A NEW LIFE IN THE COUNTRY?
THE ROLE OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS IN ENABLING REGENERATION OF RURAL AREAS

Cristian Luguzan
University of Aberdeen

Information and communication technology (ICT) has been shown to have an impact on communities - both rural and urban - by facilitating the growth of local businesses, increasing participation in civil society, and actively contributing to community development (Wallace, 2013) (see also film https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUQslmDORAA&feature=youtu.be). Social networks created online could transform a local community by enhancing offline relationships, as well as through creating new ones. This research aimed to investigate the importance of ICT and digital communications in the process of rural regeneration in Scotland.

Rural regeneration has taken place in some regions through a process of counterurbanization starting in the 1960s. It involves a nationally internal migration of people from cities to the countryside. Industrialization had been characterized by the opposite tendency – the rush into cities by people looking for employment, leaving villages and small towns depopulated. However, some researchers, such as Pahl (1965), argued that the repopulation of the countryside in Britain led to a new type of class division (Pahl, 1965). The internal migrants were relatively affluent, middle-class and well-educated, while the local population was comprised of mostly working-class commuters or agricultural workers. The middle-class migrants were looking for a certain ‘ideal rural lifestyle’ in the British countryside, which meant a tight-knit community, where everyone knows each other and neighbors participate together in local events. However, while the ‘locals’ had their networks of family and friends in their villages or nearby, they were segregated from the new ‘incomers’, and in some cases hostile to them.

This research explored the process of counterurbanization, and especially how ICT might impact upon social cleavages between ‘locals’ and the ‘incomers’. Using qualitative interviews, we examined a village in Northern Scotland within commuting distance of Aberdeen. Although rural areas are generally poorly served by broadband (Townsend, et al., 2013), in this village volunteers set up and maintained a social enterprise aimed at delivering high-speed broadband within the area. The research was designed to assess the social bonds between the members of the community, particularly between the middle-class ‘incomers’ and others. In other words, to what extent is access to digital communications likely to enhance the social capital of the village, allowing for the creation of social networks and ties between members of the community? How did it impinge on their everyday lives and was it a form of social inclusion for incomers creating greater internal cohesion within the village?
The ‘Commuter Village’ under investigation was a farming community until the 1970s but after the North Sea oil boom it experienced an influx of migrants working in oil-related industries. It has a population of around one thousand with relatively high housing prices and low crime rates. Many of the ‘locals’ are involved in agricultural businesses, such as farming cattle or organic fuel. The village is within commuting distance of Aberdeen but there are no easily accessible public transport options, nor any public services in the village, not even a shop or a Post Office. This makes people in the village entirely dependent on their own private means of transport. The Internet connection in the village prior to the community broadband was extremely slow and unreliable, as the village was not considered a place worth investing in by commercial Internet providers. The middle-class commuters who recently moved there tried to maintain their previous lifestyles and social networks. Access to high-speed Internet enabled those lifestyles to continue by helping to maintain previous social ties with friends, family, or co-workers. It also enabled a number of villagers to be self-employed global consultants (in the oil industry). In a highly mobile population with many working for periods off-shore or in different countries these kinds of virtual networks were an important aspect of their social lives.

The initiator of the broadband community project was an oil engineer who became a social entrepreneur. Having moved to Commuter Village some years previously, he was dissatisfied with the speed of the Internet. Together with a contractor, he designed the system and asked for support from the village community. In turning to the community for help he received a mixed response. While some of the
villagers were very helpful during the broadband project, others were unwilling to volunteer their support, for example by not allowing the siting of micro-repeaters on the side of their house. This raises the issue of ‘free-riding’. Hence, many villagers were willing to use the high-speed connection by subscribing to it privately but did not feel the need to lend a hand to get it set up. In this regard, the community broadband project was both a success and a failure. It was a community project, and it involved people volunteering their time and skills or access to their properties, and it managed to provide an excellent Internet connection. So although it provided very high connection speeds people tended to forget that this was because some people had contributed their time and effort to make it work.

But what does the broadband community project show about the social experiences of the ‘incomers’ relative to the existing community? Although there is little mixing between the two social groups of ‘incomers’ and ‘locals’, there is no evidence of hostility either. Both groups participated together during the setting up of the community broadband and the division was more between those who were prepared to get involved and those who were not. They now seem content to live side-by-side but there is not necessarily much interaction between them. The newly arrived are not necessarily looking to integrate into the wider village community and the ‘locals’ have already established networks of family and friends. What the research seems to suggest is that ICT enables incomers to maintain their pre-existing social networks and their lives have become even more privatized through internet shopping and the streaming of entertainment. Among the newly arrived ‘incomers’ some events are organized through Facebook groups. They meet at barbecues and other social events, and most of these interactions are mediated, at least initially, through digital communications. However, access to ICT does not seem to bridge the two larger social groups of ‘incomers’ and ‘locals’.

The idea that ‘incomers’ are primarily looking for an ‘ideal rural lifestyle’ is not fully supported either; or at least, the concept of what that ideal is differs from person to person. Although some of the interviewees expressed fondness for living in a place where everybody ‘knows your name’ or ‘they say hi on the street’, others have moved to the village looking to isolate themselves in a safe and beautiful natural setting that is within convenient commuting distance of the city. Hence ICT communications seemed to enable specialized circuits of social capital rather than the more generalized bridging and bonding associated with social cohesion of the community as a whole.
Therefore, people moving to the countryside did not necessarily change their lifestyles or social contacts significantly. But is the social enterprise model of community broadband sustainable in this context and would it work without incomers who have the skills and affluence to launch these kinds of projects? The high connection and subscription fees would certainly exclude less affluent families from accessing the service.

In conclusion, the findings of this research would suggest that Commuter Village has a population of highly skilled, affluent, well-educated people that have moved there in recent decades and maintain amiable if distant relations with the community of ‘locals’, with no evidence of the hostility and social rift predicted in the literature on counterurbanization of the 1960s. However, it is not as well-integrated and cohesive a community as it could be, and the village might profit from more places and opportunities for people from different networks and social backgrounds to meet in person in order to form and strengthen social bonds. Existing social divisions in the village community are reflected or even reinforced in the use of ICT, and its potential for bridging social capital within the village is limited. Internet-mediated communication could enhance the communal spirit of the village and create opportunities for sociability, but this tended to happen mostly between fairly homogenous social groups. Digital communications could help create new social networks among the newcomers, as well as consolidating the bonds between them, but the ability of ICT to enhance overall community social cohesion is reduced by the absence of communal spaces for face to face interaction.