.org

[18] http://www.grassroots.ns.ca

[19] http://www.communities.org.uk

These are some local community projects in which the emphasis is on Internet publishing and on upgrading the user skills required in information society:

| Melrose Mirror[20] and Satter-Lights[21] | Online publications for senior citizens launched and supported by MIT Media Laboratory. In these projects senior citizens have active editorial roles, working as reporters, photographers, subeditors and web page designers. People do what they can and what they want rather than the focus being on technical performance. Through their involvement in online publishing these people feel they are contributing to the development of the information society and do not feel left out. |
|---|---|
| HarlemLive[22] | A youth project in Harlem, New York, with youngsters producing their own online magazine. The aim is to teach useful technical and editorial skills to youths, to instil a sense of responsibility and to open up new vistas for planning one's future. |

## Finnish examples

In Finland, most regional community web sites today are produced by local councils, joint municipal authorities, Internet service providers, business companies and different kinds of projects. Consisting mainly of basic introductions to the villages, local neighbourhoods or other communities concerned, these sites are for the most part oriented to outsiders rather than the community members themselves. However, it does seem that this 'travel brochure' orientation is now giving way to a more interactive approach in which more space is given to services for community members. Recently local web pages have been opened by a number of regional associations, local neighbourhood associations and village committees, for example. In addition there have been some interesting projects aimed at strengthening information society skills at the regional level:

| Kotikatu (Home Street) project[23] | Launched by two civic organisations, i.e. the Finnish Association of Local Culture and Heritage and the Federation of the Associations for Helsinki City Quarters HELKA. Project implementation has been the responsibility of the Department of Architecture at the Helsinki University of Technology. The aim of the project is to find new ways in which to strengthen people's influence over their own living environment. |
|---|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| **Nettilä project**[24] | A web site that covers four residential areas in Vantaa (Koivukylä, Rekola, Korso and Mikkola). Nettilä is a joint development project involving the Vantaa council, the city museum, regional development boards, the Mikkola society and other local societies. Technical implementation is by a small new media workshop based in Helsinki. The aim is to develop regional information services, to provide easier access to the Internet, to collect relevant information on the residential areas and to give residents a greater say in decision-making. |
| **Oppiva Ylä-Karjala**[25] | Funded by the Finnish National Fund for Research and Development (Sitra), this project has set up citizen kiosks and launched IT training courses in the remote parts of eastern Finland. Sitra wanted this project to serve as an example of how the development potential of the information society can be used to build a brighter future for remote areas. The project ended on 31 March 2000. [26] |
| **Pikku Huopalahti**[27] | Administered by one person, the web site produced by the local neighbourhood association 'serves all residents of Pikku Huopalahti'. The site has been design primarily as a bulletin board and a meeting place of ideas, services and people. |

[20] http://silverstringer.media.mit.edu. Mäkinen (1999). Internet yhteisöjen palveluksessa (report on the visit with interviews).
[21] http://toy.story.media.mit.edu. Mäkinen (1999). Internet yhteisöjen palveluksessa.
[22] http://www.harlemlive.org. Mäkinen(2000). Report on the trip to Harlem, New York.
[23] http://www.suomenkotiseutuliitto.fi
[24] http://www.nettila.net
[25] http://unk.pkky.fi.
[26] Kyläteiltä tiedon valtateille, Oppiva Ylä-Karjala tienraivaajana -raportti (2000).
[27] http://www.pikkuhuopalahti.com

# Objectives of the 'Locality in the Global Net' project

**The main accent in the Communities component of the Locality in the Global Net project was on three key factors:**

– locality
– resident orientation and
– independent content production by communities

The aim in the project has been to facilitate citizen communication by providing the necessary technical infrastructure and the skills required so that the local neighbourhoods can themselves produce their own web sites according to their own needs. The research work related to the project has adopted a very strong practical orientation.

Locality is an important value and resource in this increasingly global world of ours. Information technology can be harnessed in the service of the local community's traditional and important values: communication, discussion, expression of opinions, influencing decisions concerning the community, the availability of neighbourly help, 'pole advertising', recycling and supporting one another.

Resident orientation, then, means working with the people in the local neighbourhood concerned, designing the web site, providing the necessary technical equipment and transferring the know-how. Defining the objective of the project is of paramount importance: what we need to be able to do is set out a goal for the web project that the members of the community concerned can easily identify with. All this has to be done from the vantage-point of the community's perspective: What kinds of needs and problems does the community have? Can information technology help to resolve these problems, facilitate management of everyday life or satisfy communication needs?

Working with local residents to develop a common concept and strategy of action is by no means unproblematic. It would be much easier to design that concept and then simply hand it over to the community. This, however, would do little to promote the objective of having a genuine community media that strengthens its sense of community, promotes its technical competencies and serves as a means of communication, information and influence within the community.

**Infrastructure of a resident-oriented web project:**

– local access to the Net + technical equipment and software
– training
– everyday use of online media

Another project objective is that local residents shall assume responsibility for content production on the community web site. This implied a complete turnaround compared to the one-way information production that is typical of traditional journalism, with the role of the community reversed from information recipient to provider: information was now produced from the community's point of view. Depending on the community concerned the infrastructure of content production may in practice involve editorial production of stories, the publication of stories, introductions to the neighbourhood, online discussions or compiling information. Methods of production may also vary; the project did not want to impose any one specific method or genre upon the residents.

The neighbourhoods involved were keen to have the project's support and assistance in the introduction of the technology. [28] The purpose of the project was to help residents set up their own online publications that serve the local community, include local material and create an image of the community to the outside world.

# The web projects go online

The web projects were carried out in three Tampere neighbourhoods: Viinikka-Nekala (launched in December 1998), Pispala (May 1999) and Kaukajärvi (May 2000). In addition, a similar community project was set up in the neighbourhood of Raksila in the city of Oulu in November 1999. In 2000 the project in Tampere saw a couple of other neighbourhoods join in; Petsamo in October 2000 and Haapalinnankylä in November 2000.

The most important task in the start-up phase of these projects has been to create the human network within the community, to teach the people involved the necessary skills and to provide the necessary equipment. This requires a considerable input that extends well beyond the start-up phase. Since the process of setting of a community media was new to everyone involved, many of the problems that surfaced on the way (such as with the building of the technical infrastructure) have had to be tackled separately on a case-by-case basis. The experiences gained during the course of the project have certainly

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[28] Schuler (1996): Technology can be applied not only for passive consumption but also for active promotion.

made it easier for the other communities joining in later, but on the other hand each community project is a unique case.

The following provides a general overview of the different phases in the start-up of online publishing in the communities concerned; these phases are discussed in closer detail later on. In practice there has obviously been some overlap between the different phases.

| Networking and defining concept | – Setting up of cooperation network and residents' planning group<br>– Information to local residents about the project<br>– Demonstration and elaboration of project concept<br>– Identification of specific uses of the Internet according to the community's needs and generation of new ideas |
|---|---|
| Creation of technical infrastructure | – Creation of infrastructure in public and easily accessible place: facilities, hardware, Internet connections<br>– Choice of the software and installation on PCs<br>– Design of user interface, structure and content for the web site |
| Planning and organisation of infrastructure for content production | – Appointment of editorial staff or people responsible for content areas<br>– Collection of material on selected subjects and start-up of systematic updating<br>– Courses on online publishing, image editing and updating |
| Testing and launching the web site | – Briefings and marketing, local event on the project<br>– Demonstration, testing, assessment and server trial run<br>– Official publication of the web site |
| Infrastructure of continuity | – Establishing and strengthening team and cooperation network<br>– Potential new partners and sponsors<br>– Mentoring to new participants<br>– 'Toolbox', making sure the tools are in working order and that people know how to use them |

## Networking and resident participation

In the start-up phase we took as open an approach as possible, inviting anyone and everyone interested to take part. Initial networking was a fairly simple and smooth process. In the Viinikka-Nekala area the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication had had previous contacts and cooperation with activists, in Pispala the network grew up around a core group of activists. In the case of Kaukajärvi the initiative came from the local neighbourhood itself, while in Raksila, Oulu, the members of a local neighbourhood society were

the first to join in. Each community has formed a separate planning group and a network of contacts including local entrepreneurs, representatives of hobby circles and other actors who are not regularly involved in project planning but who are nonetheless closely involved in local cooperation.



**At Kaukajärvi** cooperation was initiated by local residents. Web team meetings are open to all residents. Every now and then other local actors and business representatives are also invited to take part.

Since most people still have very little experience about online publishing, the best approach is to show them how things work in practice rather than to give theoretical lectures. [29] During the early stages in particular it was important to have people sat down at the PC and show them how the project works in as simple terms as possible. Even so it has been quite difficult to get older residents in particular interested and oriented to the project, which is quite far removed from the everyday world they feel they control. In Raksila, elderly people have been encouraged to take part by arranging a specially tailored Internet course for them.

Most residents taking part have had a basic knowledge of the Internet. Although the groups have involved both novices and IT professionals of information technology, online publishing has apparently been too difficult for the novices while the professionals have either not wanted to or not had enough time to assume responsibility for the project. People who have some knowledge about the Internet easily get the hang of things and are also bound to learn something new in the project. Indeed improving one's technical skills has been an important motive for taking part in the project.

The relatively low level of participation in the project can perhaps be attributed in part to the general tendency in modern society away from traditional neighbourly help and other interaction with neighbours. Even though residents may in principle be very much in favour of the web project, in practice

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[29] Cohill (1999): "Show, don't tell."

they rarely have the time to break away from their individual needs and interests. It has been particularly difficult to get young people interested in this kind of community activity.

## Participation in online teams: motives and obstacles [30]

| Motives for participating: | Obstacles to participating: |
|---|---|
| – to create a sense of community spirit so that people could get to know their neighbours<br>– to learn<br>– pastime, hobby<br>– to provide information on a club or association<br>– to promote local affairs<br>– desire to be part, curiosity<br>– social significance<br>– responsibility for a common project<br>– to publish one's own texts | – lack of time<br>– too new idea, hard to understand<br>– threshold to publishing own stories<br>– leaving responsibility to too small a group of people<br>– technical problems updating web site from libraries<br>– reluctance to make long-time commitment<br>– lack of technical skills and complexity of technology<br>– age structure in the area, difficult medium for the elderly |

## Building the technical infrastructure

The local, resident-oriented concept adopted in the project meant that we had to take the necessary technology to the people, to make it easily accessible to them. In all the communities involved the building and maintenance of the technical infrastructure has been perhaps a somewhat slower process than anticipated. This has been due to the acquisition and installation of PCs and Internet connections, inadequate PC capacity, problems in establishing networks connections, the acquisition of software and scanners, and covering the acquisition costs.

The hardware has been made available in public facilities that are as easily accessible as possible. In Nekala, Pispala and Kaukajärvi, for example, this has been the local library, which is well suited to the project's open concept and which is a place that is easy for people to visit. Libraries also had the added benefit of being wired to the city of Tampere network. In Raksila (which does not have a public library) the project was set up in a clubroom, though as it turned out this was not nearly as good a solution as libraries. The best concept of all has been the arrangement in Pispala where a telecentre type of set-up has even included a support person for immediate consultation (although it has not always been easy to find this voluntary help). Local residents in the neighbourhoods have made the suggestion that browsers also be made

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[30] Extracted from interviews with community web site teams: Huusko (2000).

available in other places such as shops, cafés and bars.

Problems with technology have caused some occasional setbacks in the project. In Oulu, for instance, installation of the Net connections was severely delayed and the residents who had just completed their training courses had to wait for their tools for several months. In Tampere, data security upgrades in the city network meant that the community web sites could not be updated from the libraries in Nekala and Kaukajärvi for a period of a few months. Furthermore, in Pispala, where activists would be keen to take over the task of administering their own community web site, this is not possible because they cannot update the pages from their home PCs that do not have the necessary software (FrontPage98). FrontPage is also needed to transfer files to the server, which does not support FTP. These kinds of problems have from time to time very much tested the motivation of the participants.

To facilitate independent administration of the web sites, the project has provided training for residents both in group settings and in the form of individual guidance. Training courses have been arranged on the basics of the Internet, web site design, html code, FrontPage and image editing processing. Where necessary the people responsible for updating have also received advice and guidance in small groups or individually. All these courses have been intended primarily for members of planning groups and those working in updating, although the training has not been obligatory.



**The project** has organised courses for local residents among other things on web publishing and image processing.

The main tool used for updating the web sites is FrontPage98, which has been installed on all PCs at the neighbourhood libraries and in Raksila. Access to the communities directory on the project server has been granted to those responsible for updating the pages, usually from five to seven persons in each community. Some have done work on the web sites from their own computers.

Web site design has been kept as simple as possible, and residents have been provided with templates that are easy to use even by novices.

Nonetheless the technology involved is quite sophisticated and does present quite a high threshold where the people involved have no earlier experience of information technology. Online publishing requires knowledge of the Internet and related applications (www-editors, image editing) as well as of the different stages of publishing (writing, photography, editing, file transfer). In the absence of any earlier experience of computers, operating systems and the mouse, for instance, it is indeed quite a leap to take to go straight into online publishing.

## Content production in practice

It is one thing getting people behind the concept of civic communication that is based on voluntary contributions, but a different matter altogether to get people to take part and share the responsibility for actually producing the necessary material. As far as recruitment is concerned the best results have been achieved by way of personal contacts through local activists. Local publications, other information channels and questionnaires have also been used to inform local residents about the project and to canvass opinions. All group meetings have been open; sometimes representatives of local actors, business companies and local administration have been specifically invited to take part.

In each community the teams working on the web sites have involved on average 10-20 people. The numbers attending the meetings have been roughly half of this. The meetings have usually discussed the technical and practical problems the teams have experienced, as well as planning new contents and discussing new ideas for the web sites. In Viinikka-Nekala and in Kaukajärvi the teams met around once in a fortnight, in Pispala approximately once every three weeks depending on needs (but there were also spontaneous meetings at the tele-hut). In Raksila the team initially had meetings every week throughout the training stage, since then less often.

The contents on the web sites have very much reflected local interests and the distinctive features of the neighbourhoods concerned: there have been gardening pages, book review sites, society pages run by an activist, and day care pages administered by a mother. Content production is based on administration of the different sections within the site so that each team member is responsible for a certain content area. In addition, home pages may be linked to the site from the outside; the pages of local rock bands provide one example. Some help with content production has also been received from students at the University of Tampere.

The neighbourhood web sites usually include advertising sections such as flea markets, for sale and wanted sections, notice boards, events, chat groups and questions to decision-makers. But there is also much more, such as local history, local maps, photo galleries, sections for local associations, pages for young people as well as contact information for business and services in the area.

## Contents of the Viinikkala web site:

| | |
|---|---|
| flea market | forms for sending in messages, in active use |
| gardening pages | questions to the gardener by e-mail, calls for greater openness |
| discussion group | on Dnews discussion group server, not very active |
| events | past and future events, always up-to-date thanks to librarians |
| young people's pages | page template designed by students, young people do not seem to be very interested |
| history | material produced by students, has met with a good reception |
| house improvement | links to related sites, project has produced no own material of its own |
| businesses | list of local businesses, pages produced with support from project run by association of local entrepreneurs |
| day care | current issues at local day care centre and picture galleries, pages run by a mother |

## Contents of the Steps of Pispala web site

| | |
|---|---|
| notice board | Dnews group, automatically updated pages |
| discussion | Dnews group, confusing design that is similar to that of notice board, not in very active use |
| questions to decision-makers | forms for sending in questions, administrators get answers |
| maps and pictures | photo albums of a professional photographer, for example |
| associations | web sites of 11 associations active in the area, many inspired by the project |
| sponsors | ready link for sponsors, not yet in use |
| our own thing | unique collection of music, photos, poems |
| K-18 | front page already set up, young people not interested in taking over |
| new | an interesting section that is worth checking out first, well updated |

It is always a good idea to start content production for a limited number of sections only: you need to know that there will always be enough material for the section and that someone is available to update the web site. The risk of taking on too much and too demanding ideas is very real. For example, the ideas of a virtual walk around Pispala and virtual Raksila never materialised simply because the communities did not have sufficient resources. Having said that, some communities have succeeded even in quite demanding projects with the support of university students or the researcher. Local events have provided interesting and topical material that is firmly and genuinely anchored to the community. Story production does not require any special skills: the online stories produced by the neighbourhood reporter and the reporter's camera have been the best possible advertisement for community publishing.

A large number of projects, events and campaigns have been carried out during these neighbourhood projects. For instance, in February 1999 a Valentine's Day event was arranged in the Nekala library, giving local residents an opportunity to see for themselves how the web site actually is produced. They were also invited to bring in photographs that were scanned and posted on the Internet for a Valentine's Day photo contest. In March 1999, a similar open doors event day was arranged specifically for representatives of the city of Tampere and local businesspeople. Students from the University of Tampere have also taken part in some neighbourhood projects. For example, students on a Master's degree training programme produced historical material, games (e.g. the urban planning game), a youth section as well as interviews for the Viinikkala web site. In autumn 1999, students in regional studies produced a virtual tour of Viinikka-Nekala on the basis of material provided by local residents. In spring 2000, poems were collected from schoolchildren and posted on the web site, in the autumn Viinikkala's own correspondent started to send in stories on local themes to Manse Media.

*Web site launches* also serve as an invitation for other local residents to take part. The Petsamo web site was launched at a garden party on 15 October 2000.

Pispala's traditional street carnival went online for the first time in spring 1999. The first theme covered in the 'Questions to decision-makers' section concerned the area's through traffic; residents were invited to put their questions to the decision-makers. A public meeting was also arranged on the topic. These questions and answers were also posted at the virtual Meeting-Place set up on the Manse Square web site in cooperation with Manse Forum. The Steps of Pispala web site hosts a number of sites for local associations, but it is also known for its many artistic presentations. The pages include samples in Real sound from musicians and poets, as well as a multimedial work on the Pispala poet Seppo Kuuluvainen, produced in cooperation with Manse Media and a university student of electronic photo journalism.



*A local, resident-driven* approach means that the technology must be readily available. The most convenient and easily accessible site is usually provided by the local library.

In connection with the opening of the Kaukajärvi web site at the local library in May 2000, project members were on hand to produce 'quick home pages' for residents. Also in spring 2000, the Manse Square Meeting-Place carried reports on a discussion held on town planning issues in Kaukajärvi. Work is currently under way to produce a 'Before-After' photo gallery based on old photographs collected from local residents; the present-day pictures from the same sites are being taken by the online production team.



*Local residents and decision-makers* can exchange views on equal grounds at the 'Meeting place'. Through traffic in Pispala is a major problem and the issue was raised at the Meeting place in spring 2000. Later on an open meeting was arranged on the subject.

One of the projects in Raksila has involved the collection of memoirs and biographies. The Raksila project is distinguished from all other Communities projects by the greater number of older people who are involved. Internet training courses for senior citizens were arranged both in the spring and the autumn of 2000.

The people participating in the Communities projects have also been keen to exchange experiences with one another. To this end a meeting of the different online teams was arranged in Pispala; likewise a meeting on the continuity of the project was arranged on 10 February 2000. It was agreed that these kinds of meetings should be arranged on a regular basis, and consequently the online teams met to talk about the future of Manse Square on 19 October 2000.



*Neighbourhood reporters* can provide interesting news on local events: this is community publishing at its very best. The photo is from a Kaukajärvi fête that was also documented on the community web site.

## Achievements, problems and lessons learned

The neighbourhoods involved in the Communities project have now taken their first steps in the use of new communications technology. The impacts of the online media on the community and its specific uses will only take shape over time, but there are some conclusions we can draw even at this early stage.

From the outset the projects to set up these community web sites have been carried on in close collaboration with local residents. Although no one has had a very clear picture in advance as to how the projects will turn out, the attitude on both sides has been very positive; there has also been a strong commitment to the continuity of the projects. The results of a survey among the participants suggest that there is a broad consensus of opinion that the project has promoted local development, interaction, access of information and offered new possibilities for publishing. These were some of the descriptions used by the respondents to say what they thought the project had achieved:

a new service for residents, a means of communication, a place for archiving local tradition, information channel for associations, notice board, forum for publishing for local views, provider of new information, and a way of lowering the technical threshold. The project has also been praised for its good spirit of solidarity, its cooperation with the university as well as for its training courses. [31]

Applications that have received most prominence in the design of the neighbourhood web sites have included communication, the recording of history as well as local advertising. Very often group members have designed the pages from a service point of view, i.e. in terms of how the site could best serve other local residents or outsiders interested in the area rather than from vantage-point of their own needs or publishing interests.

The online team members identified the following tasks for the neighbourhood web sites: access to information, an everyday medium and electronic services, recording history, reinforcing the sense of community, local means of information, mutual and fast means of communication, influencing urban planning, bringing people together in the area, publishing channel for local clubs and associations, and local data bank. All members agree the project is important even though they do not always have the time or the energy to participate. Whenever this happens they clearly feel they are letting people down.

On the reverse side of the coin, the team members mentioned the following problems that surfaced during the project: the need to learn a great many things within a very short space of time, personal threshold in relation to technology use, not enough participants, appointing those responsible, 'those who know how are not interested, novices don't know how', the lack of clear direction in the early stages and slow start-up (Kaukajärvi), exhaustion from time to time, media not properly known in the area, school was not interested in cooperation, computers down - project at a standstill, occasional lack of project leader (Raksila), project perceived as being run by the neighbourhood association, local communities want to be involved but don't want to do anything in practice, problems with updating web site from home PCs (Pispala), receiving materials from local actors. [32]

There were also occasional problems and uncertainties about division of labour and responsibilities, for instance as to who was in charge of hardware acquisition and technical maintenance. In some cases the role of different

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[31] Excerpts from interviews with online teams. Huusko (2000).

[32] Huusko (2000). The researcher's close involvement in team discussions may influence opinions, the problems mentioned and suggestions.

partners has also been unclear, and it has not always been easy to explain to residents who is ultimately responsible for Net connections, for instance. In spite of the good spirit of cooperation, there have been some difficulties fitting the actions in with the intentions and getting decision-makers and grassroots activists to fully understand each other.

The members of the neighbourhood teams were also asked how they would go about further developing the project. Many residents said they felt the project had not run for a long enough time so that the neighbourhood channels could to become properly established as independent fora. Overall the residents were pleased with the cooperation they had had with the university, and they were looking forward to seeing the university remain in charge. In the future greater effort will be invested in getting commercial partners as well as local administration involved. There would certainly be a great many benefits for businesses and sponsors joining in. The residents would also like to see continued cooperation with students.

It was also suggested that in order to get the project working more efficiently, it would be a good idea to have in the neighbourhood a local project leader or 'journalist' running the operation for a few years. Residents would also like to see more PCs set up in shops, for example, as well as technical support and people working regularly in technical support at the telehut (Pispala). More detailed instructions would be needed to facilitate updating, as well as training in small groups settings. Likewise residents would like to see more young people, children and older people take part in the online teams.

As regards contents, the residents were hoping to see among other things the following: everyday services, light conversation, exchange services and a 'local parliament' as a channel of local referendum. It is hoped that the neighbourhood site could serve as part of a broader network and that the different neighbourhoods keep in closer touch with other web projects. Overall it seems that what local residents ideally would like to see are projects that carry out their ideas on their behalf.

## The experiences gained in the course of the Locality in the Global Net project show that:

### PCs and the Internet are so difficult to use that this restricts the use of IT technology for online publishing purposes

Many middle-aged and older people in particular have difficulty learning to use PCs and the Internet. Nonetheless people in these age brackets are very often involved in these projects. Learning the basics of the Internet and online

publishing in particular takes time and patience. If the learner is not familiar even with basic terminology such as file or directory, there is not much point in trying to teach html code. Clearly, in these cases, the training has to start from the basics, i.e. the operating system and using the mouse. In this project we were not in the position to spend time on teaching the basics, which inevitably meant that some community members remained excluded. It is also difficult to understand what the project in general is about without any knowledge of the technology. Part of the reason for these difficulties lies with hardware and software research and development, which should invest greater efforts now in user friendliness and in developing easier applications for novices.

Ideally, we should be able to offer communities simple and easy interfaces to technology use and clearly defined training programmes for groups at different skills levels. This training could be arranged at activity centres, at a 'Manse telehut' or a civic centre; in each community training would be offered by mentoring. A form-based publishing system is a useful concept because this eliminates the need for learning html code and editing. However, the publishing system should not preclude other means of online production if the technical competence and the willingness to learn new things is there.

### It is important to have a systematic approach to project organisation and a clear division of responsibilities - but this is not easy

Since the purpose of the project was to have the residents in charge even though it was initiated by the university, there have been some problems with its administration and with the allocation of responsibilities. In practice, the researcher has taken over much of the responsibility for organisation, because otherwise the project would never have got off the ground. Outside consultation is not enough if the community itself has no clear project administration. On the other hand, one of the project's explicit objectives was to keep up a positive atmosphere in which everyone could enjoy working rather than turning it into a tedious and all too laborious undertaking. Although the research consciously tried to withdraw into the background, this did not succeed very well.

Successful project organisation requires that its responsibilities are clearly defined from the outset. Each neighbourhood project ought to have its own internal coordinator who has the time, the motivation and some technical skills to act as a support person, a leader and a contact person. The coordinator, in turn, will have the support and help of the project's technical support staff and will get any additional training that may be needed. One idea might be to recruit a coordinator with employment support. The members of the online team shall have their own designated responsibilities for specific content areas within the site. The rotation of responsibilities is useful in allowing group members to learn new skills. Responsibility for the implemen-

tation of plans shall lie with the coordinator. Not all team members need to take part in tasks that require technical skills.

### The PCs and other publishing equipment and software need to be readily available in the community

Setting up the necessary equipment and work with the software has taken up a huge amount of time and resources in the project. Residents have not always had access to the pushing tools they have needed, which has been due to the project's limited resources.

In an ideal situation in the community would be to have access both to a PC set up for publishing (in a library) as well as additional PCs equipped with browsers. The publishing system is easy to use and can be easily updated even from home PCs with a Net connection. Technical support is readily available.

The technical equipment needed by the community can be packaged into a toolbox product provided for instance by the University of Tampere and its partners. The toolbox would include the most important tools needed by the community to go online:

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**The toolbox**

- e-mail addresses for community members
- mailing list (which at once serves as the community's e-mail address)
- www publishing space on a server for community members and site administration
- access to the publishing system and necessary guidance
- training programme (basics of the Internet, data retrieval, e-mail, www publishing, image editing)
- Internet consultations

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Although it is possible to create such a technical toolbox and an ideal model for grassroots communication, it is important to recognise that each community is unique and requires its own special approach.

# Towards a network of neighbourhoods

It is easier to set up an online publication for a local neighbourhood than it is to run and administer that publication. Virtual spaces that are left to their own devices will not be filled with new contents all by themselves. To avoid the situation where a virtual neighbourhood is deserted once it has been launched, it is crucially important that the establishment of its operation is given careful

thought well ahead of time. Again, human resources are the key factor as far as continuity is concerned.



***Communities on Manse Square*** can also form networks among one another, exchange experiences and join forces to promote common causes.

Although community projects are widely supported, their continuity is under threat from various different directions. These threats have clearly surfaced in our project as well: the lack of voluntary and competent actors, time pressures and other personal obstacles, funding problems, difficulties with organisation, changes in administration, problems with cooperation, problems with attitudes, etc.

Continuity requires intellectual and financial resources, good cooperation, networking and clear strategies of action. There is a continuous need for training and guidance, which are crucial to establishing the independence of the project vis-à-vis the outside world. At the same time training sessions are also an important way of marketing and advertising the web site within the communities.

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**There are many ways in which we can seek
to establish continuity for the project; these include:**

Set up a project and apply for public and/or private funding
Turn to local businesses for support
Sell the web site to a commercial partner who integrates it into the company's product range
Local authorities take over the web site
A public institution such as a university takes over
A local association takes over
A model combining two or more of the above strategies

In the first options the main difficulty is that the funding and support will be very short-lived and insecure if the situation changes. On the other hand, selling the operation to a commercial venture may well change its fundamental nature and transform it from a citizen-driven campaign in a more consumer-oriented direction. Public administration is not necessarily the best option either if the authorities' take a very different view to the residents' groups on local issues. A neighbourhood association might be the right choice to assume responsibility (e.g. Pikku-Huopalahti), but of course this does require that they get sufficient support and help from the outside and that all residents are actively and closely involved.

A cooperation model in which responsibilities are shared (such as for instance in the Blacksburg[33] or Nettilä projects) often appears a good solution, especially if local residents are in a dominant role e.g. through a neighbourhood association.

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**In this kind of cooperation model the partners could include at least:**

– A neighbourhood association
– University/polytechnic
– Town authorities
– Business company (e.g. offering technical services)

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Online publishing should be seen in the wider context of the whole town. The neighbourhood web site is still just an experimental model which will only assume more permanent significance when it grows into an integral part of a broader network of communities and residents. It would be interesting to see - indeed we would very much like to see - the Manse Square local portal unfold into a city-wide, civic-oriented network of communities that would serve both as an informative and as participatory media that could steer and influence decision-making in town.

This kind of citizen-driven neighbourhood network requires resources: training courses, facilities, PCs available for public use, public support, networking and collaboration among several different parties. The cooperative model allows for effective  pooling of resources, which would be the best way to drive the project forward. The cooperation could also evolve into an activity centre, a civic centre or a technology centre that would serve as a centralised Internet consultant and that would promote networking  among communities. Given the support of the local authorities, it would also facilitate public access to the Internet, online publishing as well as people's new media skills.

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[33] For more on this project, see Mäkinen (1999). Internet yhteisöjen palveluksessa. Paikallisuus verkkomediassa -projektin osaraportti.

The centralising model would be the best way to ensure the continuity for neighbourhood projects and at the same time to get new ones to join in. Howe-ver in the absence of a comprehensive strategy the project neighbourhoods are currently being forced to struggle for survival. The communities have turned to local businesses for support and applied for public grants, but neither avenue has as yet ensured economic continuity for any of the community projects.

## Units and human resources supporting the community web concept

| Town level | Neighbourhood | |
|---|---|---|
| **civic centre etc.**<br>– technical support<br>– training, guidance<br>– sub-projects | **neighbourhood telehut**<br>– Net use, guidance<br>– publication and meetings<br>– sub-projects (senior web) | **Internet browsing**<br>– shops, kiosks, cafés, bars |
| **partners**<br>– university<br>– town authorities<br>– business companies<br>– other neighbourhoods | **web team**<br>– residents<br>– support persons | **local residents and actors**<br>–associations, companies, clubs, hobby circles, schools, etc.ym. |

The basic principle we have applied in the Locality in the Global Net project has been to avoid importing or imposing any set model upon the local communities involved but instead tried to build up a model within those communities, from their own vantage-points. Many lessons have been learned in the course of the project, helping to establish new practices that can be put to use in the new community projects joining in.

As we have seen the presence of a technical infrastructure in the community does not yet mean anything; even the most sophisticated telehuts with state-of-the-art technology do not yet mean you have a new community project and a publishing channel. In addition to this basic infrastructure you also need training, but even that does not guarantee a new media project will get off the ground, let alone become established. Residents may join up because they are curious, but curiosity alone will not provide a very long-lasting motive. The community members need to have a good reason to participate, such as a desire to get published, to have their say, to search for or collect information, to study or to meet friends at meetings. Learning, too, must have its own purpose, such as retrieving information from the Internet or learning new technology in order to be able to create an association's or society's home pages.

The Internet provides an excellent platform for public participation, but only on the condition that the community members know how to use it and want to use it. The Internet does not in itself, through its mere existence, make people any more committed or active, nor does it change people's attitude to common concerns. It can, however, serve as a means and avenue of community activity for those who want to be part but who do not have the time to attend meetings or who otherwise are unable to participate.

Community projects continue to evolve through various phases of experimentation, testing and dropping out. In any event it is clear that the online community media of the future will be something that we can still not imagine today as we are taking our first tentative steps. The key thing right now is that people feel the local civic-mediate web is important to them personally. Its purpose cannot be defined simply in terms of a theoretical 'potential', but in terms of the value attached to it by the users and community members. During this short project we have not been able unambiguously to explain this value, but on the basis of our discussions, observations, interviews and the grassroots activity itself it seems clear that people do hope that all this will continue. Indeed we have already had preliminary discussions on the future both with residents and with other project partners.

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Seija Ridell

# Manse Forum: a local experiment with web-mediated civic publicness
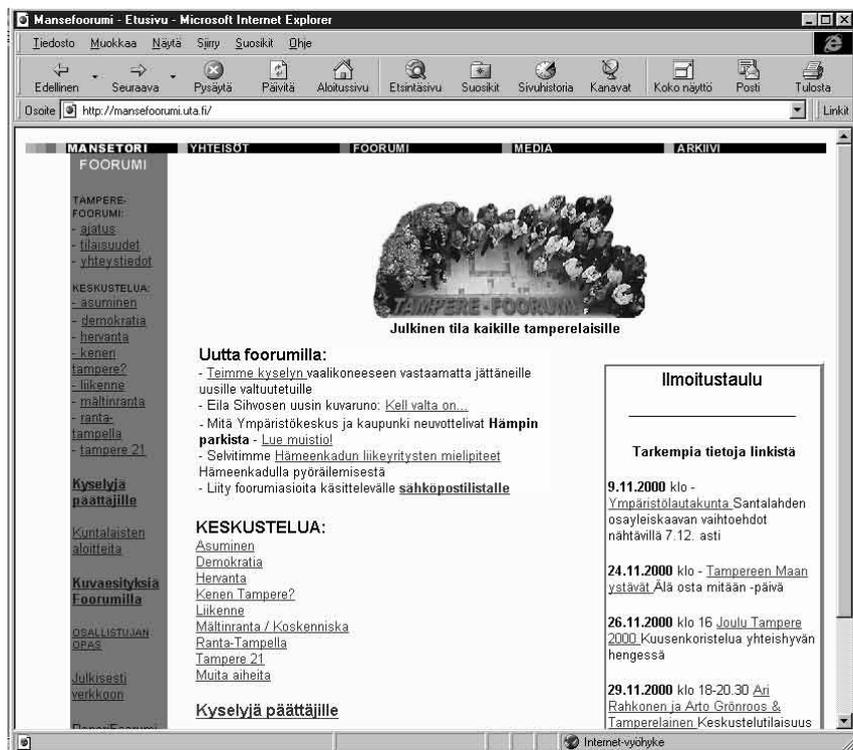


## The Internet, publicness and local democracy

The Forum component of the Locality in the Global Net project set out to study new communications technology and information networks within the framework of local democracy and citizens' communicative and participatory needs. The purpose was to use the interactive properties of the Internet to facilitate public exchange especially between politicians, administrators and local residents. At the same time we wanted more generally to support public

discussion at the local level with a view to promoting its diversity.

The Forum component of the project revolved around three key sets of questions. First of all, the aim was to find out how well the Internet is suited as a platform for locally-based public debate. For this reason the Manse Forum web site was designed and consistently developed in relation to the performance of local journalism, most specifically that of the main local newspaper. On the other hand, we also wanted consciously to challenge the established communication practices of local public administration.

Secondly, the Forum component was concerned with the obstacles presented to the public and grassroots uses of the Internet. These are concretised in questions concerning control of the Internet as a 'place' or 'space'; the technology and skills requirements for accessing and using the Internet; and the Net's practical meaning and cultural definition.

Thirdly, the subproject set out to explore the opportunities opened up by new communications technology to innovate, implement and establish new kinds of citizen-oriented forms of public communication, web-mediated genres of civic publicness.

An additional issue addressed in the Forum component concerned the role of academic research in shaping the uses and meanings of new communications technology and information networks. The starting point adopted was that research and the researcher are active and responsible partners in this socio-cultural process.

The Forum component and indeed the whole Locality project is distinguished from most other citizen participation projects by its focus on the public domain: uses of the Internet are studied in relation to the practices of journalism and public administration.[1] True, there are ongoing projects to develop the Net as an avenue of citizen participation and influence and as a channel of exchange between political decision-makers and local residents. However, in these projects the Internet is not approached as a space of publicness related to the mainstream publicity produced and maintained by professional journalism. In the Forum component the focus is specifically on how the Internet could serve as a place of grassroots production of publicness.

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[1]  One example of a project which in some respects resembles Manse Forum is Minnesota eDemocracy (see http://www.e-democracy.org/), which "hosts quality online public spaces for citizen interaction on public issues ". See also http://www.publicus.net and http://www.northfield.org/. Sassi (2000) provides a theoretical perspective on the Internet as a public platform comparable to the mass media. See also the description by Tsagarousianou (1998a) on the Greek Perikles project.

In practice, then, the Forum component set about its task, first, by taking seriously the views of active citizens in Tampere about their local reality; and second, by giving these views public exposure through the sub-project's web site, Manse Forum. In addition, the work in this component was tied up with the activities of certain local resident groups; our cooperation with these groups was a central part of the project.[2] In other words rather than bringing in new technology to try and activate people from the outside, we wanted to see how new communications technology could respond to the needs of already active groups of residents.

At the same time the Forum component in the Locality project wanted to challenge other local residents to see the public actor within themselves. Unlike journalism, which reduces its audience to observers of the publicity it has produced, and unlike public administration, which to an ever greater extent is treating its citizens as clients, Manse Forum provided people with opportunities to take part in public life and in local public debate as equal stakeholders. In other words, people were approached not as an audience but as a potential public.[3]

# Manse Forum and the journalistic production of local publicness

## Public debate, journalism and the Internet

Manse Forum was developed as a public space proceeding from the ideal notion of local publicness as a collective process of interaction in which the actors engage in public dialogue on locally important, often disputed issues and try to find a solution among as many different parties as possible. This is what active residents in particular expect journalism to do: to provide a forum of open exchange between local residents and the people in power, above all political decision-makers and administrators. However, this is the area where journalism's performance in the production of the public sphere leaves perhaps most to be desired (see Ridell 1999b).

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[2]  The necessary technical skills were taught to the participants much in the same way as in Manse Communities. There was also some cooperation here.
[3]  Here the notion of public is used to refer to the newly coined Finnish word julkiso, which covers the public discussion and collective action aspects of the English notion of public (see Pietilä and Ridell 1998; Ridell 1998). For more on the differences between audience and public (julkiso) and on how they tie in with the categories of consumerhood and citizenship, see Ridell (1999a, 31-32); cf. Sassi (2000, 72-73, 117-133).

From a citizen point of view the central aspect about this kind of dialogical public communication is that it enables, or alternatively, forces actors to take into account each others' views and values in the context of specific, concrete issues (see ibid.). Most importantly, it provides an opportunity for an open and constructive treatment of differences in opinion and conflicts, yet at the same time allows for 'fair disagreement' (Laine 1999). Rather than taking differences of opinion as a subject of publicness, fair disagreement regards these differences as a means of dealing publicly with problematic and disputed issues. In other words the approach is entirely different to that favoured in mainstream journalism where the two parties to the disagreement are pitted against each other in a fixed way. The antagonistic journalistic frame makes it possible neither to listen to nor to be heard by the other side (see Ridell 2000).

In order that the two parties can truly 'meet' in such a public exchange, it is necessary that the power relations and the differences in social positions which lie behind the conflicts are exposed (cf. Tsagarousianou 1998a, 55). Information networks carry special promises for this kind of dialogical publicness as they support reciprocal communication much better than the traditional media.

Manse Forum was set up with the specific view of supporting dialogical publicness. At the same time we wanted to provide an online arena that would give public exposure to issues that local residents and resident groups regarded as important. The genre experiments in the Forum component were built around a few such issues and active local residents produced on Manse Forum forms and contents related to these issues.

Among the issues that were raised during the course of the project were the building of a new bridge for motor vehicles across the rapids that cut through the town centre in Tampere; the building of a major underground parking facility; the building of a bicycle lane along the high street and traffic arrangements in the town centre more generally; as well as the planning of a few disputed areas again in the town centre.

## Publicness and agency

The basic coordinates of web-mediated civic publicness are set by the issues identified as important at the grassroots level on the one hand, and by the exchange of opinions organised between the actors concerned on the other. Underlying them we can detect two analytically separate yet closely interwoven dimensions on the basis of which it is possible also to assess the performance of journalism in the production of publicness. These relate to the structural properties of publicness on the one hand and to its nature as a dynamic

process of communicative action, on the other.

Analysis of these dual dimensions of structure and action helps us to gain a clearer picture of how publicness produced in different ways constructs and enables social agency, i.e. to see (in a somewhat crude simplification) whether it posits people as an audience observing social reality from the sidelines or as a public agent actively involved in shaping that reality.

In a structural analysis of publicness our attention is drawn to the actual spaces or places in which publicness is produced and also to the necessary material and physical facilities as well as the technical infrastructure in general. In the case of web-mediated publicness the latter comprises line connections, servers, etc. What kind of public actor role does this infrastructure allow people to take up? To what extent is publicness open or closed to them? How possible or how meaningful does involvement in the production of publicness appear to people?

As for the action dimension, then, i.e. the concrete production of publicness, one focus has to be on people's technical competencies and skills of interaction. In the context of Internet use this means knowing how to use, say, publishing software or image editing programs, or at the very least a web browser. On the other hand users will also need the more general skills and competencies that are needed for participation in public communication in general and via the Net in particular. How easy or how difficult is it to become a producer of publicness, or at least to take part in the public debate? How motivated, competent and welcome do people feel as parties to publicness?

Since publicness consists ultimately in representations, we should also evaluate it from this point of view. As far as structure is concerned our attention is drawn, first, to the issues that appear in the representational spaces of publicness and, second, to the actors that do or do not have the right to a public voice on these issues. What kind of issues emerge into public arenas and where do they come from? What kind of perspective is chosen on these issues in each case? Who have a say on these issues and what is the basis of their right to a public voice? What kind of criteria are applied to decide the relative weight and importance of different issues and different actors?

From an action point of view our attention is turned to the question of how different issues are linked up with other issues and different backgrounds, causes and consequences. In addition, we may assess what kind of view different actors appearing in the space of public representations take on the issues concerned as well as how they are related to one another in that space. What kind of interaction do the actors have (or not have) in the public space?

The dimensions on the basis of which we can assess the nature of publicness that is produced in different ways and weigh its implications with respect to social agency, can be summarised as follows:

| PUBLICNESS | Structure | Action |
|---|---|---|
| Level of production | - spaces and equipment for the production of publicness <br> - other infrastructure required for the production of publicness | - technical skills <br> - expressive skills <br> - skills of interaction <br> - motive to participate |
| Level of representation | - practices and criteria for the selection of issues and perspectives as well as right to public voice <br> - criteria for evaluating the weight of issues and actors | - how issues are connected to other issues and to actors' interests <br> - how issues are connected to backgrounds, causes and consequences <br> - relationships between actors |

Critical journalism researchers have long been saying that mainstream journalism's way of producing publicness is fraught with problems and that these problems have to do with both structure and action. News journalism in particular posits its audience in a narrow social agent role. People are effectively denied access to news production, and in terms of representation too the news genre posits them as bystanders reduced to observing what is happening in society. Indeed the argument of the critics is that the professional production of publicness is a closed social practice which reflects and supports the prevailing hierarchic structures and power relations in society, not only in terms of its exclusivity with regard to issues and actors that are granted entry but also in terms of methods of data collection and established modes of presentation (see Ridell 1998, 81-101).

## Leading local newspaper as producer of publicness

At the local level, however, there is much more diversity about the journalistic production of publicness. Newspapers in particular have consciously attempted to reform their practices and even got involved in various experiments in civic or public journalism. Having also spread to Finland from the United States, these kinds of projects are motivated by a shared commitment of researchers and publishing houses to resolve the crisis in which journalism has landed together with representational politics.[4]

One of the responses of local journalism to the recent changes in public life has been to adopt new, more reader-oriented ways of producing stories. Experiments with public journalism have used different kinds of reader juries both for purposes of compiling materials and as subjects for stories. Local media have also experimented with other methods of story production, such as joint interviews of a local elected official and a public servant. Even at the level of individual stories the aim has been to tone down journalism's typical antagonistic framing of stories.

Local media often give residents the opportunity to speak their mind in public, to defend their living environment and voice their demands. However these stories on 'angry local residents' rarely amount to a dialogue in that there is no one there to respond to the residents' claims; the questions are not addressed to the authorities, the people who are responsible are not called upon to answer. On the other hand there is also no one in the stories to challenge whether what the residents are saying is true, nor is the other side of the coin very often turned over. Moreover, the residents' attempts to raise their voice are typically presented by the media as examples of the notorious Nimby phenomenon ('not in my backyard') without seeing how the particular problems relate to and can be explained by broader issues concerning the threats to the quality of environment.

Indeed at least so far these efforts have done very little to change the way in which local journalism tends to segregate political (and economic) decision-makers from local residents both in the production of stories and in the public space of stories. This segregation reflects and reinforces locally established power relations and related practices of public communication, effectively preventing any exchange across social boundaries.

Local journalism also applies these strategies of segregation for purposes of ordering the field of important issues as well as the relationships of different groups of actors to these issues. It is typical of this segregationist approach that ongoing projects are detached from the preparatory and decision-making processes and presented as foregone conclusions - all on the basis of what the journalist who is familiar with local administrative culture expects to happen. In so doing journalism effectively produces publicness that prevents people from recognising the opportunities and indeed the rights they have as citizens to participate and influence projects (for instance through complaints) that often are very slow processes.

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[4]  For more on Finnish experiments in public journalism, see e.g. Kunelius (1999), Heikkilä & Kunelius (2000) and Heikkilä (2000).

The reformative efforts within the field of journalism have had even less impact on the concrete procedures of editorial work, on established practices of representation or on the self-definition of the journalistic profession. Overall it remains quite an alien idea to the profession that its primary job could or should be to support and facilitate public debate, or that journalism should offer a space for such debate (see e.g. Puranen 1999). This probably goes some way towards explaining why the interactive properties of new communications technology have remained so poorly utilised in the development of journalism (see Ridell 1999c).[5]

## Manse Forum: organising discussion across boundaries

The Forum component of the Locality in the Global Net project wanted to use new communications technology and information networks in a manner that challenges the locally established one-way and hierarchic relations of public communication. Manse Forum was specifically interested in developing and experimenting with online forms that allow for more open and more interactive exchange between decision-makers and local residents. This tied in closely with the more far-reaching goal of looking into ways in which citizen-oriented forms of online public communication could be established as genres of web-mediated civic publicness.

The challenge to apply the interactive properties of the Internet to open up public communication and to increase its interactivity also meant the Forum project would be consciously challenging not only local journalism but also local administration in Tampere (see Ridell 1999d). As Hacker (1996, 224) points out in his analysis of the role of information networks in public administration:

*interactive communication creates a symmetry of communication between leaders and citizens. This shifts the balance of power and is a threat to leaders who wish to remain elitist in their administration. Interactive approaches to political communication expand the public sphere and decrease the elite sphere of power and influence.*

So far, however, as Tsagarousianou (1998b, 174) notes, most locally-based experiments in 'electronic democracy', in spite of their interactive rhetorics, have in practice been executive-initiated, top-down and (...) based on giving access to information. Politics in this form remains more of a model of convincing through the dissemination of information than of communication and discussion.

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5   See e.g. the review by Seppälä (2000) in which he looks at the administration of discussion pages in the online versions of certain domestic and foreign media and at how these are related to journalistic materials of the publication.

The discussion below takes a closer look at how the experiments in the Locality in the Global Net project with citizen-oriented publicness succeeded in initiating more bottom-up and interactive forms of web-mediated public communication at the local level.

# Experimenting with web-mediated civic publicness

## Groups of local residents as public actors

From the outset the Forum project worked closely with three active groups of local residents: the Tampere Forum planning group, the planning culture group for the Tampere 21 process and the so-called Mältinranta movement. In line with the principles of participatory action research (see e.g. Whyte 1991), the researcher in this component was closely involved in the activities of these groups, trying to find ways in which to integrate new communications technology into their operation in as meaningful a way as possible. The contents as well as the embryos of civic genres that were produced for Manse Forum in collaboration with these group members were based on their communicative and participatory needs.

Founded in 1996, Tampere Forum is a group run by active residents who want to promote public interaction between decision-makers and residents among other means through organising public discussions. [6] The Forum is not registered as an association but has a planning group which is open to all.

There are some 15 members in the planning group and the group's composition remained more or less the same throughout the project. The Tampere 21 planning culture group was one of the eight local groups recruited in autumn 1998 by the city's environmental unit to produce ideas and proposals for the draft programme on sustainable development in Tampere.



*Members of the Tampere Forum* planning group at work in winter 1999.

The group looked into ways in which local administration could be improved so as to make it more sensitive to the interests of local residents. The number

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[6] Town forum groups have also been growing up elsewhere in Europe in recent years; see e.g. Niemenmaa (1997).

of people attending group meetings was steadily between 10 and 15.[7] The Mältinranta movement was set up in 1997 in opposition to plans to build a new bridge for motor vehicles across the rapids that cut through the town centre. From late autumn 1998 to early spring 1999, the movement activists collected almost 10,000 names to back up their initiative in April 1999 to scrap the plans and to arrange a referendum on the need for such a bridge. A dozen or so people were involved in the movement's informal planning and executive group.



**Mältinranta activists** travelled all around Tampere to collect names for their petition.

All these three groups represent a new kind of citizen activity that has been gaining ground in recent years in a number of countries. Rather than organising themselves in the traditional association format, the people involved are keen to take more direct action at the grassroots level to intervene in issues that concern their immediate living environment (see e.g. Peters 1999). Most typically, citizen or resident activism of this kind is aimed at challenging plans that are considered to present a threat to the quality of the environment.

Another distinctive feature of grassroots citizen activity is that it tends to come too 'late', i.e. at a point where the local administrative machinery is already in full swing putting officially approved decisions into effect. In addition, the people involved in grassroots activities are inclined to take a sceptical, cynical or critical attitude towards party politics. It is indicative that all three groups with which we worked during the course of the project experienced a similar crisis when the issue of party politics surfaced in their operation; all had to get this issue out of the way before they could move ahead again.

In an urban context grassroots activism is often motivated by differences concerning town planning and the underlying conflicts of interest. In these cases local residents may have very different views from local administration or building contractors as to how what is regarded as common urban space should be used. In contrast to the residents' concern about the shared environment, the interests of the latter will often revolve around financial gains and

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[7]  For more information on the Tampere 21 process, go to http://www.tampere.fi/yteto/yva21pros/21pros.htm

questions of private land ownership. Apart from issues of land use, grassroots activism has also grown up around health care services, schools and day care. Town forum activity differs from the issue-centred type of citizen activity in the sense that it is focused on the rules for the public treatment of problems and with the related administrative and communications practices.

The three partners of the Forum component differ from one another in terms of their radicalism. In spite of some underlying tensions both the Tampere Forum planning group and the Tampere 21 planning culture group have had good cooperation with the city authorities, at least the environmental unit. The Mältinranta group, by contrast, has taken an explicitly confrontational attitude towards the administrative machinery, openly challenging the legitimacy of the planning process that as far as the administration is concerned has already been wrapped up. This is not to say that the movement is uninterested in a constructive dialogue with representatives of local administration.

The one overriding concern that all these three groups share in common is their commitment to increasing open and public interaction between local residents and decision-makers. Yet in this respect, too, there are some differences. It is particularly interesting to note the difference between the core group of the Mältinranta movement and the Tampere Forum planning group. Whereas the former would want to see broad public debate on a specific issue it considers problematic, the latter is aiming more generally to facilitate a relevant discussion among all the parties concerned, at the same time organising events where such debate and discussion is possible.

## Forum project's cooperation with citizen groups

Tampere Forum represents in itself a kind of local publicness and therefore the project's cooperation with the Forum's planning group took place on a different level compared to the two other groups. In a sense the Manse Forum web site may even be described as a virtual branch of Tampere Forum; indeed this is how it is presented visually on the web site's front page. The site also provides hyperlinks to the Tampere Forum mission statement, memos on events it has organised as well as contact information for the people involved in the planning group. In addition, it is precisely the members of the Forum's planning group who have taken the most consistent and active part in the civic publicness exercise on Manse Forum.

For Tampere Forum the cooperation it has had with the Locality project has provided an important complement to its other public exercises, such as hosting different kinds of public discussions and debates, the publication of its own newsletter (PaperForum) as well as maintaining a mailing list. Nonetheless the Internet has not enjoyed any special status but has remained just one

arena among many others for Tampere Forum. Likewise as far as the Forum's planning group members are concerned their primary concern is still to organise public meetings where local residents can meet decision-makers face to face  (see e.g. Peltonen 1999; see also Huusko 2000). The newsletter is also important because large numbers who attend Forum events have no easy way of accessing the Internet. On the other hand the Forum has consciously aimed to tie together the online and the paper platforms during the Locality project.

All in all Manse Forum has provided the local town forum with a presence and a continuity it would not have without the web site. This is where people can find Tampere Forum in the interim between its public meetings and its printed newsletter, this is where memos from its meetings are archived to provide a running history of its operation. Cooperation has also been geared to experimenting with new forms of public debate and monitoring systems based on the Forum's mission, which would have been too laborious and expensive to run and maintain on a voluntary basis in other media. Further-more, the Internet has provided a useful tool in the search for solutions to problems caused by differences in the participants' power positions to the openness and equality of communication in face-to-face situations. In this regard cooperation with the project has produced some fresh openings for Tampere Forum.

The Tampere 21 planning culture group had the least intense cooperation with the project and made the least use of the public space it offered. No one in either the planning culture group or any other Tampere 21 group was willing to take on the task of hosting a discussion group on sustainable development, even though the people who took part in the Local Agenda 21 process comp-lained at the events organised by the environmental unit that the information they were receiving was sporadic and incomplete. Later on, however, we did find two facilitators for this section, albeit not from within these groups. The main reason for the difficulty of cooperation in this case was no doubt that many of the people involved in the planning culture group had very limited experience with new communications technology. For this reason they were also unable to recognise the benefits that new technology could offer in terms of what the group was trying to accomplish.

The group with which Manse Forum had the closest and most intense collabo-ration was the Mältinranta movement. So closely were the activities of this group tied up with Internet that it is fair to say that an essential part of the movement's work took place via the Net. At the same time the movement's cooperation with the project gave it public visibility it could not have achieved in any other way. As for the Locality project, cooperation with the Mältinranta movement provided a concrete opportunity to study the applicability of infor-

mation networks for the promotion of grassroots needs for public communication and participation. In addition, it provided a means with which to challenge local administration to engage in more open public exchange with local residents and to motivate local journalism to improve its own performance in this regard.

However, for some members in the movement's core group the platform offered by Manse Forum remained distant. Indeed in a sense the Internet was at once both present and absent in the movement's operation. Several key persons in the core group had neither easy access to the Internet nor the necessary skills to use it. On the other hand, these group members were all the time kept informed about what was happening on the Net. The researcher also helped them to take part in the debate that was being waged, and they even produced with her assistance other contents for Manse Forum's Mältinranta section.

## Cooperation on the Net

### Tampere Forum

As was discussed earlier, Manse Forum posted on its web site the mission statement of the Tampere Forum (in Finnish and in English), contact information for the people involved in the planning group as well as memos compiled on Forum meetings both during and before the project. Online memos have also been published from smaller events, such as the planning group's meetings with the town's director of planning and with elected officials and civil servants. In addition, the pages introducing Tampere Forum included hyperlinks to other civic online arenas.

Planning group members have also worked together to produce more direct-action online material in the form of Internet surveys in which the issues raised at open discussion meetings are followed up, with the questions put directly to decision-makers, public servants and local businesspeople. This kind of survey was carried out for instance following the 'Future of Tampella' event in December 1998. Likewise, after an event in November 1999 the chairs of all party blocs and key officials were invited to take part in a follow-up survey concerning the themes raised at the event. Summaries of the results and of the memos were also published in PaperForum.

The Tampere Forum planning group members who took part in the Tampere 21 process were also active in the online monitoring of the citizen initiative concerning the planning of the Tampella area. Some of them took on the laborious task of following the initiative's passage through the administrative machinery by regularly phoning the Registrar's Office and by contacting the

planning office. The views of the building contractor that owns the land were also inquired at different stages of the process. All phone calls, emails and personal contacts were reported on Manse Forum in a form over the 12 months or so that the process lasted, evolving into a chronological account of events. When the environmental committee finally took the initiative under discussion in late 1999, the planning group members prepared their own response to the reply they received, evaluating both the processing of the initiative as well as how the planning of the area had progressed during this period.



*Discussion* on issues raised at Forum events was continued online, with decision-makers encouraged to join in. The poll following up the 'Residents' Tampere?' event was published at Manse Square's Meeting-Place.

Manse Forum also hosted another online monitoring exercise: this was based on one of the planning group members in Tampere Forum compiling memos from the meetings of a working group that was preparing the planning of this area. This exercise in participatory monitoring produced information on

the stages of the groundwork on which neither local residents nor the media had direct access.

The local media were all the time kept informed about what was happening in these online activities. This was largely done via e-mail, with active links attached to messages whenever relevant. Decision-makers and public servants were also kept informed throughout.

Tampere Forum's planning group members also contributed significantly in terms of facilitating the contextualised discussion pages set up on Manse Forum. Three of the seven discussion groups have been facilitated by a Forum member. The project researcher facilitated one of the pages, her researcher assistant another. Two sections were facilitated by people from outside Tampere Forum and other cooperation groups. Manse Forum's research assistant was a major inspiration and an important source of technical support for other facilitators, sometimes even posting materials on their behalf.

## Tampere 21 planning culture group

Since no one from the Tampere 21 process was willing to host the Manse Forum discussion pages that were dedicated to sustainable development, this section was long used mainly as a storage place for materials produced by the process led by the city's environmental unit. For instance, this is where the local residents' so-called Idea Bank was located. The researcher tried to inspire discussion on agenda work, but this was all in vain. The facilitators who later turned up produced a whole new look for the Tampere 21 section and injected new life into this section by starting cooperation with a local school.

## Mältinranta movement

The group that attracted perhaps the widest attention, and certainly the largest volume of attention for Manse Forum in the mass media was the Mältinranta movement. The dedicated section on the web site closely followed every step of the movement in its attempts to stop the bridge, and the accumulating material was largely organised according to the group's activities. However, we did not want to turn the discussion section into an exclusive site for the Mältinranta movement; rather the purpose was to have an arena for the public treatment of the issue it wanted to address and resolve. As this issue was so hotly disputed, the discussion group was not hosted by a movement activist but by the researcher from the Manse Forum project.

The following diagram illustrates the visibility of the Mältinranta movement on Manse Forum:

| Action | Online visibility |
|---|---|
| Movement's official campaigning | - complaints and appeals |
| Events organised by the movement | - notice board messages<br>- other advance information (e.g. press releases)<br>- photos and poems<br>- (stories and series of stories on Manse Media) |
| Authorities' activities related to the movement's campaigning | - notice board messages<br>- links to agendas, minutes, public notices<br>- responses and statements to the movement's campaigning |
| Treatment by the authorities of questions related to the movement's campaign | - links to agendas and minutes |
| Online contents produced by activists | - comments in discussion<br>- questions to decision-makers |
| Online campaigns | - open letter to EU summit delegates<br>- visualisations of the Koskenniska bridge |

To provide background material for the debate on the bridge, Manse Forum first of all recorded the grassroots movement's intention to stop the bridge from being built by means of complaints and any other legal avenues available. The responses obtained from local administration and other authorities were linked to Manse Forum, or the relevant documents were published in the Mältinranta section. Advance information on the progress of the case within the administrative machinery was also posted on the notice board, with hyperlinks provided to the agendas of upcoming meetings and the notices of different court instances.

Secondly, Manse Forum closely followed the various events that the Mältinranta movement arranged to support its official campaigning for getting greater public exposure for its case of opposing the bridge. In February 1999, the movement organised a traditional Shrovetide event to boost its petition campaign. The initiative was officially submitted by a citizen delegation in April 1999, and in May 1999 a demonstration was arranged in front of the council offices shortly before debate on the initiative was started. As public interest began to wane with the council postponing (obviously because of the forthcoming municipal elections) its decision on building the bridge, the movement put the issue firmly back on the public agenda by organising

a street fête on World Environment Day in June 2000. These and other events provided abundant photo material as well as poems for Manse Forum's Mältinranta section. The Manse Media component of the Locality project also carried reports on the events, which were extensively covered in the local media as well.[8]

Like the Tampere Forum planning group, Mältinranta activists conducted a number of surveys to expose the opinions of decision-makers. One such survey was carried out among city councillors ahead of the debate on the referendum initiative. During negotiations on the town budget for 2000, a survey was carried out to find out what members of the committee for technical services and councillors thought about the appropriation designated for building the bridge. For this survey decision-makers who did not have an e-mail address were contacted by phone by core group members, while those who did received e-mails from the researcher. The response rate was considerably lower in the latter case than in the former, and some decision-makers had to be separately contacted by phone.

There were also campaigns that were especially planned for and run on the Internet. One such campaign was the open letter posted on Manse Forum and e-mailed by two core group members of the Mältinranta movement to the delegates ahead of the October 1999 special meeting of the European Council in Tampere. Signed by eight civic organisations and groups in Tampere, the purpose of the letter and the examples it cited - one of which was the disputed bridge - was to draw the attention of EU decision-makers to the problems of democracy in the host town.

In another online campaign in October 1999, a set of three visualisations by an 'Anonymous artist' was posted on the Net to challenge the 'official' versions that had been commissioned by the authorities. The purpose was to call into question the objectivity of the consultant's pictures and to raise debate about the actual impacts of the bridge in the area concerned. High-ranking officials in the town administration interpreted the pictures as a conscious distortion of reality and their publication as provocation, so much so that the researcher in the Manse Forum project received an angry phonecall. At the same time, however, the officials concerned wanted to have the city's own visualisations posted on Manse Forum, which until then had not been published on the Internet. Later on these two sets of pictures were further complemented by

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[8] The public repercussions of the Mältinranta movement extended far beyond the boundaries of Tampere. Apart from the attention it received in the local and national media, the movement was cited as an example of grassroots civic action in doctoral dissertations (Sutela 2000; Mäkinen 2000). In addition, ahead of the municipal elections in 2000 the issue was included in the online electoral machines of both the Finnish Broadcasting Company and the leading newspaper in the region.

a third one meticulously prepared by one of the members of the Mältinranta core group on the basis of detailed field measurements.

*The Mältinranta movement's* online campaign extended beyond the country's borders. .
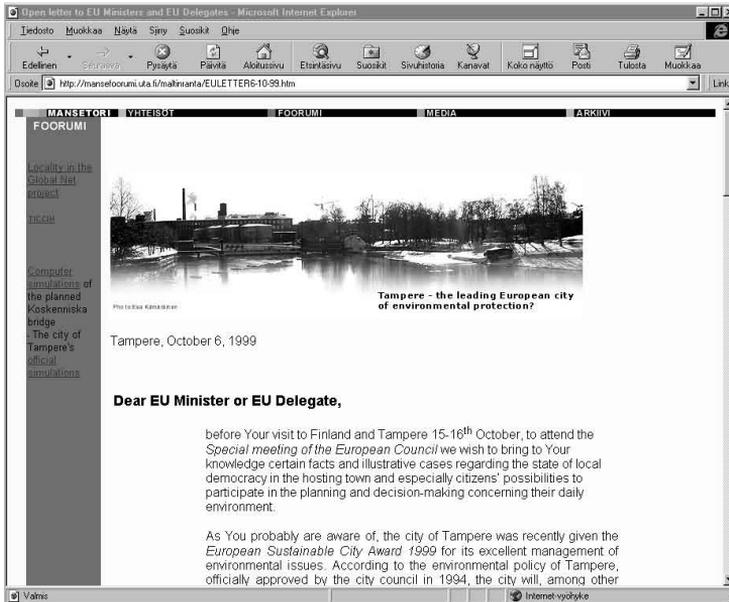


The posting of these rival visualisations on the Manse Forum web site brought a sharp increase in the number of visitors to the site. In addition, as in the case of the EU campaign, the online publicness was closely followed by activities outside the Net: the visualisations were put on display in an exhibition arranged in connection with the street fête on the Mältinranta site.

The discussion group in the Mältinranta section was based on persistent efforts to bring together the different parties involved in the bridge issue. In particular, the facilitators were keen to get comments from the authorities

*From citizen action* to the net and back again. The rival before-after pictures were on display at the street fête.
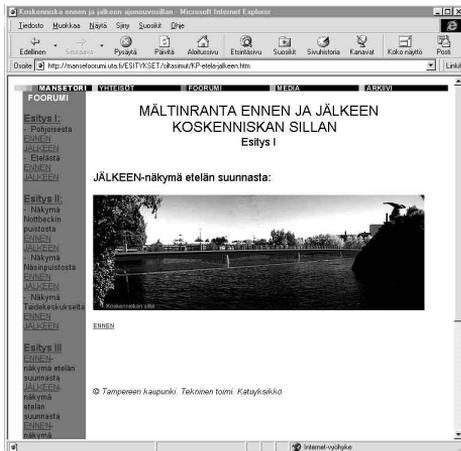
*Different before-after simulations* of the disputed Koskenniska bridge gave local residents a chance to see how the planned bridge would change the scenery at Mältinranta.
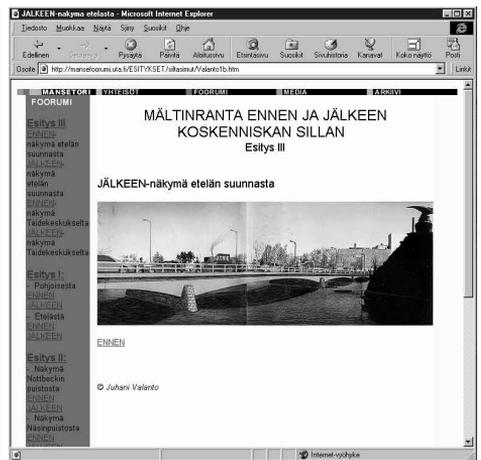
to writings from Mältinranta activists and other local residents. They also encouraged people from the business community, especially representatives of the building contractor that owned the land on one side of the rapids, to take part in the discussion. Views were also requested from specialists such as researchers and legal experts.

During the course of the project an abundant material accumulated in the Mältinranta section, tracing the various phases of the unfolding grassroots activism. However, the meaning and relevance of this material was not confined to the local level. The material posted on the web site has also provided outsiders with a grassroots view on the reality of Tampere residents. In addition, the continuous monitoring and running commentary on the unfolding process has allowed visitors to see how its different moments are related to one another. At the same time the discussion turned increasingly from specific problems to questions of broader significance: for instance, questions were raised about whether the existing Waters Act was up to date and more generally about the judicial criteria as to which parties are defined as having

the right to be heard in decision-making concerning people's living environment.

## Experiences and stumbling blocks

Manse Forum had variable success in terms of inspiring debate and facilitating the exchange of views and opinions. One of the reasons for this was that some of our facilitators were more enthusiastic and persistent than others in trying to get the different parties involved in online publicness. In those groups where the facilitators contented themselves with a lower profile, there was not much debate and discussion.

Indeed it seems quite obvious that the mere presence of a public online arena is not in itself enough to generate and maintain a lively, long-term and qualitatively developing debate on local issues  (cf. Malina & Jankowski 1998, 44-47). There are many underlying reasons, ranging from problems with access and adequate skills to awareness of the arena and, closely related to this, perceptions of the relevance of that arena as a site of public discussion. In the case of Manse Forum one very basic obstacle to debate and discussion was that in the end, there remained quite a wide gap of discrepancy between the possibilities of the Internet and the needs of local residents interested in public participation. For a large part of the members of the groups involved and for instance for the participants in the Forum events, new technology appeared as something quite alien and dubious: the use of information networks for purposes of public debate seemed quite a strange idea compared for instance to the more familiar letters to the editor section in a newspaper.

One of the biggest obstacles to public dialogue on the Net, as elsewhere, is represented by communication practices permeated by local power relations: within these one-way and hierarchic practices public interaction on an equal basis among actors and actor groups in different positions is quite simply out of the question. From this point of view there is nothing surprising about the scarcity of debate on citizen websites - on the contrary.

It was precisely the established structures of public communication that appeared as one of the main obstacles to our efforts of organising open exchange and debate on Manse Forum. Concretely, this was reflected in the reluctance of decision-makers and officials in particular to engage with local residents in open interaction on the Net (see Ridell 1999d).[9] For the facilitators of discussion groups, the reluctance of those in power to take part in online discussions was a frustrating experience which played havoc on their own commitment to hosting and organising debate. Here Manse Forum's research assistant, undaunted by the hierarchies of public communication practices, proved a hugely important resource for the facilitators of the discussion groups.

In addition, she conducted extensive and laborious surveys that were one important way of drawing often reluctant powerful actors into the domain of online publicness.

When analysing the general sense of reluctance to participate in web-mediated public debate one cannot sufficiently stress the role of the technical solutions adopted. In the case of Manse Forum the software we used in the discussion groups (Dnewsweb) was so cumbersome that it certainly did not encourage participation, neither in the role of contributor nor in that of reader. Even the facilitators complained that the software was difficult to use.

# From experiments to practice:
# towards citizen-oriented web genres

In spite of the problems experienced on the way we did succeed in the course of our project to produce quite a few different forms of online publicness that provide a useful foundation for the further development of citizen-oriented web genres. Among the embryonic genres created on Manse Forum were Questions to decision-makers, Citizens' initiatives and Civic visualisations. In addition, memos from Forum events form a separate category.

Apart from the cooperation we had with citizen groups, an extensive Participant's Handbook compiled on the Forum web site offers some interesting vistas for further development. The Handbook describes the recent reforms that have been carried out in Finnish legislation with a view to improving grassroots participation, and it offers useful information and practical advice for people who are interested in participating and influencing in the role of both citizen and consumer. The Handbook also gives users the opportunity to raise problems, to report on their own experiences and to ask questions.

Furthermore, a separate category of hyperlinks to council services was set up so that residents can more easily follow the activities of different bodies and authorities, express their own views and recognise their own chances for participation and influence in time. The 'Follow the decision-making' pages provide links for instance to the agendas and minutes of the meetings of the town board, council and committees, an opinions section, the Citizen Kiosk,

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[9]   This kind of resistance on the part of officials is familiar from the international scene as well. Schuler (1996, 124), for instance, refers to similar experiences in Santa Monica (but cf. Docter & Dutton 1998). See also the description by Jankowski et al. (1997) on the teledemocracy experiment in North Brabant, Holland, and Tambini's (1998) account of a web project in Bologna, Italy.

ongoing planning projects, reviews of planning procedures, and consumer guidance. In terms of developing web-mediated civic services it is quite a setback that for reasons of data security the city authorities in Tampere have taken the decision to reduce the online availability of documents to just two years. This very much undermines the utility of the Internet with respect to opening public administration to ordinary citizens and their chances of monitoring preparation and decision-making.

*The Participants' Handbook* explains among other things how local residents can influence the planning of land use.
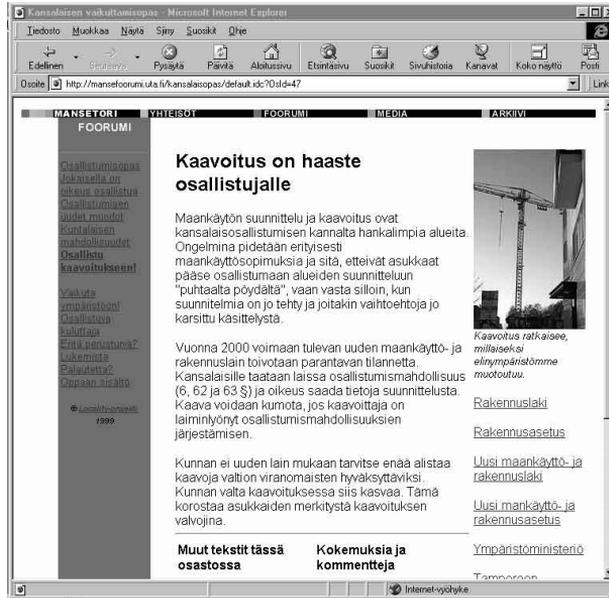


All the discussion groups on Manse Forum provide visitors with background material on how the processes concerned have unfolded and at the same time seek to encourage debate on the issues among different parties. One of the key instruments in this latter respect has been to conduct online questionnaires, drawing in ever larger numbers of participants and seeking to lead the discussion in new directions. In one of these surveys, for instance, more than one hundred business owners were asked what they thought about bicycle lane arrangements in the high street.

The aim of the web forms produced on Manse Forum has been, firstly, to create space and to build a platform for more open and more dialogical public communication at the local level. In particular, the discussion sections (as well as the Meeting-Place jointly operated with the Manse Communities) have aimed to provide an arena where decision-makers and local residents can engage in fruitful exchange even in disputed issues.

Another aim has been to make it easier for citizens to monitor local public administration, and in principle the workings of power more generally. During

the course of the project two different embryos of monitoring genres were created on Manse Forum. First there was the monitoring of initiatives, through which the reception of citizen initiatives and the treatment of those initiatives in the administrative machinery were reported. A second form was the participatory monitoring, where a resident involved in the planning of a certain project reported back with information to which neither residents nor the media otherwise did have access. The public assessment prepared during the monitoring of initiatives in response to the technical committee's reply to the citizen initiative in question is in itself an embryo of a civic-oriented genre, i.e. a collectively produced citizen evaluation.

Third, the aim of Manse Forum's web-mediated forms has been to provide an outlet for citizens' imagination and creativity concerning their own living environment. This has assumed endless different expressions, ranging from the articulation of immediate observations of the living environment to complex verbal and visual statements of opinion. On Manse Forum, examples of citizen creativity include poems and pictures inspired by the disputed bridge project, a picture exhibition by children from a day care centre, critical poems and exhibitions of nature photographs by a local resident activist. These often polemical and down-to-earth representations aim to challenge the distant bird's-eye view that so often is the standard perspective of urban planning.



*A knee-high view* on Tampere: how children from a local day care centre see their home town.

The actively facilitated public debate, citizen monitoring and evaluation as well as manifestations of citizen creativity build up in the Net a store of collective civic memory and at the same time create a culturally identifiable place for public participation. It is this that makes the development of citizen-oriented genres such an important exercise: these genres construct and legitimise such a role of social agent that affords ordinary people the right and the competence to take a stand on issues and to be heard, to participate and exercise influence in public (cf. Agre 1998). Citizen-oriented genres do not define people as subjects of public administration, but offer them the possibility to take up a position from which they can publicly weigh and value and where necessary criticise the workings of the administrative and decision-making machinery.[10] Once properly established, these kinds of civic genres could help to lend broader legitimacy and continuity to the kind of civil courage that is currently confined to a handful of individuals but that is a basic condition for organising public exchange across social boundaries.

## Web-mediated Civic Publicness: Embryonic Genres on Manse Forum

| Embryonic genres | Objective from citizens' point of view | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| QUESTIONS TO DECISION-MAKERS | - to get answers from people in power and agents in positions of responsibility<br>- to get silent parties involved in public debate | - questions to council, committees and companies<br>- Meeting-place (Manse Square) |
| MONITORING CITIZENS' INITIATIVES | - to publicly monitor and report on the treatment of citizens' initiatives in the administrative and decision-making machinery<br>- to speed up the treatment of citizens' initiatives | - monitoring citizens' initiative concerning Ranta-Tampella area<br>- monitoring high street bicycle lane initiative |
| MONITORING CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION | - to obtain information from a grassroots perspective on planning and preparatory processes generally closed to citizens | - reports by Tampere Forum representative on the meetings of the joint Ranta-Tampella planning group |

| CITIZENS' EVALUATIONS | - to put to use in project planning and preparation the expertise of local residents on their own living environment<br>- to ascertain the right and competence of local residents to weigh and assess the activities of people in power and public administration in particular | - Local Residents' Views pages<br>- assessment by Tampere 21 planning culture group of the environmental committee's response to the citizens' initiative |
|---|---|---|
| CIVIC VISUALISATIONS | - to offer a grassroots perspective on the town in public, to put the imagination and expertise of local residents to the best possible use in urban planning, to challenge the technocratic bird's-eye view that informs official planning | - 'A knee-high view on Tampere' exhibition<br>- 'In town in Hervanta' exhibition<br>- 'Mältinranta before and after the bridge'<br>- competing visualisations I, II and III |
| CITIZENS' ADVICE | - to provide information and advice on rights of participation and concrete avenues of influence, to get answers to questions | - Participant's Handbook |
| ARENAS FOR PUBLIC INTERACTION | - to tie up citizen debate and participation with preparation and decision-making and to broader causes and consequences<br>- to facilitate and arrange constructive public interaction between decision-makers and local residents even in disputed issues<br>- to facilitate public debate between local residents and decision-makers on an equal footing | - contextualised discussion pages<br>- Meeting-place (Manse Square) |

It is no great exaggeration to argue that the future of web-mediated civic publicness depends crucially on the question of citizen-oriented genres. This is because all communication takes place through cultural forms that we call

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[10]  See the description by Sassi (2000, 230-234) on the communicative strategies that are used to (re)produce the role of subservient citizen in the practices of public administration in Finland.

genres. These, in turn, are firmly anchored to prevailing social practices, which for their part maintain and reproduce the power relations and role positions built into them. Thus the key issue is whether it is possible to redefine mainstream genres in the Internet or to produce and establish there new cultural forms that break down the traditional citizen role, increasingly permeated by the consumerist ethos, and offer in its place the dynamic position of publicly participating citizen.

One example of the redefinition of genres on Manse Forum is provided by the Sustainable development electoral machine that was set up on the web site ahead of the municipal elections in 2000. The questions for the machine were collected in a public discussion organised by Tampere Forum as well as through libraries, e-mail and the Internet, giving ordinary citizens a chance to take part in the public definition process of what are important issues in Tampere. The answers of the candidates who were elected to the council will be posted on the Internet throughout the 2001-2004 term, allowing residents to compare what the councillors said about sustainable development in Tampere ahead of the elections to their actions in office.

# Does the Net have a future as a citizen-oriented space of publicness?

The question that surfaced time and time again during the course of the Forum project was this: What are the practical requirements that would allow the Internet to serve as a public site of participatory citizenship and interactive local democracy? In the light of the experiences gained in Manse Forum the prerequisites can be grouped into questions concerning material and technical as well as skills-related access to the Internet, the Net's cultural and practical meaning as well as technical feasibility.

## Infrastructure requirements

The first structural requirement is that all people, including those who cannot afford a PC or who do not want to make the investment in a PC with a network connection and the necessary software, have easy access to the Internet. One way of doing this, apart from upgrading the existing library network, is to set up networked citizen centres or different kinds of public spaces which in addition to the infrastructure offer training and continuous technical support. In these spaces people could engage in public discussions in different kinds of events, but also take part in organising events and in producing materials for online and paper publications.

These networked civic spaces would make available the infrastructure that citizens need for the independent production of publicness. At the same time they would serve as a base for the teamwork that the production of web-mediated and other civic forms of publicness requires. Importantly, these spaces must be set up in places where people go to anyway, and they must be designed in such a way that people feel comfortable going there.

The removal of the remaining obstacles to universal access in Finland is largely down to local public administration, which has an obligation to make sure that all citizens have equal opportunities to access information networks. However, the development challenge must also be extended to the Finnish government, which in spite of its policy statements has not shown a very consistent and long-term approach to resolving the problem of access.[11] Another aspect on which there has as yet been no serious discussion in Finland is the responsibility of IT business and industry in developing an equal information society - even though they are extensively supported through public funds, from the educational system upwards.

## Challenges for local public administration

One of the ways in which public administration could strengthen citizen participation at the local level would be to set up new kinds of citizen-oriented online services. For instance, municipalities could open citizens' advice services to complement existing consumer guidance services, making proper use of the interactive properties of the Internet.

Furthermore, an electronic bulletin board for notices from the authorities and messages by grassroots civic groups would be an important service for citizens interested in participating. These should be set up in central public places.

During the Locality in the Global Net project, partly in response to the challenges thrown up by the project, the local authorities in Tampere have among other things opened up on their web site new feedback channels. One of these is a moderated Citizens' Kiosk where residents can put questions to town officials and get answers to those questions. Another application that makes use of the properties of the Net is the urban planning game through which residents can express their views on different alternatives in certain

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[11]   For more on Finland's information society strategy, see e.g. http://www.minedu.fi/ tietostrategia/tietostrategia.html; http://www.sitra.fi/tietoyhteiskunta/suomi/st21/ sitra2062b.htm and http://www.vn.fi/vm/kehittaminen/tietoyhteiskunnan_kehittaminen/ raportti/index.html
   Cf. also the case of Sweden, where the government has pledged to build a broadband network throughout the country:  http://www.itkommissionen.se/bredband/
   See also Tambini (1998, 103-107), who argues that universal access to information networks should be understood as a basic right in modern society.

planning projects.[12] At the same time the planning authorities have used the Internet to an ever greater extent for purposes of illustrating upcoming projects. Recently the city also added to its web site a new section called 'Participation' which resembles Manse Forum's 'Follow the decision making' pages.

New communications technology could be put to much more interactive use especially in the preparation of land use and planning projects. As well as posting maps and graphs on the Net and giving citizens the opportunity to comment on plans at different stages, the authorities could illustrate and put to the test ideas submitted by local residents, and even place a 'citizens' architect' at their disposal to help refine their ideas. This would be a useful way of harnessing local residents' creativity and their everyday expertise for purposes of sustainable urban planning. Another service that should be worth developing in close collaboration with interested residents is a map-based citizen interface that makes use of geographic information technology.[13] Citizen imagination concerning the living environment might also yield inspiring ideas in the development of different kinds of digital town projects.[14]

An important aspect of the meaningfulness of civic Internet use is that representatives of local public administration interact openly with citizens on the Net. This should be coupled with the broader exercise to de-hierarchise existing communication practices in local administration. One possible first step in this direction could be to arrange monthly meetings between residents and the town manager, with reports on these meetings posted on the Net. Citizens could send in questions via the Internet ahead of the meeting. This experiment would combine offline and online communication and might even evolve into a new web genre as discussed above, giving people the opportunity to take up the position of publicly participating citizens and allowing for more open public interaction between decision-makers and citizens.

Another objective that is certainly worth pursuing is mutual recognition and acceptance of the city's official web site and citizens' independent content

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[12]  See http://www.tampere.fi/tiedotus/viinikka/frames.htm and http://www.tampere.fi/tiedotus/tohloppi/
For more on the town planning game, see J. Seppälä (2000): http://www.tampere.fi/viy/tyontekijat/jari/gradu.pdf
[13]  For more on the use of geographic information systems (GIS) in participatory land use planning, see Craig et al. (1998) and Sarjakoski (1998).
[14]  See e.g. Francissen and Brants (1998, 35), who argue there is a very real risk that software development is becoming an end in itself in Amsterdam's digital town project, taking account neither of users' needs nor of the restrictions of technology. Work is also under way to develop a three-dimensional virtual model of Tampere, which at least so far has made no use of citizen imagination, see  http://www.uta.fi/hyper/projektit/tred/english/index.htm

production. This would mean, for instance, that mutual hyperlinks are set up on both sets of front pages and that representatives of local administration take an active part in open debate and discussion. In urban planning projects this co-existence could and should also involve close cooperation.

The development and use of the Internet for these kinds of purposes would contribute to carving out a cultural meaning for the Net as a place that differs profoundly from web spaces that are geared to private consumption. At the moment, however, municipal web sites are very much inclined to look upon citizens as clients, for whom the professional machinery of local public administration produces one-way information and electronic services.[15]

## Civic uses of the Net and challenges for journalism

The role and significance of the Internet as a public space depends crucially on people's perceptions of other than commercial uses of the Net. We cannot sufficiently emphasise the role of the mass media in the process where cultural perceptions of the Internet take shape. If the civic uses of the Internet fail to get a sufficiently broad and credible footing in the media, people are addressed to interpret them narrowly as forms of customer service by public administration or, as far as grassroots production of publicness is concerned, reduce it to an entirely marginal exercise.

One of the hardest nuts to crack for Manse Forum, too, was spreading the message about this web-mediated public space. Our various non-commercial advertising campaigns, word of mouth and e-mail lists as well as home-made posters, brochures and the Paper Forum, paled into insignificance when compared to the space that the local newspaper can use for advertising its own online version. In addition, although the experiments in civic publicness on Manse Forum did receive quite broad attention in the local media, none of the many ideas they suggested for the development of local public sphere were seriously picked up by journalists.

Our efforts to market and advertise the Forum web site cannot even be compared to the situation of web sites run by local authorities: all the advertising that they need is the institutionalised position of public administration in people's everyday life and the knowledge that virtually all municipalities in Finland today have their own sites.

Speaking more generally, one of the ways in which awareness of citizen-oriented web sites could be increased would be to link them together into a

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[15]  See e.g. the development programme for Tampere's online services: http://www.tampere.fi/projekti/vepa/loppurap.htm

network and perhaps set up a portal of locally-based civic web projects. This kind of network would make it much easier to circulate experiences about Internet use for civic purposes and to pass on information about related web genres.

The development of the citizen-oriented public use of the Internet also presents challenges to the daily practices of media and journalism in particular. Although it is clear that the position of journalism as the institutionalised producer of publicness in modern society is not the least threatened by these web-mediated grassroots campaigns, journalism would do wisely to try and improve its own performance by paying a bit more attention to the communicative and participatory needs expressed at the grassroots level. Just as local public administration, local journalism might have a lesson or two to learn from citizen imagination; this concerns such questions as who are the parties to different issues and who should have the right to a public voice, or who are entitled to public answers to their questions and who should not be allowed to remain silent in which issues? Journalism might also pick up some fresh ideas from citizen activism in terms of breaking away from the segregationist presentation formats. As far as organising public debate and discussion is concerned, journalism could even benefit from venturing into cooperation with grassroots civic groups.

## Challenges for technology development

It became perfectly clear to us in the Forum project that new communications technology is not in itself an answer to anything. It does of course make possible all sorts of things that are important for civic publicness, such as reciprocal communication, but the question of how all this translates into more citizen-oriented practices of public communication is decided in cultural struggles over shared definitions and social struggles waged under established power relations.

Nonetheless the challenges that are posed specifically to the development of technology are crucially important with respect to the public use of the Internet. We already referred briefly to the cumbersome discussion group software that was used on Manse Forum and to the obstacles it presented to participation in the online discussion. Microsoft FrontPage98, although it was not particularly flexible in use and did not allow for any ambitious experimenting for instance with map-based pages, did serve its purpose reasonably well. Adobe PhotoShop for its part was too complex and sophisticated a program for this kind of application.

All in all technological problems and poor or lacking applications present a major obstacle to the citizen-oriented use of the Internet.[16]

Obviously then, web-mediated civic publicness and its various genres require special tools that need to be designed, tested and further developed closely with the citizen groups using these tools.[17] Indeed one of the biggest challenges for the future is to develop the technology that meets the communication needs and the requirements for publicness arising from the grassroots level.

## Challenges for research

The preconditions for the development of the Internet as a site of citizen-oriented publicness may be summarised in the following diagram:

| Civic publicness | Structural preconditions | Action preconditions |
|---|---|---|
| **Production** | - networked civic centre or similar facilities<br>- PCs, server, publishing and image editing programs, training, technical support<br>- web-assisted citizens' guidance | - easy access to civic centre<br>- reasons, motive and skills to use the Net for civic purposes<br>- familiarity with the rules of public online communication<br>- user-friendly and reliable technology<br>- teamwork among civic actors |
| **Representation** | - citizen-oriented genres revolving around:<br>   - open, public interaction across social boundaries<br>- backgrounding and provision of hyperlinks<br>   - citizen initiatives<br>   - citizen imagination and creativity<br>   - civic monitoring<br>   - civic evaluation<br><br>⇨ archives of civic memory and knowledge | - exposure of actors' interests and power relations<br>- long-term monitoring of current issues and linking them with concrete decision-making<br>- facilitating dialogue between different parties<br><br>⇨ implied public, which makes it possible to recognise the public actor-role of the participating citizen and to view it as permanent and meaningful |

[16] One of the projects that never got off the ground was the green strip project that was to be carried out jointly with housing corporations. Another concept that remained on the drawing table was the council votes map which we also suggested, without success, to the city's communications department.

[17] One point of comparison is provided by the community-based Silver Stringer project coordinated by the MIT Media Lab ( http://silverstringer.media.mit.edu ( which has worked to develop an easy-to-use publishing program for elderly people and others with very little or no experience of PCs and the Internet (see Turpeinen 2000).

The development of the Internet as a space of civic publicness obviously presents a host of challenges to academic research as well. Traditionally social scientific research has been concerned with the analysis of ongoing and evolving trends in society from a broader socio-cultural point of view, to identify on this basis new development needs and to put forward ideas as to how those needs could best be addressed. This also applies to the new communications technology and information networks. In this case, however, researchers will additionally have to form networks of cooperation across administrative and disciplinary boundaries.

The sociological, technical and planning imagination now need to find one another and work together with civic actors. Only in this way it is possible to find new uses for the Internet beyond those more apparent and fashionable ones that are being developed in the prevailing economic and cultural climate. One of the toughest problems here is the question of how to problematise, both in research and in society more generally, the culturally pervasive consumer role from the vantage-point of which public sphere is a supermarket and the production of publicness always appears as someone else's than the audience's job.

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Ari Martikainen

# Towards dialogical online journalism

Manse Media was launched in March 1999 following a period of early experiments with different software and web site structures. During the 18-month period up to the end of 2000, a total of more than 250 stories were published on the site.

The main objective in the Manse Media project has been to develop dialogical online journalism with a view to promoting public debate.  At the same time the aim has been to find new ways of dealing with local issues by means of a concerted treatment of new ideas and the use of a wide range of different types of sources. Manse Forum and Manse Communities have provided a platform of cooperation for active citizen groups and local residents, giving them the opportunity to make their voice heard by journalistic means.

The Internet has opened interesting new vistas for process reporting, offering new methods and forms of both presentation and archiving. Stories written on the same subject are filed under the same heading to provide a running case history on the unfolding process. In this way users reading the latest stories on the subject can follow it all the way back to source.

In this project the traditional role of journalist has also been called into question. Editorial staff at Manse Media have not just followed events in a capacity of outside observers, but at best they have worked closely with local residents on ideas for new stories and on the actual production of those stories.

Apart from the production of new contents, another key concern in the Manse Media project has been with the development of a more user-friendly publishing system with easier technology: the aim has been to make it easier for users to import stories into the system and to embed photos within stories. During the course of the project the system has been further improved on the basis of feedback received from editorial staff.

# Sections built around subjects

The Manse Media site is divided into different sections. It has never been intended as a full-service media, but the focus in its news reporting is on particular themes. Primarily, Manse Media has followed the same stories as have been covered in Manse Forum from a process angle: since the purpose was to see how certain urban planning projects unfolded and progressed through the municipal decision-making apparatus, it was the most logical solution to set up a separate section for each subject-matter. In this way stories dealing with the same themes were linked up with existing materials, making it easier for users to navigate within the site.

Initially there were three sections: Aspinniemi (or Ranta-Tampella as from spring 2000, concerning a planning project to redevelop an old industrial area in the city centre); the Koskenniska bridge (disputed plans to build a new bridge across the rapids that cut through the centre of the city) and Puu-Tammela (concerning a low-rise area of wooden buildings again in the city centre); later on a fourth heading was added to cover an unfolding discussion on Hämpin Parkki, concerning plans for a major underground parking facility. New sections have been added according to need. There are also sections for stories produced locally by the neighbourhood communities as well as for current concerns. In autumn 1999 two students wrote a series of six stories on the values underlying sports appropriations from the council; this prompted the opening of a separate sports section.

# Small organisation

For most of the time Manse Media has operated with an editorial staff of no more than one or two persons. For this reason the project has not even tried to develop any special editorial routines. Permanent editorial staff have concentrated in their job mainly on monitoring and updating stories created in other sections. Having said that there have been a number of ongoing projects in which students have been closely involved. In November 1999, a total of some twenty-odd students worked simultaneously for a fortnight on new stories. Indeed the frequency of new stories has fluctuated quite widely.

For these reasons Manse Media has had an open and also quite flexible editorial organisation. The project has worked particularly closely with journalism teaching staff at the University of Tampere. Since the Locality project has not been formally integrated in the university curriculum for journalism and mass communication, each project has had to be set up separately. In the absence of any set procedures, the revision of stories written by students has occasionally caused some problems: as the stories have passed through the hands of

both the course teacher and the Manse Media news editor, there have often been too many gatekeepers. Yet overall even the biggest projects went quite smoothly. An important instrument that has made the organisation of work much smoother is the editorial and publishing system Square that was developed during the course of the project.

# Square – Manse Media's publishing tool

The first version of the project's publishing system (which was known as Rin Tin Tin) was launched in spring 1999. Within this system whoever wrote the story also published it, which required some knowledge of html code. Rin Tin Tin did not allow images or sound or video files to be imported directly into the system, nor did it not support simultaneous users. Initially the system was quite adequate for the needs of Manse Media, when there were no more than one or two editorial staff.

|  | **Spring 1999** | **Autumn 1999** | **Spring 2000** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **System development** | RinTinTin | Square | |
| **Sections** | Aspinniemi Koskenniska bridge Puu-Tammela Hämpin parkki | In Focus Sports Corner | Neighbourhoods Ranta-Tampella |
| **Projects** | Aspinniemi | | Neighbourhood reporters |

*Development* of publishing system, section opening dates and special projects.

 In its current, upgraded version (known as Square) the system provides separate platforms for content production and publication. This means that several teams can now work simultaneously in the same editorial environment. Publication of the stories has been the responsibility of Manse Media's news editor. Content production has been made easier so that contributors no longer need to know html code. In addition, it is now possible to enter images as well as sound and video clips into the system provided that they are fed through the appropriate software.

# Excerpts of contents produced in Manse Media

## Process reporting: the underground parking facility

News items in today's fast-moving media are often isolated pieces; so intense is the pace of news-making that there is rarely enough time for journalists to

do any extensive background research or to examine an unfolding news item in its broader context. One of the great advantages of the Internet is that it offers ample space for archiving news stories: users can easily access earlier related stories through the links provided in connection with the new one. Manse Media took advantage of this feature in its process reporting.

The method was used especially in connection with urban planning issues raised in Manse Forum. Over time, a chain of individual stories on a certain planning project will create a history for that particular case, allowing readers who have not followed it from the beginning easily to see how it has evolved. At the same time process reporting lays bare the ongoing nature of things and the stages the matter has reached in the decision-making apparatus. At best this kind of reporting makes it clear to people that they can in fact influence the course of planning (e.g. the planning of a new residential area). By highlighting new and different perspectives and the opinions of different parties, process reporting aims to inspire genuine debate and to provide information to help people exert a real influence.

In December 1997 a major building contractor introduced its plans for the development of an underground parking facility in the centre of Tampere. One week later, the plan was adopted by the city executive board. The plans only began to receive wider publicity at the beginning of 1999 when the preliminary plans were introduced to local residents. The documents concerning the projects were made available to the public in March 1999. Thirteen opinions were filed in response, specifically objecting to the plans to have entry and exit sliproads into the parking facility in the centre of the city. Manse Media took up the issue in summer 1999. The progress of the planning project has also been monitored in Manse Forum.

The first stories published in Manse Media were aimed at describing how the planning project was advancing within the official decision-making apparatus: interviews were carried out with the architect in charge, the area manager of the building contractor who had made the initiative and local residents who would be affected by the traffic in and out of the parking facility. Since then the perspective has been expanded with new stories on the necessity of underground planning, for instance. Among the sources quoted in these stories are an official from the Helsinki city planning office who was involved in drafting the underground land-use plan for the Helsinki metropolitan area.

| Decision-making | Manse Forum | Manse Media |
|---|---|---|
| | | First series of stories June 1999. |
| | | Progress report September 1999. |
| Draft for change in town plan adopted by environmental committee on 23 Nov 1999. | Enquiry concerning parking facility submitted to members of environmental committee in Nov 1999. | Story on the meeting of the environmental committee Nov 1999. |
| | Exchange of views in MM's Traffic forum in Dec 1999 between responsible architect and local residents. | Stories on the necessity of underground town plan in Dec 1999. |
| Proposal for change in town plan adopted by environmental committee on 6 June 2000. Proposal displayed to the public from 8 June to 10 July; ten objections were filed. | Discussions in the Traffic forum in spring 2000 involving area manager of building contractor, town traffic engineer and local residents. | Update: Housing corporations in the area appeal in May 2000 to environmental committee, objecting to the location of entry and exit points. |
| Negotiations between Pirkanmaa Regional Environment Centre and city authorities concerning the planning of the parking facility in August 2000. | Full memorandum on the negotiations made available online. | Story on the negotiations in Manse Media. |
| Planning continues. | | |

*Civic debate* in Manse Forum and the stories published in Manse Media have complemented one another in the follow-up of the planning process.

Process reports on Manse Media have not just recorded the course of events, but a very serious effort has been made to dig deeper and find out what exactly has happened in the corridors of power and in the planning system. When the environmental committee had discussed the issue and voted on the location of the entry and exit sliproads in November 1999, all committee members were interviewed to find out why they had voted the way they had. At this stage it

became obvious that the committee members were very much at the mercy of the civil servants. Some of the elected officials did not even seem to be clear as to what the committee had decided and how their decision would influence the future planning process. The citizen perspective has been consistently emphasised in all process reporting. Not only planning staff and decision-makers but also local residents living in the area concerned have had the opportunity to make their voices heard.

It is no easy task to write stories all the time on one and the same subject. For instance in the kind of planning process that is involved here, the journalist will often have to go back to the same people for interviews time and time again. It may be difficult to find fresh and new angles on the subject, even when there are new developments in the process. Divided into sections based on subject matter, the structure of Manse Media has been ideally suited to process reporting. However the clarity of the structure within sections has presented some problems: Should the stories appearing within a section be linked to one another? How should older stories be listed and presented? As soon as the number of stories begins to accumulate it may be difficult for the user to properly see the broader picture. In this respect there is certainly need for improvement both with regard to the presentation and archiving of older stories.

## Multiple perspectives and background information

Local news reporting is most typically a one-way process from top to bottom. The recipient's role is largely confined to acknowledging the receipt of the information. Recently, however, there has been a growing movement away from one-way communication towards journalism that is based on genuine reciprocity and dialogue. It is also very rare for traditional journalism to provide any historical background on current stories, which means there is no historical continuity about the unfolding story. These were the aspects on which we focused in Manse Media's Aspinniemi project.

Redevelopment of the old industrial Tampella site has been a disputed issue in Tampere for ages. Building on the site has now started. A couple of years ago local residents were wondering what was happening when huge boulders appeared on a site that is called Aspinniemi; apparently they were going to be used as landfill along the shores of the lake, giving the building contractor YIT valuable new land for residential and commercial buildings. A heated debate followed that was traced all the way back to the foundations of municipal decision-making. The builders had received permission to dump the boulders from the town building inspector. This came as a surprise even to many city councillors, who were now beginning to realise just how much authority they had delegated to the officials in town. Several appeals concerning the filling

project were made to the water rights court, which eventually in autumn 1999 took the decision not to allow it to go ahead.

A separate section was opened in Manse Media on Aspinniemi because this was a controversial local issue on which opinions were strictly divided. It was also well-suited for process reporting in the sense that this was an ongoing issue: appeals filed with the water rights court were still under deliberation and public debate was sometimes quite heated. The Internet was used in the project to provide an arena for exchange of opinions, supported by much historical background material. A group of journalism and mass communication students were recruited to work on the Aspinniemi project in Manse Media. The working group met with the project researchers for a concerted treatment of how the project should be tackled. The plan was to use the MIT-developed Elastic Catalogue program that would have allowed a weblike exchange of the views of different parties on the same forum, but these plans came to nothing because of technical problems. Instead a simpler concept was developed on the basis of the Elastic Catalogue.

## Elastic Catalog provides contexts

Obtained through the MIT Media Laboratory, the Elastic Catalog software package was tested in Manse Media to illustrate the connections between different events. In this program an interactive interface shows a concept matrix the parts of which move in relation to another. This means that in any chain of events, it is possible to represent the connections between different actors, their opinions and actions in a graphic interface.
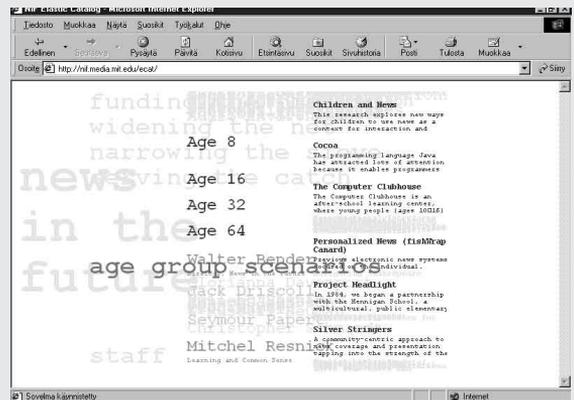


In Manse Media the system was used for purposes of illustrating the connections between actors, opinions and events in a series of stories concerning the Aspinniemi project.

The system failed to work properly and therefore the experiments were not published. In principle the concept was workable within the confines of the Java interface. Apart from problems with Scandinavian characters, the browser needs to have Java support switched on. The system tested is also based on the assumption that large numbers of concepts and actors are involved, which places heavy space requirements on the user. This means that using the system within some other system interface is not necessary a feasible option as far as the user is concerned.

Opinions on filling out the shoreline and building along the shores of the lake were collected with a set of questions that were presented to six respondents (for instance, what do you think about tipping the boulders in the lake). Their responses were presented side by side so that users could easily compare the positions of the different parties, whose specific role in the process was also described.

*Important questions,* different views – all on the Internet



The package also included a video in which two of the interviewees, the area manager of the building contractor that owned the land and a local resident, explained what they thought about the future of the area; the local resident also looked back at its past. The video includes shots from the interview situations, the Aspinniemi area as well as inserts of old photos taken from the area. The history of the area was also presented in the Aspinniemi album, which used photos and texts to tell the story of Aspinniemi from the beginning of the century to the present day. In addition a map was prepared on the basis of the appeals filed with the water rights court, with image links inserted in the map on the area: these links opened up to files explaining on what grounds the respective appeals had been made.

The Aspinniemi project set itself an extremely ambitious goal: the aim was in a group work setting to develop a form of interactive, dialogical online journalism that integrated various different perspectives and that provided a historical background to the subject discussed. If the Elastic Catalogue program had worked in Finnish, the multiple perspective concept might have opened up entirely new avenues for online journalism. For future uses it would be important to have software that would allow the simultaneous presentation of different opinions in the same field.

In the essays they wrote on the experiment, the students who were involved in the project were critical about its failure to take full advantage of the Internet's interactive features. For instance, a discussion forum would have fit in very

well with the project, providing readers with the opportunity to express their views in public. However, the project had taken a policy decision not to open discussion fora either in Manse Media or in any other component, but rather to provide links from each site to the relevant discussion pages.

## Neighbourhood reporters

What kind of news are newsworthy? Journalistic practice today and the journalistic profession who follow that practice tend to make this decision on our behalf. Often the news items are selected on the basis of releases arriving at the editorial office, with a couple of phone calls made to check the facts are right. Journalists do not have the time to break away from these routines, perhaps they do not even want to. However local news reporting should listen to what local residents have to say, trying to uncover grassroots stories that are close to people's everyday environment.

In spring 2000 we hired six students to work as Manse Media's own neighbourhood reporters for a period of two weeks. Working in two Communities neighbourhoods, i.e. Viinikkala and Pispala, their job was to find out whether there were any interesting news items in the areas that are not covered in the local media. The students worked closely with the residents who were involved in publishing their respective web sites, getting useful hints on stories they might follow and suggestions on who they should interview. At the same time this provided an excellent opportunity to test the Square system in a fieldwork setting.

Three of the students worked in the Viinikka–Nekala area, three in Pispala. When they set out they knew next to nothing about the neighbourhoods or what was happening there; that is why it was crucially important for them to cooperate and talk with local residents. They wrote their stories directly into the Square system mainly at the local libraries, using some three hours to get to know how the system worked. To take the pictures they needed they used digital cameras, the basic principles of which were already familiar to them.



*Closing down:* after almost 70 years in business the famous round kiosk in Viinikkala was closed down.

During their two weeks in the neighbourhoods the students wrote some twenty stories. The first of these stories were based on subjects suggested in advance by local residents. During the second week, when the students got to know the area and its people better, they started coming up with new ideas for stories. These ranged from minor news items to more in-depth interviews and stories on local art exhibitions. In Viinikka-Nekala, for instance, the fate of a deserted kiosk attracted the students' attention, while in Pispala an interview was carried out with a couple who had lived in the area for 80 years, and a story was published on the availability of rental accommodation in the area.

| Viinikkala Headlines | Pispala Headlines |
| --- | --- |
| Rainwater drainage for Ahlmanintie | Plans for Pispala highway in the balance |
| Viinikkala web site helps when you're feeling homesick | Rented flats still available in Heikkilä |
| Who knows what to do with a kiosk? | Rented Council flats in short supply in Pispala |
| The round kiosk: history from the 1930s onwards | Art experiences in Pispala library |
| Sunday music in a car showroom | The Niemis have lived in Pispala for 80 years |
| Garden sheds: a great place for things you need and things you don't | Guitar delights in Pispala |
| Researcher's quiet and pleasant living area | Experiencing Rajaportin sauna |
| Art from old newspapers | Towards a better future from Tahmela civic centre |
| Children – disturbance on the bus? | There are no cash machines in Pispala |

Local residents gave every possible support to the student journalists, helping them to get started with ideas on stories they could cover. Although there had been some fears that the students might not find enough to write about, it turned out that they did not in fact have enough time to cover all the potential stories. The students also indicated they were pleased with their first experiences of Internet publishing; indeed two of the students have subsequently said they would be interested in contributing to Manse Media on a voluntary basis. None of the students had any difficulty learning how to use the Square system, even though they were given no more than three hours to familiarise themselves with the system. All agreed it was useful to be able to see what the final story would look like in the final product even as they were still writing it. This made it easy to slot the photos in their right place, for instance. There were, however, complaints about the fact that the publisher and the writer are unable to communicate with one another within the system: when the journalist is writing a story somewhere else, it would be good to get any suggestions on how to revise the story, for example, within the system. E-mail was not fluent enough for this purpose.

Local residents have also been encouraged to write their own stories on Manse Media. So far two residents from the Viinikka-Nekala area have contributed.

# The journalist's new challenges

Manse Media has required of the journalists a new attitude to the job, in at least two ways. First of all, the Internet is a multimedial publishing tool, and the journalist needs to have at least a basic knowledge and understanding about newspaper editing, audio production and the possibilities of video. What is more, it is also necessary to know how these different elements can be combined. Online publications still rely primarily on recycled material that is transferred more or less as is into the Internet. When the journalistic content is specifically produced for online publication, the journalist faces a whole new set of challenges. An Internet story can combine text, images, audio and video material. In addition, the journalist can insert links to the sources used, for instance.

Secondly, local communication has been organised in this project from the vantage-point of citizens' needs and interests. This has severely tested the self-understanding of the journalists involved and at once forced them to rethink the assumptions that lie behind everyday normal journalism. The stories covered have come from the grassroots level, and where possible those stories have been approached from the angle of ordinary citizens. This has been at least as challenging for the journalists as learning the new technology. They have had to rethink the whole journalistic process and break loose from the routines of the so-called professional journalist. It has been interesting to observe in this project that students who have journalism as a secondary subject at university seem to have less difficulty than those majoring in journalism to adopt new working methods. Apparently it is easy to adopt the traditional journalist role with all its conventions, but quite difficult to get rid of that role. The content production experiments carried out in Manse Media have tried to do things differently at all stages of the journalistic process, the aim being to find out how the Internet could be used as a means of citizen-driven publicness.

## Starting out from the idea

Content production for Internet publication requires a broad range of skills and know-how, including knowledge of image and video editing programs. Although it is not necessary to be familiar with all the technologies involved, the journalist must have an idea as to what can be achieved and done by the medium.

Internet journalism depends crucially on careful advance planning. When the journalist has decided on the topic of the study, he or she will then have to decide which features of the media to use. As we have seen in this project the tendency is for journalists to start out in a traditionalist manner from the text.

However the medium would offer many other options as well; should the story be based on visual or audio material, for instance?

## Using different sources

In Manse Media the citizen-oriented approach adopted by the Locality project is most clearly reflected in the process of knowledge acquisition and choice of sources. As well as speaking with the authorities and political decision-makers, journalists have also interviewed other concerned parties to help make their voice heard in the public debate. This has proved to be a very challenging task. The most logical choice of course would be to contact someone at the city's administrative offices and in this way to try to find out how planning of a certain residential area has proceeded and what will be happening next. It is taken for granted that decision-makers have greater expertise on the issue than local residents, for example. What is more, official organisations (such as the town council) often have the same people answering these questions. Active citizen groups and neighbourhood associations for their part do not have such a formal organisation or large information departments, so journalists can hardly expect any influx of press releases from that direction. The journalist has to go to the local residents.

This is exactly what the journalists in Manse Media have had to do (or have been able to do). The experiment has involved direct cooperation with local residents and civic groups, which in turn has allowed for a more interactive, dialogical type of journalism. The neighbourhood reporters' experiences of working with local residents to produce stories showed that journalists do not have to confine themselves to the role of journalist, but they can also be participants.

## Technology: an aid or a hindrance in producing stories

The writing process itself has presented no difficulties to Manse Media's reporters: it is quite easy to learn the succinct, clear style of writing that is required in online reporting. The next stages, though, have not always been quite as easy, because this is a medium which requires quite considerable technical expertise. Using a videorecorder is still too cumbersome and time-consuming for everyday purposes, but modern technology has made photography and soundrecording fairly straightforward. Editing images and sound, by contrast, is somewhat more difficult. Image editing programs, for instance, support so many different functions that it makes sense for the journalist to try and learn just most basic operations. The experiences from this project suggest that simple, easy to use image editing software would make the journalist's job considerably easier.

If the journalist has to spend time trying to sort out complex technology, there will obviously be so much less time to work on the content of the story. Although it is still not the ready article, the publishing system developed during the Manse Media project has helped to make life quite a bit easier for the journalist. Both writing stories and publishing are easy, and journalists have had little difficulty learning the system. Although the heavy database system does detract somewhat from flexibility (e.g. in terms of changing the publication's visual appearance), it does have very definite advantages in the area of content production. The journalist does not need to waste time learning html code or reading the manuals of edit programs, but can concentrate on the story itself.

## Towards more interactive journalism

Traditional journalism has never been too concerned about promoting inter-action between the journalist and recipient; traditional journalistic practices have hardly been conducive to inspiring much dialogue, either. For instance, in newspapers letters to the editor are always set apart in a column of their own; they appear as opinions that are strictly segregated from the editorial material. Manse Media has not had a separate column for discussion or comments, but the stories concerning town planning, for instance, have featured a link to the relevant Forum discussion pages. However even journalistic sections could include interaction which might benefit both the journalist and the user. As far as the objective of dialogue is concerned it would be important that the opinions are displayed publicly and made accessible to everyone. In online publications the feedback all too often goes only to the writer of the story.

A public discussion forum gives the recipient at least the opportunity to participate and comment on both the story and the opinions expressed. Via the feedback and discussion, the journalist can find new angles on the subject and new ideas for new stories. For example, in process reporting this might help to open up new and fresh angles on a theme that has already been extensively discussed. There is also no reason why journalists should not consciously try to activate users by asking for instance, 'Who would you like to be interviewed on this issue?'

# Journalist as citizen, citizen as journalist

Manse Media has represented one of the corners in the Manse Square triangle, the other two being Manse Forum and Manse Communities. Throughout the project we have worked very closely with these other two sections. This cooperation points in two possible directions where local web publicity, and journalism as an integral part of that publicity, might be heading.

In the first scenario, the journalist is the initiator and administrator of a local discussion that is waged on a equal basis. The journalist is committed to making sure even those people can make themselves heard who in the prevailing publicity have neither the skills nor the opportunities to do so. He or she will move comfortably in amongst both political decision-makers and active citizen groups advocating different interests and create links of communication between the two groups. This journalist will also closely monitor the progress of decision-making processes, try to find new angles on stories by talking to different parties. The issue itself is in constant flux and it is not finalised once the story has been written. The journalist is not a passive on-looker and recorder, but has the right and sometimes the obligation to express his or her own opinion. The journalist receives feedback from users on the Internet, creating a foundation for new ideas and new stories; and so the discussion continues to unfold.

In the second vision the neighbourhood communities have their own web sites. Apart from other contents there are local news and stories on the site whose themes derive from the residents' everyday life and events in the local environment. Stories on these subjects will not appear in any other media. The online publication is compiled and edited in the neighbourhood's civic centre. Resident-oriented communication is grounded in a completely different set of premises than normal journalism. The residents of each neighbourhood create their own needs of local publicness and thus also their own criteria for publishing. Although the local community has a need and desire to publish stories on issues that are important to residents, this kind of publication tends to concentrate mainly on community needs. Therefore every neighbourhood web site is different, reflecting the interests of its residents. In this environment the traditional journalist role is in fact entirely redundant. If only the technology and other infrastructure is in place, local residents can produce the contents of their publication without outside help. Thus the challenge presented for journalism would be to find ways in which it can better serve as a resource for communities and ways in which communities and citizens for their part could reform and enrich journalism.

Mika Halttu

# Local content production: hardware and software development

Technical implementation in the Locality project was divided into three phases. First, in the pilot stage of the project, we studied the technical background of Finnish online publications. Then, during the first year of the project proper, we created the general design and structure for Manse Square and its constituent web sites. Finally, the remainder of the project was used for system administration and for building and testing the publishing system developed to meet the requirements of the project's basic concept.

In the choice of a system platform we had to first of all bear in mind the rather limited personnel resources available in the project. In addition to that we wanted the system to be as easy to use as possible so that the researchers would require no special skills. As far as content producers in the communities were concerned, it was recognised that they might not have had any experience of PC use.

Bearing these criteria in mind our choice of server was Microsoft NT 4.0, with Internet Information Server used as our web server. These choices were motivated by considerations of system applicability: it was possible that during the course of the project system uses might grow and expand.

In weighing these future uses we paid special attention, on the one hand, to the requirements of journalistic publishing, including speed and manageability; and on the other hand to the requirements of community and civic publishing insofar as they differ from those of journalistic publishing (the most notable of these being decentralised administration and greater needs of interactivity).

Throughout, we had three main criteria in the choice and the subsequent development of the tools of online publishing: they should be easy to use, reliable, and have a simple technical structure.

## Operating environment

On account of the project's fairly limited development resources it was decided at the outset that the operating environment should be so restricted that the service would primarily support specified browsing environments. Our choice of browser was Microsoft Internet Explorer, of which technical administration had most experience. Nonetheless most of the services and contents produced in the project can be accessed by all common browsers; in the end there were only a few experimental concepts where browser restrictions were needed. The operating systems used in the project's own work as well as on the PCs made available to the communities were Microsoft NT, Windows 95 and Windows 98. Apart from being the most widely used systems, they also support an extremely wide range of software. The choice was also influenced by the ready availability of support services and by their popularity among home users.

## Software

### Workstation programs

The choice of software was again largely based on considerations of how widely they were used and how readily they were available. We specifically wanted to avoid using expensive special programs, particularly on the PCs intended for the communities: this way we could encourage users to adopt them at home as well.

The main programs used in publishing workstations were Internet Explorer (for surfing the Internet), FrontPage 98 (for web site creation and management), and Adobe PhotoShop for image editing (initially version 5 and later 5.5). Programs used and the nearest equivalent freeware/shareware. Projects with limited budgets resources can quite easily dispense with expensive programs and use freeware instead.

On workstations used for audio and video production we additionally used RealProducer to put together the webcasts. Actual editing was done either with CoolEdit (freeware) or with the Adobe Premiere video editing system.

### Server software and server

The web server was installed on a PC running one 400 MHz Intel Pentium II processor and a RAID-5 protected disk system with four hard disks. One partition of these hard disks served as the root directory for the web services, which were powered by Microsoft Internet Information Server (IIS) with FrontPage Server Extension to allow for direct administration using FrontPage tools.

| Program | Purpose | Example of less expensive software |
|---------|---------|-------------------------------------|
| Microsoft FrontPage 98 | Web site creation and management | FrontPage Express and FTP transfer in publications; freeware. |
| Microsoft Office Pro 98 | Office software package | Sun StarOffice 5.1; freeware. including word processing, spreadsheet, presentation graphics, database and e-mail programs. |
| Adobe Premiere 5.2 | Video and audiomaterial-editing | - |
| Adobe Photoshop 5.0 ja 5.5 | Image editing | Lview, PaintShop Pro; shareware. |
| RealProducer | Audio and video editing, live webcasts. | Freeware. |

*Programs used* and the nearest equivalent freeware/shareware. Projects with limited budgets resources can quite easily dispense with expensive programs and use freeware instead.

In addition, for the discussion sites we had a DNews discussion group server with a DNewsWeb extension so that messages posted could be followed both via a web browser and the Usenet discussion group program proper.

Distribution of audio and video material from the server was by a freeware version of RealServer, which supported 25 simultaneous users.

## Remote programs

Remote programs are here defined as a category of software running on the server but used via a browser. One of the tools we used in the project for remote program control was the web server's common gateway interface. Unlike server programs, remote programs perform some other user-controlled function apart from simple document distribution. For instance, while the distribution of discussion groups was taken care of by a server program (DNews), the extension that made it possible to write and read discussion group messages via a web browser, was a remote program (DNewsWeb). The remote program Upload.exe was used for transferring attachment files and images from publishing systems through to the Net server and to the publishing system's database.

Most of the in-house program development work that was done during the course of the project was focused precisely on the development and testing of remote programs.

| Tool | Observations |
| --- | --- |
| Digital camera Kodak DC 260 | Optional external flash improves usability. Extremely heavy on battery consumption. Memory card has a tendency to be corrupted, therefore memory should be occasionally formatted. |
| Digital camera Kodak DC 240 | Maximum resolution smaller than with DC 260, but to the naked eye the technical quality of pictures is still excellent. External flash not available, but compact size makes for easier use. Far more economical than DC 260 in terms of power consumption. |
| Digital recorder Sony | Performs reliably and does the job in all situations and circumstances. Recorded sound quality is up to broadcasting standards. The MD disks would be much easier to use if workstations were equipped with MD drives so that sound files could be copied directly. (In practice the sound has to be redigitised for editing on the PC.) |
| Scanner HP Scanjet | Comfortably meets the basic criteria regarding ease of use and adequate quality. Because of our OS choice (NT Workstation) we opted for a version that uses the parallel printer port (LPT). |
| Video capture card Hauppauge | Meets the requirements of web use (8-12 images per second). The card has performed reliably in both NT and Windows 95 environments. Well-designed user interface made for easy learning. |
| Nokia Communicator 9110 | Can be used for browsing web sites, especially if the terminal's limitations are taken into account when creating the pages. Small size and slow data communications mean that administration is extremely difficult and cumbersome. |
| GSM modem Nokia CardPhone v. 1.0 | Shares the same problem with the Communicator, i.e. slow speed of datacommunications. Another difficulty is that the cardphone only works with Windows 95. |
| Multimedia recorder Hitachi MPEGCam | A digital recorder that records sound, images and video on a portable hard disk. Extremely high quality of recorded sound, but the fixed microphone picks also up a high level of ambient noise. External microphone not available. Still pictures have a tendency to be somewhat blurred; in practice the quality does not bear comparison with digital cameras. The quality of video clips is adequate, but the MPEG format means it is not compatible with the most commonly used video editing programs. The recorder worked reliably even in adverse conditions such as freezing temperatures, in the dark and in high winds. |

*Technical tools* used in the project: observations on strengths and weaknesses.

## Technical equipment

Various technical devices have been used for content production throughout project. The one that was certainly used most often was the digital camera. The videocamera and MiniDisc recorder were also in quite frequent use. By contrast the digital multimedia recorder was used to a much lesser extent, mainly because of problems with quality and technical compatibility.

## Assessing the project's technical solutions

One possible approach to assessing the project's technical set-up is to look separately at the server and workstation software, at the network connections and how well they worked, etc. It is particularly important to recognise that the project's technical system was always in one way or another dependent on the surrounding technical environment, for instance on the network and data security arrangements in the facilities where the project was carried out, both within and outside the university. Throughout the project we had to rely on network connections and workstations provided by third parties.

On the one hand this clearly highlighted the kind of problems there are with the use of the Net, on the other hand it unnecessarily burdened the organisations in which we were supposed to be testing our solutions. Problems were caused for instance with user identification and also with accessing some services. Sometimes these problems meant that pages could not be updated, sometimes they could not be accessed from outside the university at all.
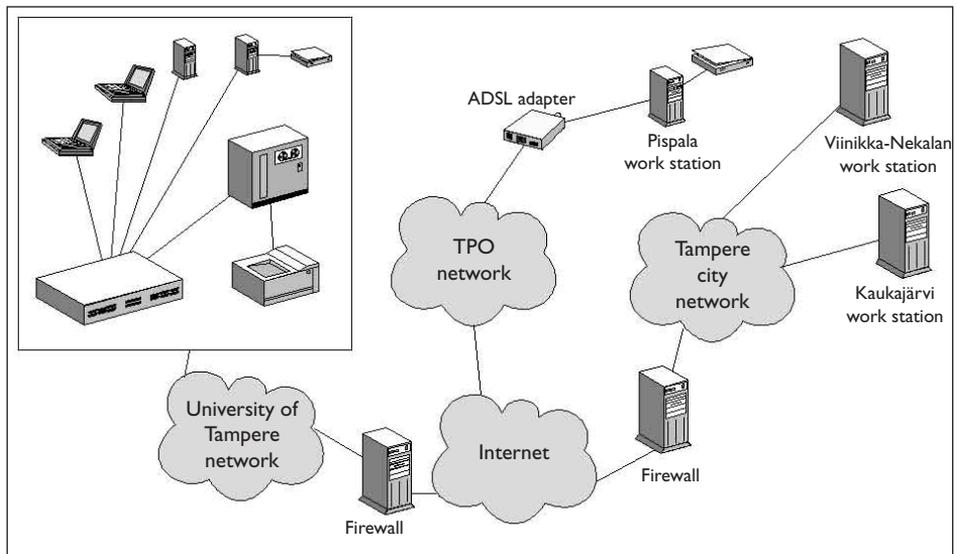


*Operating environment in Tampere.* The diagram clearly shows how the project's Net server at the University of Tampere (with the smaller, inserted figure describing the editorial set-up and the server at the university) in most cases was behind complex network connections. The main practical difficulty this caused was in updating web sites from the workstations in the two neighbourhood libraries.

## Technical platform

The technical platform which combined a FrontPage editor with a server specifically equipped for this purpose provided a simple but solid and useful foundation for the creation of web sites. In particular, the software provides extremely powerful tools for experimenting with different visual appearances.

On the other hand the editor does require some basic knowledge about the structure of web pages and web sites so that its full potential can be used. Likewise the use of styles and libraries in regular publishing does require special care and indeed some knowledge of how the system works.

The use of some of the more sophisticated features of FrontPage tools (e.g. interactive pages and user control) also requires some general knowledge about information systems. However in combination with other programs FrontPage did allow for relatively simple and efficient management and development of the whole project system.

The alternative method of updating pages by means of code editors and then inserting the pages into the publication by means of FTP, was also tried out in the Raksila (Oulu) neighbourhood web site. This method required the same knowledge and skills as FrontPage and additionally knowledge of FTP and html code.

## Publication expansions

### Dnews and DnewsWeb

Discussion group features were set up on the web site by using a Dnews discussion group server and a DnewsWeb interface, because the system allowed for easy browsing, addition and deletion of messages and groups. It would also have been possible to set up moderated groups, but this feature was never used. The choice of system was here based on ease of management, though in practice it turned out it would be necessary to have even simpler and more flexible solutions. This became particularly clear in the Manse Forum discussion sections, where the discussion group administrator spent much of her time compiling background materials for the discussion and soliciting contributions to the discussion.

The Dnews and DnewsWeb system also allowed users to access discussion groups using an ordinary Usenet news browser. However this feature was not specifically marketed to users because we wanted to get people to join the discussions through the Forum pages which provided them with background materials.
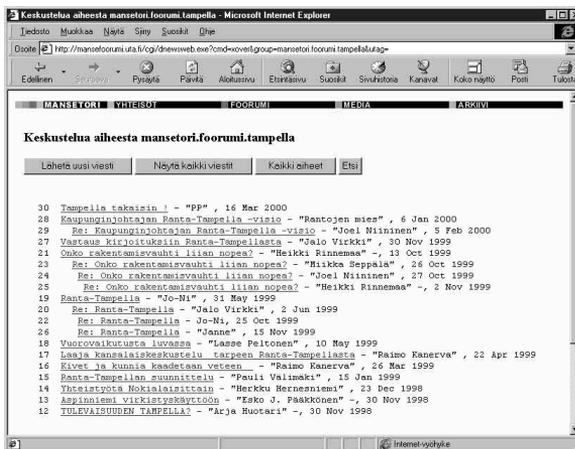
*View of discussion forum* opened with a web browser via DnewsWeb.

The discussion groups were presented on the web pages via the DnewsWeb interface, which is largely accountable for the lack of system flexibility. For instance, it was difficult to change and edit visual appearances, sometimes it was not possible to access all of the oldest messages. However basic system use was reasonably easy; there were no problems in submitting and reading messages.

In the nearest rival system, i.e. the FrontPage publisher's discussion groups, deleting messages was much more difficult and took some learning. However some FrontPage discussion groups were also opened during the project.

### RealServer

Recorded audio and video material and live webcasts were transferred using RealServer. This server allows for streaming, which means that playback is started on the workstation as soon as there is a sufficient buffer on the receiving unit, before the whole file has been transferred. This makes possible the transmission and reception of live webcasts via the Internet. The choice of RealServer was based on its popularity.

Installation of the server software requires some expertise, but once configured the server proved easy to use and reliable both in the transfer of recorded materials and in live webcasts. Successful use of RealServer requires that the material is produced using RealProducer. This is easier to install than the server and also simpler to use. Once the server has been installed and configured the only other software required by the publisher is RealProducer.

## In-house program development

Work within the project to develop its own tailored programs was motivated by the need to simplify certain routines involved in updating project web sites, most particularly in the Manse Media component but also in the admi-

nistration of notice boards and the Participant's Handbook. In the case of Manse Media there was also a felt need for closer control of publishing. Where FrontPage is used on its own there is no simple way in which to distribute separate rights for material production and publishing. Likewise, routine updating is laborious if this has to rely entirely on templates.

Initially the areas specified as requiring in-house development were operations related to the creation, management and publishing of text, images and multi-media materials; these were elements shared in common by all Manse Square components. In addition, it was considered necessary to make discussion groups and notice boards easier to use; this specifically concerned the creation of new notice boards and discussions as well as the deletion of messages from the system. Given this list of requirements we set out to test and compare commercial and freeware products. In both categories there were products that met one or the other these requirements, but not a single program that met all of them. The problems we saw were largely the same in both commercial and freeware programs. There were problems with program documentation, which together with the interfaces in individual programs would have hampered or prevented the editing of software for use in the context of the Manse Square project. In addition, the costs of buying and running commercial software would not have made sense without substantial financial support because these kinds of costs would certainly have made it difficult for the online communities to continue their work following the completion of the project. The costs of purchasing and maintaining community publishing systems run up to tens of thousands of euros.

The programs available were also too inflexible for publishing purposes; either they imposed strict limits on what could be done in terms of variable appearances or they were too complex to allow for fast and widespread publishing.

The software created by the project consisted of remote programs running on the server but accessible via an Internet connection. It was also borne in mind from the outset that needs might change and expand in the future. Common standards such as SQL-92 and ODBC were used as program interface.

All in-house systems used a relational database. Initially this was MS Access 97, but problems occurring in shared use on the server prompted a change to a MySQL database engine. Server problems occasionally caused all database services to crash when using the Access database via the ODBC driver. These problems ended immediately when the database type was changed.

The main focus in all in-house program development was on ease of use. In addition we wanted to have software that would allow people to focus on the job in hand and that would be suited to different organisational environments.

## Rin Tin Tin

The first programs developed were simple publishers designed to facilitate the presentation of large bodies of texts on the Net. Introduced in spring 1999, the first publisher version (known as Rin Tin Tin) did not define the user or user rights in any way, but whoever created the material would also publish it. The system was also unable to deal with version conflicts caused by several simultaneous users. The system was designed on the basis of the publishing needs of the Manse Forum Participant's Handbook and the Manse Media publication. Since in both cases there was one full-time administrator, the system's features were well suited for this purpose.
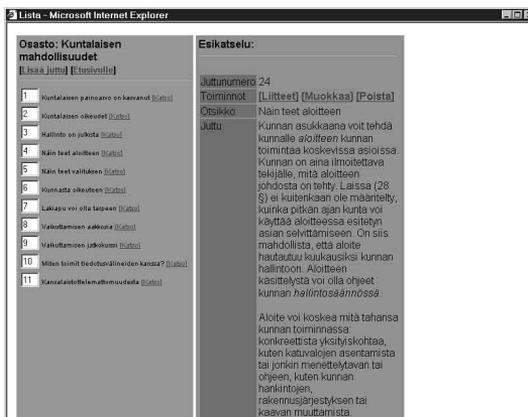
*Rin Tin Tin.* The publisher used in publishing the Participant's Handbook is restricted to a single-level directory structure, and there is no user identification. The number of directories, stories, attachments and feedbacks is not restricted. System management is through simple numerical logic.
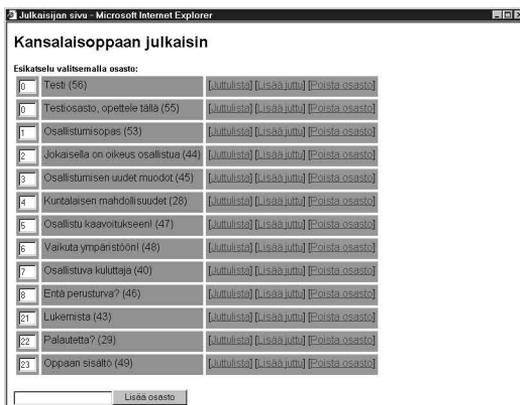
The basic system consisted of a simple MS Access database, with html-coded contents fed into the database via html forms. It was also possible via the database to define links, descriptions and images. Numeric publication values were assigned to stories and sections of stories. The database was also used for collecting feedback. The system has later been developed by integrating a WYSIWYG html editor, which means that users do not themselves need to edit the html code. The database is also powered by the MySQL database engine.

The system was retained for purposes of administering the Participant's Handbook.

## Square

The next publisher version, known as Square, was designed with a view to expanding form-based publishing so that it could be applied in the Communities and Forum components. At the same time the purpose was to debug the old system.

A major challenge with respect to system design was to define the publication needs of the project's different sections. The specific needs of the media component had already been identified in earlier applications, as had some of the needs of other sections, such as notice boards. For these reasons the Manse Media component received more attention than others in the development of the Square system.



*Square system section screen.* Column on the left shows user data and user rights. The main screen on the right provides a basic view of section no. 7, the Ranta-Tampella section published in Manse Media.

The classification of publication needs eventually produced four different types of contents components (hence the term Square). Two of these components are different models for publishing articles; in addition the creation, management and use of notice boards and discussions have been defined.

The system is built around a directory tree that can be freely edited, so that different types of contents as described above can be set up as separate directories. It is also possible to add new types of directories in addition to the four specified. Furthermore, the visual appearance of individual stories and sections can be modified. Certain parts of the old system were integrated in
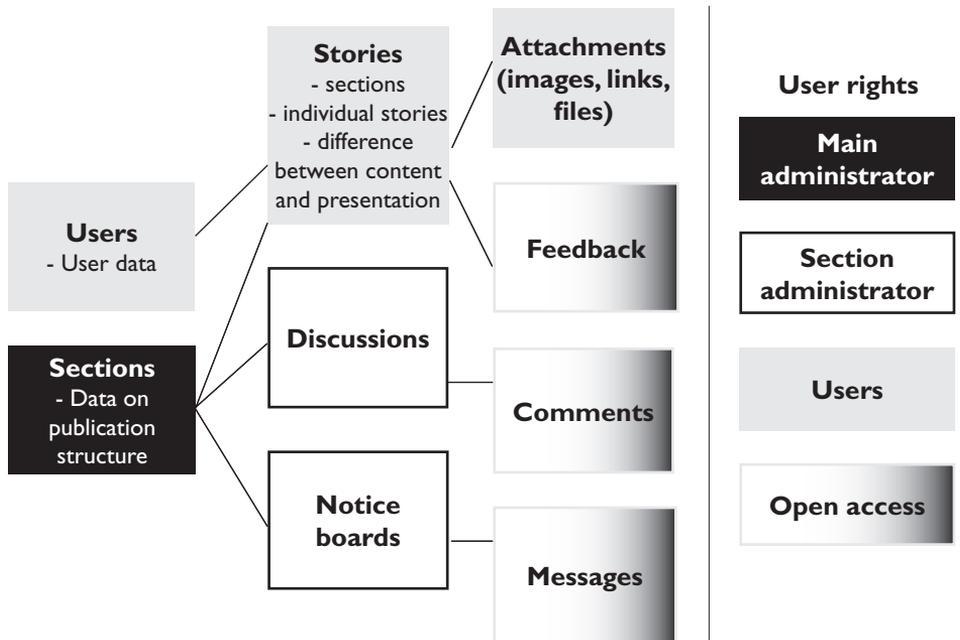
**Structure of Square system.** The diagram shows how the different parts of the system are related to one another and identifies the respective user rights. For instance, the main administrator is responsible for management of the structure of different sections, section administrators create user rights and set up new discussion groups and notice boards. A database has been created on the basis this diagram to record the appropriate data for each section.

the new one as is, in addition we introduced some more sophisticated user control functions. Content editing features were also improved.
Among the elements that were imported from the old system were the structure of textual contents as presented in the database as well as numerical control of publishing. Certain parts of the user interface were also brought over and integrated into the new system. The interface was further refined so as to make it easier to monitor the progress of stories in the production chain. The section view picture above shows how the production chain is described from top to bottom with published stories lowest down on the ladder and ideas for new stories highest up.

The biggest single change was the strict separation of content production and publishing. This feature together with a more advanced user ID system allows for whole teams to work together in the same editorial environment, which was crucial to the journalistic experiments carried out in Manse Media.
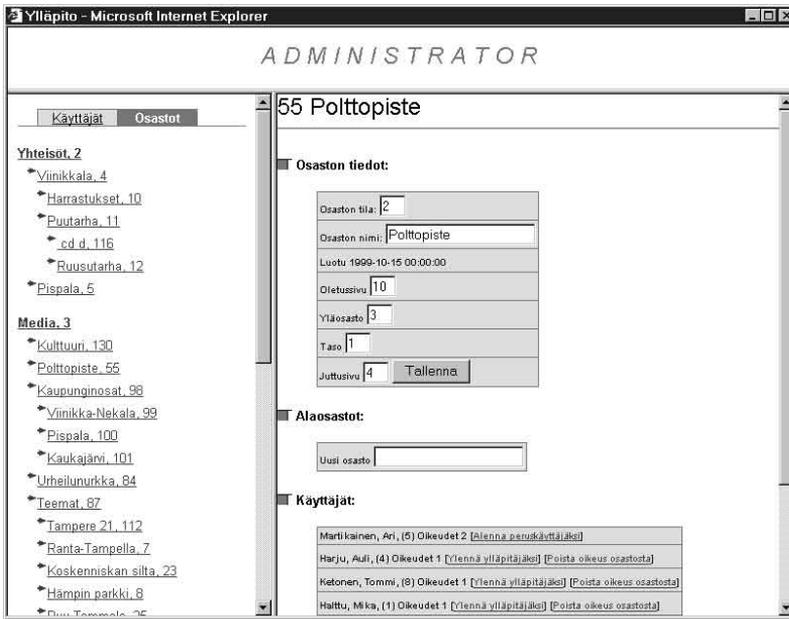
**Square system edit screen.** The left column indicates user data, the main screen has a text opened for editing. The actual story prepared for presentation is shown in the bottommost WYSIWYG edit screen. The biggest single change with respect to content editing was the introduction of a WYSIWYG editor  in html coding and the integration of image and attachment loading into the publication system and RealServer.

Given the ultimate objective of decentralised system management, the administrator's role in the Square system is also decentralised. In practice this means it is possible to have different administrators for each section in the Square system. The administrators' tasks include issuing of user rights, publishing of stories and ideas for new stories, and the administration of discussions and notice boards.
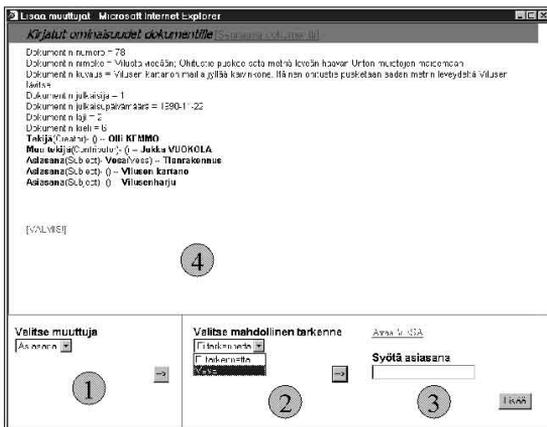


**Metadata system.** Divided into four fields, the working screen shows the accumulating metadata in the biggest compartment (4). First, the operator selects a variable in screen (1), which will then determine the content of the menu (2). This in turn will determine whether the keyword (3) will be presented in a list or whether a blank box is opened. When the form is sent, a new line will be added to the metadata (4). The same method is used to record data in the scrapbook library produced at the Kaukajärvi library under the Manse Communities section.

## Use of own publishers

Rin Tin Tin was installed for use as soon as it was ready. It did not feature a WYSIWYG editor, so all contents were fed into the publisher in html code. Since the number of users was limited to no more than two or three and since these users were familiar with html, there were no problems either with setting up or using the system.

The system performed the job for which it had been designed very well. Later on a feature was added that allowed material from outside the database and thus individual web sites to be linked to the publication. The need for such a feature arose through various independent content projects.

The original version of Rin Tin Tin was a powerful tool in the hands of users who knew html code and who were familiar with how the web server worked. In this version FrontPage was used for transferring images and attachments to the server. Later on automatic attachment file downloading was integrated into Rin Tin Tin together with a WYSIWYG editor so as to make it accessible to users who did not know html code.

The Square system is largely based on the same operational principles as the Rin Tin Tin system, and therefore the changeover between the two systems did not cause any major problems. The operation of the Square system and its publisher were tested in student groups who only received the most basic information on how it worked. Feedback from their experiences provided valuable clues on how to make the system more logical and easier to use.

Most of the feedback we received was quite encouraging; the main comment was that the system was easy to use. A key factor in this regard has been the separation of editing and contents production from the publishing process, as well as the separation of structural management from the former functions. The screen that opens up to each user is now compatible with this particular user's user rights and skills.

A new feature of the Square system allows for material imported from outside the system to be linked as part of the publication.

The operation of the discussion fora and notice boards in the Square system have not been tested, since the introduction of the system in Manse Communities and Manse Forum would have required a complete reorganisation of the projects and training that would have extended through to the end of the project.

## Alternative trends in development

The development of the Square system was initially motivated by the need to expand the practices of journalistic publishing and techniques to local communities and to Manse Forum. If the basic approach had been different and if, say, community publishing had been applied to journalistic practices, then the outcome would no doubt have been very different. In this case greater attention would no doubt have been paid to the possibility of distinctive appearances and easy editing, which was what the developers of the community web sites wanted and what for instance the publisher of the Homestead service offers. On the other hand this would not have been in line with the journalistic requirements where the accent is on speed, ease of use and fluency.

On the other hand if the development effort with the publisher had been grounded in the objectives of the Forum component, then the emphasis would have been very much on the same aspects of material management as is the case in the present version of Square. At the same time, though, more attention would have been paid to feedback systems, dialogue and different kinds of interactive inquiries. Having said that it is important to note that the present platform does not preclude the inclusion of these features in the system. If the resources were available it would be possible to develop a publisher that would meet these kinds of needs.

However, rules regulating the structure of information systems and publishing means it is unlikely we will ever get rid of the publishing rights hierarchy that is part and parcel of this system too. User-specific pages would not eliminate the problem altogether, but would certainly go some way towards the alleviating it. The need for a hierarchy is clearly evident in practical contexts in the provision of support for users. A user with more extensive user rights serves as a support person for people lower down in the hierarchy. The hierarchy also serves as a structure that can help prevent problems in the system because an incompetent user may cause severe damage to the system if he or she has the rights to edit the system platform.

# Lowering the threshold of participation

## Basic conditions

Full user equality in online publishing is an ambitious objective that places very special requirements both on users and on applications. It is not enough that users are interested in publishing because the threshold to participating is extremely high in terms of the skills, knowledge and tools required. The obstacles could be illustrated by a fence that surrounds people and that they

have to cross in order to be able to participate. Typically, the fence will be lowest and easiest to cross at those places where the audience that is interested in listening is smallest. The easiest way to express one's views on social issues is to talk with family members at home or with friends down at the local pub, but these messages will not carry very far. Radio and television would give immediate access to a nationwide audience, but accessing these media at the broadcasting end is for most of us impossible on grounds of our inadequate knowledge or skills or some other reason.

Internet web sites of the kind represented by Manse Square are aimed at opening up new, easier crossing points in that fence. Virtually everyone can publish, and in principle the audience is a global one. In practice, of course, not nearly everyone gets to express their views through this media; it is just that one set of obstacles are replaced by another.

## The skills requirements

There have been huge changes during the past decade or so in terms of the use of the Internet for purposes of information dissemination and public debate. The pace of change now seems to be slowing down somewhat, but at the same time industry is launching ever faster equipment and applications that also require ever greater skills and competencies.

For instance, the use of discussion fora on the Internet is still quite cumbersome because it seems that virtually every one of them works differently. The contents are also highly fragmented, one position only appears on one site. Other discussion fora dealing with the same subject are independent, and the same message should be separately posted on their notice board. For anyone to take a serious and active part in online discussion, they will need to a have a reasonably good familiarity with the system and the ability to learn new things quickly.

## Tools

Internet subscriptions have been sold to private households for some 10 years now. The costs have of course come down to some extent, but they are still not free. Getting started is also quite expensive. If you do not need a PC for anything else than surfing the Net, the cost of close on one thousand euros is quite a lot of money. Besides you will also need a telephone line or a GSM subscription - both of which cost money.

Not everyone can afford these investments, not everyone wants to make these kinds of investments. Some people have access to the necessary equipment through work, but for them the problem is that not all employers have the

equipment that allows for civic participation, and not all employers would like to see employee spend their time on this anyway.

## Motive

Assuming that the knowledge and skills are there and that the equipment is in place, the most significant factor with regard to online participation is that of motivation. Motivation can compensate for shortcomings in knowledge and skills, because these can be learned if you are persistent enough. If you want to, you can always find the information you need.

## Technological development

There is still room for improving the electronic tools of participation; we can still lower the barrier to participation. It is possible to make the tools of discussion and publishing so simple and easy to use that everyone who wants to can learn to use them. This, however, requires that equipment and software manufacturers keep a close eyes on users' experiences and that they take account of these experiences in developing their technologies.

There prevails a certain equilibrium between all technological systems and end-users. If there is a sufficiently strong need to use a technical system for publishing purposes, for instance, then there will also be the motivation to learn the system and to pick up the necessary skills. The level of motivation and the technical threshold are related to one another: if software manufacturers are capable of lowering the threshold by introducing easier technical systems, then publishing will be become accessible to growing numbers - including those who have not had the motivation to study complex programs but who do have ideas and who do want to go into self-publishing.

Ari Heinonen, Seija Ridell and Esa Sirkkunen

# 3. Lessons learned from the project

## The Net as a resource for local communities and a tool for changing local publicness

The Locality in the Global Net project was built upon the premise that new communications technology and information networks open up new opportunities for more diversified practices and contents of public communication at the local level. To make use of these opportunities the project set out in the cities of Tampere and Oulu to study the Net as a means of citizen and community communication and on the other hand to explore the potentials of online local journalism. Within the space of just over two years, the project has used the methods of participatory action research to create and test new models of online communication by local neighbourhoods, public arenas for civic online dialogue and forms of public journalism using new communications technology. The project has shown that the global Internet provides an extremely potential arena for local-level communication and local publicness.

However, the use and application of new communications technology at the local level is far from simple and straightforward; this has become amply clear in the project. In what follows we sum up our views and suggestions on how grassroots uses of new communications technology could be developed into permanent practices. The discussion is organised around the four perspectives that unfolded during the course of the project: these are the perspective of communities and participation, the perspective of new contents models and genres, the perspective of technology and the conditions for using technology, and the perspective of an increasingly diverse local publicness and challenges for journalism.

## Community communication online is a learning project

During the research project several citizen groups and associations from the two participating cities have been involved in planning and implementing civic network communication. The significance of new communications technology to local communities is clearly highlighted by the fact that dozens of people volunteered and contributed to the local online publications. This voluntary networking went a long way towards achieving the project's objective of

incorporating technology in a meaningful way into people's everyday life.

Interviews with project volunteers and web site users (Huusko 2000, Mäkimattila 2000) showed that citizen-oriented communication on the web can be quickly established as an integral part of local communities' everyday life. Even though the experiment did not last very long and even though it was not very widely publicised, some users had learned to log on more or less regularly to check for the latest news. The web sites produced by the communities themselves were seen as important channels of information and dialogue. Indeed the Net has generated new, meaningful forms and practices of local communication: it is seen as an easy, fast and interactive tool for communicating local issues within the neighbourhood. There is also the added advantage that space rarely constitutes a problem on the Net.

The role of the Net in local communication was not confined to the exchange of views or to current news. The web sites produced as part of the project have also served as publication media that have added new meaning and new dimensions to the communities' everyday life. An important future role for the web sites will be to serve as neighbourhoods' memories: as well as providing storage space for historical images and texts, they can also be used for purposes of recording current events for future history-writing. In addition, Net communication has created new contacts both between and within local communities. This networking among networked communities has found expression in a growing recognition among neighbourhoods in Tampere, for instance, that they are an integral part of a broader community of neighbourhoods in the city. Within the communities, all participants have generally had positive experiences of the joint efforts to create the web sites.

The Net is not, however, an unproblematic medium as far as local communities are concerned. One of the key problems is presented by new communications technology itself, with which many people do not yet feel comfortable or which may be difficult to use. The only way to overcome this problem is to invest in training. It has become perfectly clear during the project that access to hardware does not itself suffice to create an active grassroots involvement, but citizens must also have access to training so that they can learn the skills required by new communications technology. The project of learning and teaching basic Net skills could be compared to the literacy campaign. The high literacy rate provided the foundation for the nation's welfare in industrial society; the challenge now is to create the foundations for digital literacy in information society.

Online communication may also require new types of interaction skills. Our project has shown that participation in a discussion group that is debating and trying to resolve a particular problem requires different kinds of skills than

involvement in, say, a network community built up around a leisure interest. In the former case the organisers need to show an enthusiastic, active and analytic approach to the debate and have a clear view on the parties whose views should be brought into public and who should be able to find one another for an equitable exchange of views in the public online space.

Furthermore, it has become clear that Net communication has not revolutionised the life of the groups and communities involved in the project. Traditional media are still important to the participants, and their sense of community still derives primarily from other than online exchange and interaction. To an extent this has to do with the shortcomings of existing tools: both the hardware and the software could be much easier to use. On the other hand there has never been any serious suggestion that online communication should replace other forms of interaction; as far as face-to-face interaction is concerned that is impossible to digitise, no matter how sophisticated the technology. Indeed the significance of Net communication lies in its complementarity: it supports other forms of interaction in local communities and brings out new sides in it.

# New genres can be created on the Net

During the project a wide range of materials has been produced on the Net. The web sites operated by different project teams have published everything from children's drawings and photos from village fêtes through journalistic multimedia shows and minutes from local meetings to complex visualisations of urban planning projects. It is noteworthy that most of the contents are produced by local residents and non-professionals. The Net has been used in the project to meet grassroots communication needs in ways that are useful to communities' everyday life, and this has been clearly reflected in the contents produced. From this point of view the forms and contents created in the project may be seen as justified proposals on the kind of purposes for which the Net can and should be used from a grassroots perspective.

An examination of the content models developed in the project allows us to distinguish at least the following emerging genres of locally-based, online citizen communication:

*Interaction genres*, which are characterised by the public encounter of views, opinions, ideas. In their purest form these types of reciprocal communication are represented by discussion fora, with individual citizens exchanging views in a horizontal dialogue. An example is provided by the Meeting-place at Manse Square, although here the dialogue takes place between decision-makers and ordinary citizens. A distinctive feature of both the Meeting-place and other

forms of interaction established within the project has been to provide background materials for the debate and to actively arrange discussion between the different parties. Journalistic materials have also been used for purposes of contextualisation.

*Information genres* focus on providing information on current events and topical issues. Examples include communities' own notice boards and events calendars. Some of the project's journalistic materials have also had an informational function by providing accounts on past or future events.

*Influence genres* consist of forms of communication in which the ultimate purpose is to give exposure to views and opinions that are aimed at effecting change. In these genres the distinctive characteristics of the Net are used to highlight points of view that are aimed at persuading local decision-makers, for instance. In a certain sense the web sites operated by active citizen groups are as such this kind of genre; it would also include debates on such issues as local traffic or planning within neighbourhoods. The system set up for monitoring the progress of citizens' initiatives through administration is a dynamic influence genre which allows people to keep an eye on the doings of public officiels and to exert public pressure for greater efficiency. Other examples of this genre include image simulations that challenge the official versions released by planning authorities or the Participant's Handbook, which gives concrete advice to citizens on how to improve their own living environment.

*Memory genres* use the Net for purposes of recording local history and current events. During the project this kind of material has been produced on different web sites for future use in both Tampere and Oulu. The Net is ideally suited for collecting tradition and also offers new ways of presenting the information.

*Service genres* comprise flea markets as well as other advertisements by residents and local businesses on products and services for sale. Other types of contents in this genre include simple but useful listings of opening hours, bus or rail services or other types of information tailored to the needs of specific areas.

*Synergistic genres* use various different kinds of content models. In the Locality project special efforts were made to create an element of complementarity between journalistic and grassroots materials. For instance, various citizens' campaigns have been given journalistic exposure, and at the same time links have been created so they can provide a background to journalistic stories. On the other hand the fora hosting citizens' discussion have provided journalistic materials to contextualise the debate. Further synergy can be created through links with web sites produced by the authorities.

We should make separate mention of the experiments carried out in the project with journalistic genres. In addition to the synergistic content models mentioned above, the Net offers a further supermedial avenue for the development of local journalism, for instance by means of integrated stories which combine the characteristics of, say, the Net and radio. Likewise, multimedial local stories provide an important avenue for expanding the forms of online journalistic narration. Our experiment with neighbourhood reporters showed that it is indeed possible to produce extremely interesting material for publication on the Net even with a very small organisation and basic equipment.

# Technology does not respond to the challenges of local communication

Development projects in network technology often work with the assumption that technology in itself is a sufficient condition for the emergence of new forms and practices of local communication. As we have seen quite concretely in our project, technology does not automatically generate new kinds of interaction and new activity. The technology that is available today has two drawbacks: in the first place both the hardware and the software leave much to be desired in terms of sophistication, and secondly citizens would need to have more equal access to that technology as well as equal opportunities to learn how to use it.

Indeed some of the lessons learned from the project have to do with communications policy: the experiences from the project suggest that the further expansion of online communication requires not only information society rhetorics but also real, practical steps. In order that they can learn how to use the Net, local communities will need systematic guidance and support. The basic skills that are needed to use an Internet browser are of course quite simple to learn, but the role of an active producer of online contents requires more in-depth knowledge and a wider range of skills. In our project it became clear that community training schemes promote the production of locally useful and meaningful contents on the Net. In this sense, too, it is important that an active effort is made to take the information society to citizens rather than just waiting that they will eventually take an interest.

Systematic efforts are also needed to facilitate access to the Net. The project to build a citizen's information society will never succeed if everyone has to go out and get the necessary equipment themselves or rely on what is available at the workplace. With this in mind the Locality project set up small telecentres in the areas involved. The key thing is that everyone has access, in the same way as to libraries or reading rooms that have traditionally served as centres

for popular education in Finland. In addition it is important that these tele-huts provide opportunities for collective activity, in other words that they also have the facilities (both technical and otherwise) for meetings among different communities and for the planning and implementation of Net contents. People should also have the opportunity to study at these centres either on their own or under professional supervision, to meet other people who are keen to learn and to exchange experiences (see Resnick et al. 1999, Uotinen 2000). For all this to be possible it is clear that some measure of public funding will be required, in the same way as monies are provided from the public purse to support keep-fit sports, for instance.

Our experiments in citizen communication showed that the network techno-logy currently available is in many ways still rather cumbersome. In many cases the usability of hardware is surprisingly poor, and many useful ideas are thwarted quite simply by the fact that they are too complex for the speeds currently supported.

The software also leaves much to be desired. The basic challenge for software development is to find ways of combining imaginative presentations with ease of use. The project set out with the idea that the web sites created by the communities should reflect the image of each individual community. However, the programs currently available for community publication are of little help in this regard because they are based on unified or limited content formats. The only way that communities can create an original look and original publications is to use specialised software, but they are rather difficult to use. Indeed as far as software development is concerned it would be necessary now to identify the specific needs of citizen communication, to learn from various experiments and research projects and to try and respond to existing needs by innovative technical solutions.

# The Net can change local public sphere

In spite of the problems experienced with technology and its applicability, the project demonstrated that Net communication does indeed open up new kinds of opportunities for the development of local publicness. In Tampere, the Manse Square web site has provided valuable experiences of how local resi-dents can exchange views not only amongst themselves but also get decision-makers to explain their own views and – what is most important – exchange opinions with local residents on important issues in public. For citizens, the Net provides an opportunity to suggest alternatives and at the same time to monitor as a public process the progress of their initiatives in administration. In this regard the citizen-oriented genres of Net communication open up new possibilities as in traditional media and traditional genres, it has been difficult

if not impossible to organise this kind of grassroots public action.

The experiences of our project suggest that online communication may create a whole new order in local public sphere. Traditionally, the space of publicness is occupied by institutionalised media and public authorities, while citizens remain on the outskirts in the role of bystanders. From the audience's point of view even local events happen somewhere else, beyond their own sphere of influence. It is no exaggeration to suggest that in recent years the exclusion of citizens into the passive audience role has caused a growing sense of alienation both with respect to political participation and the rhetorics of information society, for instance.

The model of local publicness created in our Locality project repositions citizens both in relation to journalistically produced local publicness and in relation to administrative publicness. The premise of our model is to create a public space in the Net that is open to all and that allows all people who are interested to take a stand on issues of common concern, whether small or large. For the authorities the situation presents a whole range of challenges; most importantly, they are expected to show much greater openness not only to preparing matters but also to the alternatives suggested to them. At the same time the authorities should of course benefit in that this makes it much easier for them to keep their finger on the pulse of community interests and to make the best possible use of local expertise on the immediate environment. Indeed if they can just see these benefits, public discussion within neighbourhoods or civic groups or alternative solutions suggested by citizens' groups on the Net are a major asset for the authorities.

For journalism, then, citizen-oriented publicness on the Net should give cause to a critical analysis of its own conventions. The experiments carried out in the project's forum and journalistic components suggest that if citizens' views and opinions are taken seriously, a thorough rethinking of the established source practices of local journalism is needed. Although partly familiar, questions are raised that are now actualised in a new way. How could the Net be used to more effectively gain diverse views on contentious issues? How could the Internet be used for purposes of offering background information to stories and representing relevant contexts? How can different parties be brought into a constructive public debate? What is the relationship between civic and journalistic publishing? Or in other words: where do we draw the boundary line between journalism and citizen-oriented public communication, and does this question warrant separate consideration in the first place? How should multimediality be used in the treatment of local issues? These are clearly intricate questions, which only goes to show that citizen-oriented online publicness presents a major challenge for local journalism and its conventional working methods.

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# Beyond the project

## Manse Square developed into a significant space of publicness in Tampere

The Locality project experimented with and studied different models of grass-roots local publicness in which the local community component, the journalistic component and the citizen-oriented public debate component complemented each other. During the course of the project the Manse Square web site in Tampere has evolved into a public arena of local interaction among a whole range of actors; it has grown from a tool and a publication platform initially set up for the purposes of a research project into a significant and distinctive local space of publicness that makes an interesting addition to existing public spaces. The key factor that has made this possible is the project's orientation and commitment to civic groups and local communities: from the outset it has worked closely with these grassroots groups.

All in all it would seem that an open-minded, innovative virtual arena of the kind developed in this project provides an ideal setting for the evolution of a new kind of local publicness that lies beyond the steering of powerful social groups and economic self-interest. This is an important factor with respect to commitment to the local communities that are involved in the arena because it is unlikely that a platform perceived as being part of the administrative apparatus or an economic agency would be accepted by citizens as the focal point for 'our community'.

Having said that, it is important that the independence of the citizen-oriented Net space does not translate into isolation. The conditions for a democratic information society will not be met at the local level unless the authorities and local business and industry are also committed. A virtual arena that brings different actors into contact with one another can only be viable if all potential participants recognise that the common space of publicness is a worthwhile project – even if participation in interaction on that arena were not always an entirely pleasant responsibility.

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