

Building & Bridging Community Networks: Knowledge, Innovation & Diversity through Communication Conference, Brighton 2004



A SHORT REVIEW

The Old Ship Hotel in Brighton, East Sussex, was the location for the public launch of the Community Network Analysis [CNA] research project (31st March and 2nd April, 2004). This project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), forms part of the People at the Centre of Communication and Information Technology (PACCIT) research programme.

In addition to providing a launch for the project, the conference set out some ambitious but necessary outcomes:

- To provide a platform for delegates to share their perspectives about the use of human-centred technologies to build and sustain healthy communities
- To create connections between people interested in developing collaborative networks
- To share good practice and current research

Diversity of delegate backgrounds

During the early stages of conference planning, the conference team envisaged a fairly informal workshop-type event for around 20 people. However, after circulating the call for papers through mailing lists and discussion groups, interest in the Community Network Analysis project and the conference grew. This was particularly true among researchers and practitioners from Community Informatics and Human-Centred disciplines.



The conference, which eventually attracted over 90 participants, was significantly international in its representation. Academics, community practitioners and small businesses attended from countries around the globe, including Canada, US, Peru, Puerto Rico, Kenya, Pakistan, India, Australia, New Zealand, Cameroon, Nigeria, Holland, Denmark, France, Somalia, Italy and various parts of the UK.

In all, over 30 refereed papers were presented during an exhilarating and thought-provoking three days of discussions.



Programme

Our operating principle throughout was to make the conference as intimate and inclusive as possible. Just about every mode of conference communication was in evidence, ranging from formal presentations, panels and roundtables to the more informal techniques of scenario workshops and participatory activity exercises. Of course, the all important informal discussions and networking that take place at conferences during mealtimes and in the bars were actively encouraged as well.

Our aim was that everyone should leave the conference feeling that they had been part of an interesting and exciting event that was informative and

provided an opportunity to extend their networks.



For those not content with face-to-face communication, we set up a Wi-Fi connected cyber-café at the conference. We also established a conference Wiki (<http://wiki.cna.org.uk>) in the cyber-café to support conference activities and enable delegates to put their conference reflections online. To aid those delegates unfamiliar with Wiki technology, we ran a number of practical 'how-to' workshops during the conference.

Measured by the volume of stimulating interaction from a wide range of talented, knowledgeable and, above all, committed individuals, it is fair to say that the participants considered the conference to be a great success.

The intensity and interactivity of the conference make it impossible for us to describe the full programme (<http://www.cna.org.uk>); however among the memorable highlights was a Native American story-telling workshop, run by our own Richard Cupidi, which emphasised how communication, despite rapid advances in technology, is still very much a human-centred process.



On the opening day David Wilcox, from Makingthenetwork.org, facilitated the Neighbourhood Game which used participatory techniques to encourage discussion of issues central to the planning, implementation and development of community technology initiatives. It proved to be both an ideal ice-breaker and a perfect context setter. A roundtable on the role of community research generated a lively debate that highlighted many of the differences between community and academic practice.



The three keynote speakers provided the conference with the requisite insights into the relationship between community and academic practice in the network society. Douglas Schuler from the Seattle Community Network illustrated how community uses of ICT might be leading to the emergence of a civil intelligence. Wallace Taylor from the COIN Academy in Rockhampton, Central Queensland emphasised the need to develop a clear policy agenda

for community networking. Whilst Michael Gurstein, Chairperson of the Community Informatics Research Network, discussed how the effective use of ICT by communities can stimulate and promote social innovation.

Lessons from CNA, Brighton 2004

As was evidenced during the community research roundtable, one of the crucial issues facing us in our attempts to stimulate dialogue between academic and community practitioners is the dialectic of culture that exists between these sets of people. On the one hand, there is a group (academics) who are primarily concept workers, and on the other are practitioners, more prone to pragmatism and finding ways of getting things done than seeking explanations for them.



Bringing together these diverse cultures (or communities some might call them with only a trace of irony) could have been a recipe for division and conflict. The challenge for us was to create a supportive environment that focused on the common ground shared by the groups – i.e., the commitment to community networking and the use of ICT to build and sustain healthy communities – whilst acknowledging their differences. Facilitating the conference through participatory and inclusive techniques, in which we recognised and celebrated diversity

and difference as a collective strength, helped us manage this challenge. Our dialogic approach, of collaboration through mutual respect and reciprocity, meant everyone was able to have a voice and contribute to the dialogue in a meaningful way.



We intend that future conferences will utilise this lesson as an operating principle, to illuminate and discuss all our differences and commonalities as a process of networking community networkers.



Progression

As a launching pad for the CNA project, the conference was equally successful. It has enabled us to establish a fledgling international network of people interested in community network analysis. Several potential networking partnerships were explored and are being followed up as future research collaborations. These network ties will continue to be

actively supported through the CNA Wiki, our website and our mailing list.

As the project progresses we intend to link our resources with those of other community networks projects. In this way we will continue to build a network of research, using each others resources to signpost activities and future conferences. Finally, there will be other conferences designed to build on the success of this one.

Thanks to everyone who helped shape this conference, and we look forward with enthusiasm to the next one.

Quotes from the delegates

"I enjoyed the presentations and company of many interesting people. It was an intimate conference." InfoLab, Tilburg University

"First my heartiest gratitude for all the help and kindness extended to me by yourself and your team. All of them are amazing people... and your students too... I was particularly impressed with their thoughts and vision to do something different and useful for the people." Shahzad Ahmad, SDNP, Pakistan

"Well it was a great conference for me, I met people that I needed and wanted to meet and heard some useful research. And we were given an excellent room and some seaside sun, and well fed. Congratulations on pulling it off!" Kate Williams, University of Michigan

"Just a brief note to thank you for a great conference. I really enjoyed it and felt really welcomed, and part of an exciting development. The size was ideal; large enough for some interesting contrasts yet small enough to get to talk to everybody. It was great to meet people working in the same area."

Mark Gaved, Open University

"It is my duty to inform you that I have been in many conferences since early 1970s. I must admit that it was one of most successful conferences I have attended. It was really informative, inclusive and up to its objectives. I enjoyed every minute of it. I really appreciated the opportunity extended to me."

Mohamed Samantar,
Somali Research Network