Island histories, open cultures ?: the electronic transformation of adjacency

Stephen Little,
Senior Lecturer in Knowledge Management
Open University Business School
Telephone: +44 (0) 1908 652862
Fax: +44 (0) 1908 655888
Email: S.E.Little@open.ac.uk
Web Site http://www.geocities.com/stephen_e_little

Len Holmes,
Senior Lecturer Organisation and Employment Studies,
University of North London,
Email: l.holmes@unl.ac.uk
Web site: http://www.unl.ac.uk/relational

Margaret Grieco,
Professor of Transport and Society,
Napier University, Edinburgh
E-mail: msgrieco@aol.com
Web site: http://www.geocities.com/margaret_grieco

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Abstract

Technology transforms the historical character of enclaves: the remote is now accessible on a ready basis to the centre, the centre is now accessible to the remote equally readily and remote locations are now in reach of one another. The physical boundaries that produced information enclaves no longer have the power to effect cohesive social separation. Information communication technology introduces new social practices and social patterns. At the same time, the political geography of islands and small states enables readier decision making. The combination of ready access to external structures through new technology and the potential for more rapid implementation of new technologies in smaller and thus less complex structures render small states and island sites key beneficiaries of and pioneers in the adoption of ICT. Singapore stands testimony to the trend. Networking by small states and islands through a combination of new technology and face to face meetings can generate new economic and social structures within global functioning. The voice of the small social and political unit can now gain volume through co-operation and communication within the institutional capabilities of the new information communication technologies. Sponsoring and monitoring technology developers to ensure that scale technologies appropriate for small and remote locations do indeed develop must be a priority of the new electronic advocacy networks proliferating in the c-operation between public and private society both in the developing and developed world. This paper sketches these dynamics and provides instances and examples of new developments in the field of community empowerment. These are relevant for island sites, small states and peripheral regions and present challenges an opportunities for both commerce and governance.

1. No space an island, no space unconnected: electronic adjacency and ICT.

Historically, the physical boundaries of islands had very real consequences for social relationships and the construction of identities: they broke the easy flow of traffic and people into distinct and scheduled channels of contact and communication. The present 'insularity' of the United Kingdom in respect of its European neighbours stands testimony to the impact of the ocean in shaping social discontinuity and thus generating distinct identities, languages and agendas. In the same way that the sea formed the physical boundaries and borders of social identity for islands so too did mountain ranges, moorlands and marshes shape the contours of remoteness on mainlands with resulting 'social islands' or enclaves which frequently share the social and communication characteristics of their geographic counterparts. Japanese notions of national uniqueness reflect an island status as much as language [see: http://www.iz2.or.jp/english/what/index.htm]. More surprisingly, low income urban spaces often experience such severe accessibility problems as a consequence of poorly organised transport services and inadequate income generating opportunities that they too have distinct social enclave characteristics (Grieco, 1990; 1994; 1995). Similarly, the lower income countries have experienced severe disadvantages consequent upon their poor access to information and technology resources in a history of power where transport distance was equivalent to information distance and poor access to information negatively impacted upon bargaining capabilities. Uniquely, South Africa must deal with its own form of each of the above physical, economic and cultural discontinuities while overcoming the particular insularity resulting from apartheid and its consequences.

No island was every perfectly separated from the external world, no remote community ever socially intact , no low income urban dweller ever completely sealed into the deprived inner city, no low income country ever completely without information or power resources but the degree of seal and separateness from interaction with other individuals, agencies and societies in such circumstances has been significant for economic, social and political forms and institutions.

Developing new practices and new knowledge, indeed developing any form of practice or knowledge, requires proximity or adjacency to others who compose the relevant 'team'. Historically, physical adjacency provided the framework in which new practices and knowledge were developed - the monastery or university not only pulled together relevant players for the knowledge team but they also

placed boundaries around these teams which outsiders were not permitted to cross. Gates and doors are both points of access as well as barriers developed by humans to limit the scale and character of the team in play. Placing players in the knowledge team close to one another allows a very high level of iteration - experiments can be developed and repeated, run and rerun until the winning solution emerges. As the knowledge team plays together in the monastery or university, the high levels of iteration provide the space for the fine-tuning and finessing of the performance before it is exposed to the light of the external world (Holmes, 1998). Adjacency provides the ground for rehearsal and rehearsal provides the performance which legitimates the label 'expert'. Similarly, work teams and labourers the world over are aware of the importance of developing teams to undertake dangerous, difficult or skilled task - boundaries are set on social membership and those inside the membership interact and shape one another in the collective development of skill. Or so the game used to be played but change is abroad and the rules are changing.

In 1988 Bruce Sterling produced a "cyberpunk" novel entitled "Islands in the Net". Based on a near-future scenario of off-shore information economies, it portrays the Caribbean and Singapore as contrasting forms of "data haven. Since then the continuing development of new information communication technologies has created a new form of adjacency which is critical to the development of new global practices and global knowledge. The new technology creates the opportunity for individuals and agencies which are physically distant from one another to be in real time public contact with one another: it is a new collective form of social contact. Electronic adjacency permits instantaneous interaction between distant individuals: new forms of knowledge are generated in this new interactive practice though social and political theory have been slow to document and analyse this new social state (Carter and Grieco, 2000). The speed and ease of new communication over distance enables the collecting together of views and opinions which were historically fragmented and disparate. Similarly, the transparency of this discourse permits the opportunity for those who were historically excluded from decision making to enter core domains. The present programmes of the development agencies, most particularly the World Bank (see: http://www.globalknowledge.org), to make use of the new technology in extending participation is paralleled and was foreshadowed by the use of consumer organisations and senior advocacy groups (American Association of Retired Persons - http://www.aarp.org) in utilising the technology to make clear their case for social change.

Not only are the real time capabilities of the new technology critical in creating public and transparent discourse, the asynchronous capabilities of the new technology have important consequences for redressing inequities in gendered access to information. Women typically are time poor: often they can not schedule visits to physical information facilities within their complex working and caring routine day. The asynchronous capabilities of the new technology enable women to 'log on' when children and husband are in bed: women have become major users of the new technology in the United States in their search for information, education and in the booking of services and ordering of goods. Electronic adjacency educates, enables and empowers those with constrained time and restricted mobility

For small states and island sites, for inner city communities and remote regions of Africa, the electronic adjacency offered by the new technology provides a new and viable path to enter the decision taking centres of world technology and resource allocation. In cooperation and in complaint, the collective voice of the previously marginalised can be articulated through the new information community technology with sufficient iterative possibilities for the polished and rehearsed political claim to emerge and achieve. The voices of large numbers of disparate interests can be recorded and acted upon without systems grinding to a halt: direct democracy is now possible and community information networks are set to play their part in developing a world where collective complaint brings appropriate social change and action (see: http://www.communities.org.uk).

2. Scale and flexible decisionmaking: the implementation benefits of smaller structures.

It has long been recognised that smaller scale units can reach decisions more quickly than complex structures but along with the advantages of this speed of action have gone traditional disadvantages such as the weaker capabilities of small structures in the accessing of external information. But the advent of the new information communication technology is also the advent of a new community technology: community nets (see: http://www.onde.net) have begun to flourish in small cities, small states, islands and other remote locations and these community nets enable the members of communities to access not only their regional neighbours but also the global range of learning and knowledge resources.

A good example of the speed in which the world of technology is moving in directions which extend the reach and influence of small communities is that of the Onde project (Online Desenzano). 'Onde is one of several trial community networks in Europe with each citizen having free access to the civic network.. To claim your email address you get the town hall to verify your identity and you can attend open forums on topical issues or ask advice of other users and officials. If you don't have a Personal Computer at home, computers are free to use at the Mediateca, the public library, old people's homes, schools and the town hall' (Guardian, 9.3.99)

Interestingly Desenzano is a relatively rural location and the article which the Guardian newspaper carried on this project suggested that the take up of new technology might indeed be greater and faster in rural locations because of the benefits of connection it creates for communities which are comparatively isolated. 'A poll of community networks showed a greater percentage take up in rural Desenzano (a town of 23,000 inhabitants of which 1,300 have registered on line) than in urban Amsterdam. The organisers say one reason for this is the community's desire to survive. As more people travel outside the town for work and only see their neighbours at weekends, they can only easily lose track of life in the town on a civic and personal level. Local people see the network as a way of keeping the community vibrant and together, supplementing physical contact with a virtual one' (Guardian, 9.3.99).

New information technologies may have been developed primarily in large urban locations but there is clear evidence here in the Onde project that small and remote locations provide the new community technologies with obvious and large markets. The small snippet in the Guardian on the Onde project also provides some other insights on the relevance of the new information technologies to the small and remote: small and remote locations are often subject to the never ending loss of population through outmigration. The emotions and despairs of exile are well documented in world literature and in the reproduction of features of the home community in the new locations in which migrants take up residence: the little Italies, Chinatowns, little Polands of the United States and Canada stand testimony to the desire to retain contact with the culturally familiar. The development of virtual community nets enable the migrant to enter once again the discourse and social being of her/his original community of identity. In the case of Africa, the level of activity of Ghanaians on the Internet shaping cultural and commercial sites which retain the contact with mother Africa and generate the goods for the continuing support of that identity in the USA and America is remarkable (see: http://www.ghaclad.org and http://www.geocities.com/margaret_grieco/kentecon/kente.html). The benefits of a migrant link up to the community net of the place of origin are many: with the establishment of an efficient microbanking system linked to a community net funds can be readily transferred from migrants in the wealthier location back to their home site for development purposes. Electronic discussions around the possibility and profitability of setting up such links have just been hosted by community web sites in El Salvador (see: http://www.conectando.org.sv)

Small communities can make their decisions fast about appropriate implementation locations (should the tele-center facilities be in the library or in the town hall or in the school or in the old people's home or in kiosks in the shopping centre? or in all of these locations), bigger societies have bigger bureaucracies

and more competing interests to resolve. The benefits for small states and island sites in making rapid resolutions in favour of the new technology are many not least because it extends their range of trade, finance and influence. No island need be isolated if it is sufficiently open to experiment with the new community technologies and community nets.

3. Contemporary options and winning combinations: off the shelf electro-policy with in house implementation cyber-capabilities.

There is a new market for information communication technologies: whereas historically the market for the technologies was in the public sphere of education and commerce and subsequently for the private domestic consumption of individuals, information communication technology is rapidly becoming the technology of collective civic empowerment. Within the developed world, wealthy countries with sparse populations have led the social movement in the adoption of this technology. A leading state in this sphere has been Canada: community nets are used to help individuals living in sparsely populated areas to communicate with one another and to co-ordinate their social activities. Community nets enable the pooling and sharing of transport with great benefits both for individual's transport costs and equally great benefits for the environment. In Australia, the limiting case of an island continent, local and national government are directing resources to remote communities in support of commercial, administrative, educational and cultural activities (see: http://www.techreview.com/articles/apr96/TrendOutback.htm).

At the other end of the spectrum of the great expanses of Canada and Australia with large land masses and small populations is Singapore with its small land mass and great population. Singapore has unashamedly pursued the vision of the intelligent city where new information communication technology is used to pursue efficiency. And social efficiency requires that inhabitants be able to coordinate with one another to reduce the burden on the state in the provision of services.

Politicians from Al Gore with his initiation of the 'smart' presidential campaign to Britain's Brent Council http://www.brent.gov.uk have realised that the 'smart' way to take the pulse of the electorate is cheaper, direct, timely and efficient: ICT provides the first ever opportunity for direct democracy and indeed the present significance of the instantaneous focus groups and their consequences for Clinton's survival shows the imminence of ICT for future forms of governance. Linking with the electorate through various forms of online community whether these be local community nets on an intra-net model or open access internet sites creates the pressure for the development of community technologies. In Africa, where the penetration of rural areas by motorised transport is particularly poor as a consequence of the history of extractive exploitation of that continent by colonial interests (roads and rail ran between mines or plantations and the port with little concern for the development of the surrounding hinterland), the prospect of ICT organised around satellite communications and solar power open up a future for health and education servicing of the continent to a level which was previously inconceivable (Holmes, Turner, and Grieco, (1998). The market in Africa for ICT is not a personal home based use nor is it a market of large employers and enterprises rather it is a market for ICT applied to community business with an export drive in the craft sector, for small enterprises also in the export sector and for the tele-servicing of the rural community in the areas of education, health and transport scheduling. It is likely to find its shape in the development of tele-centers in rural areas as well as in the mobile provision of ICT services - not unlike the mobile library, shop or dispensary of the past. Satellite and solar power permit such mobility (African Cellular Telephones Info - http://www.cellular.co.za/africa-cellsystems.html ; Rural Connectivity & Telecentres - http://www.itu.int/ITU-D-Rural ; Building Information Communities in Africa conference - http://www.bica98.org ; World Bank Forum on Rural Communications in Africa - http://www.worldbank.org/devforum/current-connectivity.html).

ICT has already revealed itself as a key tool for small and medium sized entrepreneurs in developing world: e-commerce is already a normal part of advertising vocabulary. With these new markets both hardware and software have been rapidly developing to satisfy the demand for the new e-flexibility. The rural demand for e-servicing is likely to call forth further developments in the technology - though rural access to technology is an obvious beneficiary of the demand for global access hand held personal technologies used by the high status international business and development professionals. Increasingly small and remote sites have available to them off the shelf technologies which place them in contact with vast libraries and reservoirs of knowledge and policy information.

The logic of the level of decoupling and of simultaneous coordination available within the new technological paradigm is clear: the combination of ready access to external structures through new technology and the rapid implementation of new technologies in smaller and thus less complex structures render small states and island sites key beneficiaries of and pioneers in the adoption of ICT.

4. A union of small states and islands: working the ICT mode to advantage.

The consequence of the logic we have charted is that islands and small states as a category of technology consumers with special needs must co-operate and co-ordinate to identify their particular needs within the future pattern of technical development. Within the context of European integration, city governments have already began to co-operate across national borders through fibre optic technologies and other forms of electronic networking in the identification of municipal problems shared and solutions sought. Similarly within the European Union locations along particular lines of transport communication have begun to co-operate electronically in the management of traffic. So the models of networking are already present in the real world: the traditional geographical barriers which confront island sites and remote locations should not be permitted to conceal the potential for networking opportunities equivalent to and as influential as those networking forms which are developing amongst spatially adjacent but politically distinct institutional structures in the European heartland.

Indeed, the danger of the traditional barriers drowning out the new electronic opportunities for co-ordination between those who share problems but are spatially dispersed are given by Britain's lack of integration into the new European arrangements in transport management and other vital areas of modern social life.

That technology passed through the stage of servicing a large personal domestic based market has resulted in the proliferation of low cost, easily housed technologies with global reach. Community technologies have through this route been developed as affordable at each and every level of society: even the lowest income household can be provided with networked terminal access which has the lowest of possible costs. The consequence is that small states and islands can afford to select a range of off the shelf technologies which provide them with immediate networking capabilities. Instituting an appropriate framework is now an organisational or institutional issue, not a technical issue.

New technology not only has consequences for the civic empowerment of the individual in relation to the state but also for the capability of remote locations to have their influence on the world of global government and global commerce: there are now powerful electronic counterbalances to historical policy remoteness. Networking small states and islands through a combination of new technology and face to face meetings can generate new economic and social structures within global functioning. Every island can form a base.

5. Targeting technology: the promotion of scale ICT technology for small states and islands

Small states and islands have been fortunate in the path which ICT development has taken. Pricing, scale and technical capabilities of domestic electronic technologies have provided an off the shelf information capability with no need for substantial investment in the development of the technologies on the part of small governance structures. But the future may not be as automatically benevolent: islands, small states and remote communities have to take an active part in determining the shape of new technologies both by influencing technology developers and those agencies which represent the major public sector market for ICT.

Institutions such as the World Bank and UNDP require active lobbying by civic minded institutions to ensure the provision of adequate facilities for transparent and open government and trade. The potential for e-trade, e-commerce and e-banking which would support remote communities experiencing migration loss to overcome the disadvantages historically imposed by remoteness must be explored within a objective driven framework.

Every island must act electronically to empower itself and its citizenry politically and economically. Malta, most interestingly, has already begun the process

http://www.maltanetworkresources.com/

http://www.searchmalta.com/

http://www.knightlyorders.org/uksmom.html

http://web.idirect.com/~malta/links.htm

http://www.malta.ru/

http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/2214/

The task now is to shape the existing links and information into a cohesive citizen's site that furthers community empowerment.

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http://www.geocities.com/margaret_grieco/womenont/gndr_nct.html

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Web resources on new communication technology:

E-Journal of ICT Activities and Applications - http://www.iicd.org/ejournal/documentation.ap

RuralTeleCon `98: 2nd Annual National Rural Telecommunications Conference-
http://www.ruraltelecon.org

If you Have a Lemon, Make Lemonade: A Guide to the Start-up of the African Multipurpose Community Telecentre Pilot Projects - http://www.idrc.ca/acacia/outputs/lemonade/lemon.html

Wireless Communication Technologies for Africa - IDRC Report - http://www.idrc.ca/acacia/studies/ir-jens.htm

Wireless Communication Technologies - IDRC Internet Resources http://www.idrc.ca/acacia/studies/ir-jensc.htm

ICT Stories from Developing Countries - http://www.iicd.org/stories/read.ap

African Cellular Telephones Info - http://www.cellular.co.za/africa-cellsystems.html

Rural Connectivity & Telecentres - http://www.itu.int/ITU-D-Rural

Building Information Communities in Africa conference - http://www.bica98.org

World Bank Forum on Rural Communications in Africa - http://www.worldbank.org/devforum/current-connectivity.html

Policy processes on the Web

American Association of Retired Persons http://www.aarp.org

Brent Council web site - http://www.brent.gov.uk

Connecting El Salvador to the Future - http://www.conectando.org.sv

Online desenzano (community network technology) http://www.onde.net

UK communities on line - http://www.communities.org.uk

UK democracy on line http://www.democracy.org.uk