Indiana's Community Networking Movement: Websites Then and Now

Kathryn Clodfelter, kaclodfe@indiana.edu
Wayne Buente, wbuente@indiana.edu
Howard Rosenbaum, hrosenba@indiana.edu
School of Library and Information Science, Indiana University

Background

The state of Indiana launched its Access Indiana initiative in 1995 as part of an effort to develop a statewide "information management infrastructure" (Intelenet, 1995). The initiative involved funding thirty (30) geographically-based community networks with the intention of using the Internet to provide a common gateway to community information (ICNA, 1997). All 30 community networks were required to develop an on-line presence, via a community website (the primary ICT of interest). In 1997, Rosenbaum and Gregson conducted a website content analysis of these community network websites, which culminated in the submission of a report to the Indiana Department of Education, one of the initiative's funders (Rosenbaum & Gregson, 1998). In their report, Rosenbaum and Gregson made a number of recommendations.

This study represents the first phase of a broader planned research agenda involving Indiana's community networks. The research program will attempt to situate Indiana's community networking movement within a broader national, state, and regional context. One of the researchers has been involved with Indiana's community networking movement since near inception. By being able to examine community networks at different points in time, from an insider's perspective, and using social informatics methods and theory, we place community networks with a larger socio-technical interaction network (Kling, McKim, and King, 2003; Rosenbaum & Davenport, 2006)). With this move, we hope to explore how community networks within an entire state have both influenced and been influenced by their funders (Access Indiana), umbrella organization (Indiana Community Network Association or ICNA), individual founders and champions, local communities, the broader external environment, and other actors.

Research Questions

The current study attempts to address the following:
1. *What* is the status of Indiana's community networks today?
2. *How* has community network website content changed over the years, and what do the changes reveal about implementation of recommendations from Rosenbaum & Gregson's 1998 report?
3. Do the results of the follow-up website content analysis provide any insight into *why* some community networks have failed, while others have thrived, and others struggle?
4. *How* can a social informatics perspective illuminate *what* social, cultural, and political factors have affected Indiana's community networking movement?

Methodology

In 2005, a follow-up to the Rosenbaum and Gregson website content analysis was conducted, using the same coding sheet as the earlier study with some minor modifications. A grounded theory approach is being used to interpret the data.

Results

Preliminary results from the follow-up website content analysis suggest that Indiana's community networking initiative is an example of a partially successful ICT project. Fourteen (14) of the 30 original community network websites are still available online with current content. However, website content analysis data indicate that Indiana's community networks as a group do not appear to have a shared identity nor are sharing best practices.

Future Direction

Future research activities include:
o   Complete interpretation of website content analysis data, perhaps within an evolutionary or e-government framework
o   Analyze data collected while conducting participatory action research (PAR) on one of the Access Indiana community networks
o   Analyze emails generated during involvement with ICNA
o   Conduct interviews with key informants (e.g., "champions")
o   Develop survey instrument to collect feedback from those involved with Indiana's community networks

References

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