Neighbourhood renewal and information policy: The Atherton Gardens network

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last five years, community informatics initiatives around the world have sought to bridge the digital divide for low income and socially isolated people (see Schuler, Cohill and Kavanagh 2000, DiMaggio and Hargattai 2000). Projects of this sort give residents of low-income neighbourhoods free computers, Internet connections and membership of a 'wired community'. Residents gain access at home to local electronic information systems, educational resources and, potentially, employment opportunities (see eg Wellman et al 2001, 1996; Cohill and Kavanagh 2000; Denison et al 2002; Gurstein 2000). Sophisticated plans for transforming communities have been articulated by activists, entrepreneurs and philanthropists, and sold on to private sector partners and government sponsors.[1]

Considerable public and private resources have been devoted to the creation of wired communities and digital networks for low income people, but little is yet known about the social and cultural impact of such schemes. The supporting rationales stress the potential benefits that lie in building both skills and more diffuse outcomes such as increasing social capital and cohesion within the community (Devins et al, Hallawell 2001, Cawood and Simpson 1999). It is assumed that electronic communication will generate social capital by enhancing social connectedness, facilitating new connections between groups and building trust and co-operation. However, the social outcomes of investment in these schemes are necessarily difficult to track and to predict, since they will only emerge with use and time. There is a need for careful research on the social and cultural effects of such networks; there is also a need for contextual research on how support for these social entrepreneurial schemes fits into public policy frameworks and understandings of technology, community and government.

This article focuses on an Australian example of wired community: the Reach for the Clouds project. The project is the product of a social partnership, generated by InfoXchange, a not for profit internet service provider, in alliance with community groups, private companies and local government, and with cash and in kind support from the Victorian state government. It is based in Atherton Gardens, a high rise public housing estate in Fitzroy, Melbourne; the estate is home to a multiethnic, multilingual and multifaith population living in low income households, with a proportion classified by social service providers as having multiple needs. Reach for the Clouds is one of a number of initiatives currently focused on these problems. Initially oriented to a broad range of concerns about information poverty, public housing and social welfare, the project has taken on a new life as a community-building project, with the potential to promote social cohesion.

We offer a narrative history of Reach for the Clouds, showing how this project came to be formulated as an enterprise in neighbourhood renewal and how this has affected the terms in which the social outcomes of the computer network are likely to be assessed and understood. We place this within a broader analysis of the scope and limits of current policy enthusiasms for community building. Wired community

[1] One instance is the American Camfield Estates/MIT Creating Community Connections Project See http://www.camfieldestates.net/ and http://web.media.mit.edu/~rpinkett/papers/camfield-mit.html). The UK has a parallel project, the Wired Up Communities scheme developed by the national English Department for Education and Skills (See http://www.dfes.gov.uk/wired/index.shtml)

projects such as this one, we argue, exemplify the complexity of neoliberal strategies for devolving responsibility for social service provision to the local level, to the voluntary and not for profit sector and to community groups (Rose 2001). They also reveal some limits to political aspiration and technical experimentation.

WIRED COMMUNITIES

Wired community advocates often take their cue from discussions of the digital divide, but they also call on broader debates about neighbourhood renewal and community building. The most positive stories emerging from them are of hardworking (often immigrant) families stuck in public housing estates, keen to seek opportunities to retrain themselves and help their children to stay in school and find a way to a good job and a better place to live. Once, perhaps, it was schooling that was regarded as the ladder out of poverty; now it is information technology.

Such success stories are highly attractive to governments committed to 'community revitalisation' and to finding alternatives to welfare dependency. Often, however, the enthusiasm for community and participation has waned, as organisers have met indifference or grappled with the gritty reality of holding social partnerships together.

One instance, from the US, is the Camfield Estates/MIT Creating Community Connections Project based in Boston.[2] MIT has donated computers and high speed Internet connections to all families living in a low to middle income housing development in South End/Roxbury. The scheme offers residents – more than a hundred families – some training and access to a community technology centre and a web system (C3) that compiles information on the 'commercial, associational and institutional assets' in the community: this is conceived as an online resource for building social capital (Pinkett 2002 p. 2).[3] The architect of the project presents it as a continuation of nineteenth century efforts to 'revitalise America's distressed communities and fight the war on poverty' (Pinkett 2002 p. 1). American communities, he comments, are divided by class, race and ethnicity but on this housing estate, where most households are headed by single, African-American mothers, there is the chance to make community members active agents of change. Using online resources, they can be encouraged to find local information, share skills and build up local assets. They can become producers of information and content (Pinkett 2002, p. 12).

The outcomes so far have not met these expectations. The MIT organisers hoped to see the enterprise owned and run by community leaders and committed individuals (Pinkett 2000). In the event, it took much persuasion to get families on the estate involved. Out of 80 eligible families, 59 finally agreed to be given a computer and to use the network (Pinkett 2002 p. 9). For the organisers, this take-up rate was something of a problem, since their conception of the community network went well beyond access to technology to a model where social capital and cohesion would be enhanced: computer use and the compiling of data and models would bring awareness of skills, abilities and resources in the community; in turn the exchange of resources would build trust, promote a sense of obligation and extend both strong and weak ties within the community. Instead, it appears that online exchanges have failed to 'reconfigure' face to face exchanges and social

[2] See http://www.camfieldestates.net/ and http://web.media.mit.edu/~rpinkett/papers/camfield-mit.html
[3] C3 uses ArsDigita Community System, an open-source software platform. See Pinkett 2002.

networks. In the first few years of its operation, the Camfield Estates experiment has not yet shown a pattern of improvement in community interaction and local activity; nor has it demonstrated measurable increases in trust and social capital. The relationship between community technology and community building remains unclear (Pinkett 2002b).

There is a similar pattern of high expectations and disappointment in the Wired Up Communities scheme developed in England by the national Department for Education and Skills.[4] Ten million pounds has been given to seed-fund public-private partnerships designed to give residents in disadvantaged communities high-speed access to the Internet in their homes. The initiative is designed to test 'how new technology can help break down barriers which people face in getting and keeping a job' and to assess the extent to which Internet access in the home can 'transform opportunities', developing 'new ways of accessing learning, work and leisure services'. [5] Following a pilot project in Kensington, Liverpool, the Department put out a call inviting socially disadvantaged communities to organise themselves into public-private partnerships with technology companies and not for profit agencies and to propose an experiment in wiring a community. The scheme has been in place for two years: there are now seven initiatives in place, using a various means to link computers in people's homes to the Internet and to local networks: connectivity is being achieved through standard telephone lines, broadband and digital television.[6]

The pattern of progress varies with each local initiative within the Wired Up Communities scheme; however, construction of the experiments has fallen well behind schedule, in part because of difficulties in sustaining partnerships between the community agencies involved, the tenants themselves and the private technology companies responsible for developing and installing the network (Devins et al 2003). A number of the initiatives lost their private partner when small technology companies went into receivership. Others found that the private sector partners were primarily interested in the opportunity for technological innovation, and were unable to grapple with the needs of residents. In the short term, there has been little evidence that computer access in the home has been directly linked to improved employment prospects. Although the computers are being used, communal educational initiatives have been patchy; residents tend to say that they want educational opportunities for themselves and their children, but they do not necessarily want to be involved in communal education activities.

It is of course too early to tell what the longer-term costs and benefits of providing computer networks to low income communities will be. There is already a debate in the UK about whether or not such initiatives are likely to meet their short term goal of building skills and raising education levels, much less the longer term goal of promoting social cohesion and social capital. Already, there are warnings against investing in ventures with such uncertain outcomes, especially where there is no clear strategy (Wilcox, Greenop and Mackie 2002, Wilcox et al 2002, Pleace and Quilgars 2002, Pearl and Scanlon 2002).

It may be that there is a causal chain between access to technology in the home, informal learning and experimentation and the pursuit of educational and employment

[4] See http://www.dfes.gov.uk/wired/index.shtml
[5] See http://www.dfes.gov.uk/wired/over.shtml
[6] See 'Wired up communities' http://www.makingthenetwork.org/common/wuc.htm. Accessed 28/02/2003

opportunities, linked in turn to increased prosperity and thus to social cohesion. The problem lies in tracking change and in demonstrating that it stems from the use of information and communication technologies. There are certainly empirical challenges in tracking how low income people use computer networks once they are made available to them and any apparently related rises in skills, education and employment levels and in patterns of sociability and involvement in activities and decision-making on the estate. There are also political and normative questions about how far the success of these initiatives should be tied to questions of whether or not the computer network has built participation and community engagement.

GOVERNING THROUGH COMMUNITY

Wired community initiatives reprise problems which the community sector has been working on for decades. They offer telling instances of the complexity of neoliberal government (see Barry 2002, 2001; Rose 1999; Henman 2002; Dean 1999). Increasingly, functions of government are being devolved to private agencies and local concerns — to communities, individuals, households and consumers (Barry et al 1996; Rose 1999, 1996; Dean 2002). Social services have been reorganised around the objectives of mutual obligation, volunteerism and the "self-sustaining community" (Schofield 2002, p. 668). Commentators have described this trend as a shift to advanced forms of liberal rule. They see it as a new adaptation to the historical dilemmas of modern liberal government: the problem of how to retain political authority while fostering liberty and autonomous self-government.

The problem can be put simply. The legitimacy of government depends on its capacity to maintain security, civil peace and prosperity: in turn, this depends on individuals' ability to govern themselves in areas beyond the reach of the state, in commercial, social, familial, and domestic life and in civil society. States need to know, predict and to some degree manage what is happening in these autonomous and opaque domains, but they have limited tools at their disposal. States found the solution to this problem during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the invention of social institutions such as the school, the clinic, the hospital, and the museum (Foucault 1991; Donzelot; Burchell et al 1991, Rose 1996). In these social sites, and outside them, teachers, social workers, health workers and others have helped people to improve and govern their own lives.

In recent years, we have seen a shift away from the central role of state agencies and professionals: the idea is that volunteer, private and not for profit groups provide local social services, identify stakeholders and co-ordinate community consultation and participation, working closely with clients (Rose 2001, Schofield 2002, 664). Community is conceived 'as a moral space of voluntarism situated between the state and the market' (Marinetto 2003; cf. Bowring 2000). But despite some appearances to the contrary, community development is a managerial technology. In community-based projects, creative professionals have found ways to enlist local people to tell their own stories and articulate their own hopes and needs. Written up and re-presented by advocates and community workers, the story becomes evidence of consultation and community participation (Schofield 2002, p. 673). The image of the community network enables needs and interests to be channelled, organised, grouped in 'communities of interest' and then notionally connected to decision-making. Aspects of life in the local area are listed, condensed and represented in diagrammatic schema:

> Black lines feed into red boxes and more blobs which stand for public, voluntary, private and statutory agencies. Together these institutions come together as a partnership which converts the community's needs into an agreed development plan. (Schofield 2002, p. 673)

There is an overlap between how computer networks operate and the ways in which human relations on a particular site are summarised, organised and schematised in diagrams on white boards, butchers' paper, overhead transparencies and PowerPoint displays. The imagery of circuits and wiring has infused the language and techniques of community development. By the same token, the conception of the organic community returns relentlessly in the way we think about the social use of technology. Life in the local community is plotted, mapped and inscribed as a portable model; in turn, the model can be reapplied elsewhere as a diagnosis of weak or strong links, or of disconnections calling for inventive solutions (Schofield 2002, p. 675).

It is easy to be carried away by the metaphor, thinking of community technology schemes as means to schematise community life and, perhaps, reducing actual social relations to a technological simulacrum. In practice more human error, argument and effort is involved. As noted above, those running community networks continually seek to be able to connect to authentic community life, which is assumed to have existed before the network was established. The thorny problems of social administration remain internal to the field of community development. To what extent can those governing and shaping communities know and intervene in its dynamics? Community development is continually troubled by the question of how to identify and articulate the authentic voice of community, especially where actors suspect themselves of making arbitrary assumptions about who speaks for the community and about how groups work within it. Community planning is reflexive about how far to monitor and intervene in these processes; hence the constant reinvention of social and economic indicators, including social capital measures (see Hopkins 2001).

Each of the wired communities discussed so far is one in which social entrepreneurs, philanthropists or academics have taken on the responsibility for enlisting low income people into self-education, social connection and self-help. The problem, it seems, is how to make such schemes self-governing or self-sustaining, capable of functioning without the assistance of either public agencies or entrepreneurial intermediaries. This means getting the tenants further involved, giving them ownership of the decision-making processes and enabling them to take over the running of the network and the training activities.

In each case, organisers have had to find ways to articulate, map and connect the needs and interests of tenants. Thus the construction of the computer network has been shadowed by the building of a technology of community consultation. However, building resident participation in the community network requires onerous work in persuasion, negotiation and arbitration. The composition of the residents is likely to shift and change; different interest groups will coalesce. Keeping track of this involves research into the composition of the community, extensive consultation, negotiation with existing residents' association, eliciting and encouraging new groups to form, raising enthusiasm and moderating expectations, and anticipating risks and disasters ranging from people selling donated computers at local pawn shops to

partnerships falling through and funders losing their faith that there will be any demonstrable outcomes from their investment. Along the way, the politics of the local community are likely to be fissile. It will never be clear whether the initiative can be said to come from the community and be owned by it; organisers are always likely to be vulnerable to the accusation that they have imposed the scheme on to residents and failed to consult sufficiently. For this reason, those building wired communities keep coming up against the problem of how far they should aim to be discovering community, reviving it, or creating it anew.

REACH FOR THE CLOUDS

These patterns also appear in our Australian example, the Reach for the Clouds initiative at Atherton Gardens in Melbourne. Like the US and UK enterprises, this experiment is taking place in the context of neighbourhood renewal strategies. Like them, it operates through neoliberal programmes of governing through community. Government seeks to 'retool' communities. But government is also re-engineered using new technologies to act more effectively at a distance. A reciprocal relay or mechanism is set up, a 'reflexive circuit' between government, the third sector and community. But there is no single, clean or economical movement involved. The relays are slow, faulty and hard to fix. This is not a simple case where technology use, expertise and social entrepreneurialism provides a connection between governmental objectives and communities of interest. It is a complex instance of the labour of negotiation involved in social administration.

Reach for the Clouds stemmed from the activity of InfoXchange,[7] an organisation with a strong record of providing Internet services, data bases and web design to community groups. Among its other initiatives is "Green PC", a venture funded through the State Government Community Jobs Program, which involves enlisting long-term unemployed people to recondition donated personal computers, reselling the equipment at cost to the community sector, or donating them to low income people.[8] Out of this scheme developed the plan to give all residents of Atherton Gardens, a local high-rise housing estate, free reconditioned computers, software, training and network access.[9] Each household of the estate has been offered a free personal computer, on completion of a ten hour training module. The machines are refurbished models, mainly end of lease machines donated by government departments when those organisations upgraded their own hardware. Computers, monitors and printers are refurbished through the "Green PC" programme. A pool of volunteer trainers, drawn from the estate and the wider Melbourne community, carries out computer training.

Atherton Gardens consists of four twenty storey tower blocks, with ten flats on each floor, comprising a total of eight hundred dwellings, housing some two thousand residents. While a significant minority of residents on the estate have arrived in Australia from Vietnam and speak Vietnamese as their preferred language (around 40%), there are more than thirty languages spoken by residents who come from countries including Turkey, the

[7] See http://www.infoxchange.net.au/index.html

8 See http://www.greenpc.com.au/

9 See the electronic-Atherton Gardens Enterprise website at http://www.highrise.infoxchange.net.au/ See also http://www.infoxchange.net.au/ to investigate the background to InfoXchange's activities. Publicity from partners in the project can be found at Victorian Department of Human Services http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/peoplefocus/mar01/website.htm and on the City of Yarra site: www.infoxchange.net.au/yarraweb

former Yugoslavia, Spain, Greece, Iran, Iraq, China, Laos, the Philippines, Somalia and Ethiopia. Less than thirty per cent were born in Australia. Residents have high employment, education and training needs. A significant proportion of residents suffer from problems of substance abuse, mental or physical ill heath and social isolation. The residents are generally on very low incomes, with 80 per cent receiving some form of income support from government and only 20 per cent having private or other income sources.[10] Atherton Gardens has long been perceived as a focus for drug trading and domestic and other forms of violence, graffiti and vandalism of public areas. Located in the inner city suburb of Fitzroy, the estate has good access to public transport, major retail, entertainment, education and employment centres and is in the centre of a cluster of welfare and community agencies. The estate was built in the early 1970s, at the very end of Melbourne's slum clearance program. Its surroundings have been thoroughly gentrified in the three decades since.

Public housing generally, and the high rise towers of the inner city suburbs in particular, have become centres of the poor and marginalised in a society characterised by economic growth and growing affluence. The post-war crisis in housing availability, coupled with the problems of inner city overcrowding and substandard conditions in many properties led to a major shift in public thinking about the housing issue. Campaigns of slum clearances began to gather momentum, supported by government policy and by charitable groups such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence. New high rise flats were seen as clean, modern solutions to entrenched problems of poor housing, poor health and childhood neglect (Handfield, 1980, p. 170). Protests by residents against the change were largely ignored, at least in the early days of the slum reclamation project. Since then, public housing in Australia has become increasingly targeted at the poor and those with high needs (for example , the homeless, mentally ill, physically disabled and recent arrivals). The distinctiveness of the public high rise blocks in a landscape of gentrified low rise and detached or semi-detached private housing makes them obvious targets for stereotyping and discrimination, by employers and others.

O'Brien (1989) provides a useful summary account of the historical and social context of Atherton Gardens. Fitzroy's 'slums' were the focus of liberal concern and intervention before and after the second world war, culminating in the construction, in the early 1970s, of the four high rise towers of Atherton Gardens, as well as a number of low-rise, walk-up flats. The flats initially offered improved housing for a broad pool of inner city residents. But by the late 1990s, public housing was increasingly reserved for people in serious need. However, budgets for maintenance and services had also been reduced, including support for tenants associations. Atherton Gardens had become the 'flats of fear', as the city's leading tabloid put it: drugs and violent crime were the new focus of intervention.

When the new State Labor government came to power in 1999, public housing estates were again a policy priority, within a broader programme of neighbourhood renewal

[10] There are limits to how much is known about life on the Atherton Gardens estate, or about the social profile of the residents. Some information is available through census data. At the last census, two collector districts (the smallest areas for which aggregated data is available) were exclusively based on Atherton Gardens, providing information on some 882 residents (roughly half the population). The rest of the estate is included in collector districts that are not exclusively the estate. The information from the two Atherton Gardens' collector districts is valuable in its own right and also as a means to verify the results from our own survey of residents , discussed below (see ISR 2003a, 2003b).

and community-building (see Ewing 2003). Coming in after a conservative government, the new government distinguished itself from its predecessor by emphasising community consultation. The Office of Housing embarked on capital improvements across Victorian public housing. The high rise estates were refurbished and new security systems installed. Neighbourhood Advisory Boards were set up, comprising resident and agency representatives. These will influence the distribution of funding and services to estates and develop community plans, which will become a blueprint for service delivery and physical planning. New tower based management schemes will be designed to give residents employment opportunities in cleaning and maintenance. A range of options is being discussed including providing new landscaped areas, security and recreational facilities within a significantly improved living environment.

InfoXchange became involved when Atherton Gardens was earmarked, in 1999, to be the site of the state government's key response to security issues on high rise estates – setting up an electronic controlled access system, which would involve wiring the estate's four towers. Building on the planned rewiring, InfoXchange proposed to place the machines reconditioned by GreenPC in each household and to wire the building to a local intranet, with support from local businesses and community agencies. InfoXchange's role as a major provider of information technology in the community sector enabled it to build support for the project. The aim of the venture, according to early funding proposals, was to bridge the digital divide, to build skills and employment prospects, to promote social cohesion and community-building and ultimately, to establish a resident-owned and resident-run wired community (InfoXchange 1999, 2000; Meredyth et al 2002).

In December 1999, InfoXchange and its partners submitted a proposal to Multimedia Victoria, a government agency that was primarily responsible for the state's nascent internet and information policy, to develop a plan to wire up the Atherton Gardens estate. The focus of this initial proposal was on the advantages of the scheme as an intervention in the digital divide and information poverty. After receiving $10,000 to prepare a plan, Multimedia Victoria decided that this was a social development project, rather than a business development or technology industry initiative and therefore they would not provide further funding. Securing the funding involved a gradual change of emphasis in the aims and anticipated outcomes of the project. The project was re-pitched to government agencies as an innovative model for new forms of social service delivery (see Ewing et al 2003).

This plan was eventually successful. Following concerted lobbying from InfoXchange, with support from community groups, local government and private sector partners such as Microsoft, the Victorian Office of Housing agreed in November 2001 to fund the rewiring of the buildings. The scheme now had official support, but this did not extend to recurrent funding. InfoXchange then applied to the Community Support Fund, arguing that Reach for the Clouds was a "a community building project" designed to "assist the development and maintenance of community capacity and cohesiveness at the Atherton Gardens estate, by utilising new technologies" (InfoXchange, 2001). Reach for the Clouds was officially included as part of the Fitzroy Neighbourhood Renewal Project in May 2002. A month later the Minister announced that the Community Support Fund was to provide $820,000 over three years for staff and support for the Reach for the Clouds. In November 2002 the

government released a document outlining its Neighbourhood Renewal Program. Its aims included increasing people's pride and participation in community; enhancing housing and the physical environment; lifting employment, training and education opportunities; expanding local economic activities, improving personal safety, reducing crime, promoting health and wellbeing, increasing access to key services and improving government responsiveness. (Office of Housing 2002, p. 3). All ten of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit's projects were under way before it was formed. Reach for the Clouds had become a neighbourhood renewal enterprise.

The Reach for the Clouds community network is now being established. The rollout of computers and cabling continued throughout 2002; servers and routers have been installed in each building, wiring connected to all apartments, an intranet is under development, and access to the Internet is being arranged. The network will shortly be launched.[11] It will contain content provided by local social services and businesses, including information on housing, health and social welfare services, as well as local activities and community resources. Residents who have received computers – about 400 of them as at February 2003 – have also completed training courses. They will have access, in their homes, to a reconditioned machine, software, email and a subsidised Internet connection, as well as access to the intranet and to a common training room on the estate, where classes are being held throughout the week.

Research thus far includes focus groups with residents, interviews with key individuals and a survey of residents, involving face-to-face interviews using translators; the survey will be repeated in a year's time, when the network is well established. The team has also been following the implementation of the project and attending various meetings of residents and agencies related to life on the estate. The research is designed to explore the extent to which the network has made a difference to residents' technology skills, attitudes to computers and the Internet, employment and education prospects, access to news, information on social services and their ability to stay in touch with friends and family. This research makes partial and critical use of social capital models (Putnam 2000, Woolcock, Granovetter 1973). The result, once the network has been in place for two years, will be an analysis of the extent to which the computer network has altered the pattern of association on the estate, both online and in face to face interactions. The aim will be to track the extent to which the network has built weak ties across social divides; and the degree to which it has reinforced strong social ties within homogeneous groups (see Meredyth et al 2002, 2003, Hopkins and Thomas 2003, Hopkins 2002).

It has been clear from the beginning that Atherton Gardens residents cannot be regarded as part of a single 'community', but as a complex set of associations. People and households are linked in different ways: by language, by gender, by faith and recreational interest. Many of these groups show high levels of bonding capital. Connections across group boundaries do exist, but there is limited communication. This was confirmed by our first survey of residents, which sought information about patterns of community contact in and around the estate, about the extent of residents' contact with neighbours, friends and family, about the degree to which they know and trust their neighbours and are involved in decision-making on the estate, and about their attitudes to Atherton Gardens as a place to live.[12] Our initial findings, from interviews, focus groups and surveys, have been reported

[11] See http://www.atherton.org.au/

[12] The survey was undertaken by ISR staff over six weeks starting 27 May 2002, in face to face interviews usually in residents' own homes. Interviewers who could speak Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin, Macedonian Turkish

in detail elsewhere (ISR 2003a, 2003b, Meredyth and Ewing 2003). A brief review shows though that Reach for the Clouds raises questions equivalent to those facing the US and UK wired community initiatives discussed above: to what extent should the success of such schemes be understood in terms of whether or not they live up to the rhetoric of the community-building? How broad is the agenda for neighbourhood renewal, and to what extent does it address substantial issues about skill-building, education and employment opportunities and the chance for people to leave their renewed neighbourhoods and build a life elsewhere?

EXPECTATIONS AND OUTCOMES

Like its international equivalents, Reach for the Clouds offers a hopeful picture of enterprise and opportunity – although it promises more than it has been able to deliver so far, and although many of its benefits may be hard to predict, describe and measure. At the very least, it has given low income households free personal computers and intranet connections where they had not had them. Before Reach for the Clouds began, just over twenty per cent of households on the estate had a computer: by the beginning of 2003, over half the households had one (ISR 2003a).

It is clear, from census data and survey results, that Atherton Gardens residents have high education and training needs. Residents express strong interest in learning new skills, in helping their children with schoolwork and in seeking training and qualifications for themselves. They see access to computers as an important element of this; this is one of the main reasons why they are interested in having a computer in the home. They are also keen to learn how to use computers to find work. This suggests that Reach for the Clouds stands a good chance of opening new education opportunities, if it fosters informal learning, if local schools' early interest in the initiative continues, if parents become involved and if training becomes fully established. Online resources may provide better information about job vacancies; some residents may also be able to work from home, either by using the computer as a workstation or by using email and the Internet. Involvement in training, in refurbishing computers and in managing the network may help residents to build skills or become creators of content. The network is likely to give tenants new ways of staying in touch with friends and relatives, of accessing local and international news and current affairs and of seeking information on estate activities and on social services. Which residents use this information, for what purposes and with what effects, remains to be seen.

This initial research suggests that the educational, employment and informational implications of the network may be more significant than its capacity to build social sociability and participation on the estate. There is a pattern of some social isolation on the estate: residents tend to depend on long distance phone calls to stay in touch with friends and family, few know their neighbours well and few trust their co-residents. On the other hand, there is also evidence of strong associational involvements on and around the estate. Religion is an important associational link, as is sport. This associational life is only partially linked, though, to residents groups and to decision-making on the estate; there are low levels of enthusiasm for getting more involved in the tenants' association.

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and Arabic were employed to administer the survey. 269 households were contacted, with around 70 declining to be interviewed, resulting in a total of 199 responses. The response rate to the questions was high: 74% for those households contacted. See ISR 2003a and 2003b and Meredyth and Ewing 2003.

Meanwhile, Reach for the Clouds continues to sit within a Neighbourhood Renewal programme that emphasises community-based decision-making, meetings and deliberative democracy. At Atherton Gardens, this has involved creating a Neighbourhood Advisory Board that includes tenant and agency representatives. Residents have been invited to a series of public meetings to discuss neighbourhood renewal objectives, identify potential projects and set priorities. This board will then create three further working groups; welfare professionals will guide the process, deal with technical issues and help with funding applications. Residents will then be asked to comment again. When and if there is broad agreement on the projects, they will be submitted to the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.

The process is part of a self-reinforcing cycle between government policy, community consultation and the idea of community-based decision-making. The old question of whether or not the community has the capacity to make decisions and understand political processes has been addressed by the strategic use of intermediaries and experts. Building community involves enmeshing residents, or their representatives at least, in advanced decision-making about how to set priorities for the use of public funds, how to establish links between departments and how to achieve whole-of-government approaches. Government programs are necessarily complex and unwieldy, involving organisational structures that are difficult for outsiders to understand. This is exacerbated when private firms and the third sector are added to the mix. The techniques of community-based consultation act like a software user interface: non-experts are able to engage without having to understand the underlying workings of the various programs. The process may empower and educate residents, in the sense that the experience equips them with new skills, experiences and understandings. At the same time, it implicates them in decision making: they become accountable to the process.

Ironically, in some respects, these neighbourhood renewal projects do not exactly build new communities where none existed before. On the contrary, these meetings are able to build on a highly developed organisational and associational structure. There are active tenants associations on the Atherton Gardens estate, which meet regularly. They may only involve a minority of residents: our survey results indicate that a significant proportion of residents may be socially isolated, in the sense that they have little regular contact with others on the estate or with friends and family. Many are however members of groups on and around the estate, especially faith-based groups. This associational life provides a resource both for residents and for those who seek to govern them. It may be that although community workers, government agencies and third sector organisations are willing to use the current language of community-building, they are less interested in redeeming community life than in building their own understanding, as service providers, of who their clients are and what they want, both individually and in their associational groupings.

It is important to remember, though, that the organisers and funders had — and continue to have — different and sometimes competing conceptions of the purpose of the Reach for the Clouds project and of what would constitute success (Hopkins et al 2003). Selling the project to partners, including government agencies, welfare organisations and private firms, has entailed a constant reformulation of the project and its objectives. Those involved tend to describe the project in three distinct ways: as a project addressing the

digital divide; in more traditional welfare terms as an initiative to improve service delivery and encourage education, employment and training participation; and, as an exercise in building community and community capacity. To some extent, these purposes are at odds with one another; although each could be regarded as part of an overarching programme of neighourhood renewal, they involve different conceptions.

From the point of view of the State Government's Office of Housing, for instance, or the local government partner the City of Yarra, the project is attractive in that it offers a way to communicate information to housing estate residents, including material on social services and the activities of these agencies (Hopkins et al 2003). At the same time, it offers a way to seek information on the profile, needs and requirements of the tenants themselves. The project tallies with many of the institutional goals of these agencies, especially since it is a local enterprise, involving self-help and participation from tenants and community-groups, with a strong focus on capacity building and skills, rather than dependency on welfare services.

InfoXchange itself has consistently maintained that its main motive stemmed from a concern about social justice and the digital divide: it aimed to give disadvantaged people the chance to have some of the same technology as their affluent neighbours had in their homes. How people used the computers and the network was up to them. Nevertheless, in interviews, Andrew Mahar, InfoXchange's director, expresses the hope that people will use the network to reconnect themselves to work, education and training and, more than this, that they will make the network into an enterprise of their own. According to the earliest formal outline of the project, a document produced by InfoXchange in November 2000, the longer-term aim was to develop a self-funded, tenant-focused and managed computer network on the Atherton Gardens estate within two years. InfoXchange's stated aim in that document was to enable the resident-run network to become self-sustaining and at that point to hand over maintenance and ownership of the network to residents. Sustainability, the document noted, depended on many factors, including a sufficient take-up rate on the estate, developing community enterprises online, and continued funding and support from the various stakeholders in the project.

InfoXchange echoed some of the aspirations of the MIT-Camfield estate project and of Wired Up Communities in the UK. It saw the network as offering the basis of a resident-owned and resident-run social enterprise. Carrying this off was always going to be a challenge. To live up to this rhetoric, the organisers would have to do more than show that tenants use the computers and the online facilities: they would have to get tenants involved in training activities, in planning and contributing to the content on the intranet, and in running the network itself.

Interestingly, the most cautious and sceptical assessments of the project have come from its community sector partners. One interviewee, for instance, regarded InfoXchange's scheme as a 'top-down' initiative, insufficiently grounded in community-based decision making and participation, and liable to failure for that reason. From the perspective of community workers confronting the effects of intergenerational poverty, illiteracy, and lack of English, in an environment where a broken lift, violence in the corridor and discarded needles on the stairs pose immediate problems, giving residents free computers and expecting them to use the technology might seem quixotic. As one interviewee put it, it can seem like a 'space age' idea for a 'stone age' context. It would be possible to argue that a disproportionate amount of public money as been spent on putting computers into

all the residents' flats – money that could better have gone to literacy classes, crime prevention or employment generation. It is also be possible to contend that Reach for the Clouds is irrelevant to the wishes and needs of residents, that it has come from outside and that it is not properly based in local decision-making. The question is whether the initiative would ever have happened if these criteria had been determinative. Should it be found wanting because it does not match the models of rationally planned government action, of a collective political will or of moral community?

CONCLUSION

Some commentators may see Reach for the Clouds as incoherent. Is it a project about information poverty and access to technology, about community and social connectedness, about participation and deliberative democracy, or about skill-building, education and employment? Is it designed to keep people happy in public housing, or to help them get out of it and back into the workforce? Each of these alternatives fits within the general rubric of neighbourhood renewal, but each has different implications for how the return on private and public investment might be regarded. From another point of view, the project owes its success to date to a capacity to marshal diverse interests. The rationales that have been articulated have been purpose-specific, pitched to different funding sources. Money and time has gone into different parts of the project for different purposes, and these commitments have to be met separately. It would be a mistake to see the programme as falling short of its own aim: for one thing, there is no single programme, and no single rationale. Instead, we have described a loose network of actors, some individuals and some corporate, and some co-ordinated actions. More than a computer network, Reach for the Clouds is a mobile political construction. It has been put together from parts of other programmes – Green PC, Neighbourhood Renewal, slum clearance, urban planning, technology centres – and reassembled as useful new components were found.

Given that we have treated the example as case of neoliberal political experimentation in social partnerships and government through community, perhaps the most striking criticism to make of Reach for the Clouds is that it is no substitute for planned and co-ordinated government action through social institutions. But the intensively planned, state-driven intervention which produced Melbourne's high rise public housing in the 1960s and 1970s now seems historically remote. The problems of today's localised, social partnerships are different, but just as obvious. Of course, those involved in the initiative might see no necessary conflict between calling on government to solve endemic social problems and convincing business and community groups to do what they can. Social entrepreneurs have more flexibility than government agencies: they are more able to take risks. They may be more imaginative; they may also be less accountable. The difficulty, for a project of this sort, is to make full use of the resources that social partnerships offer, while co-ordinating their effects.

Wired communities are remarkable political and social experiments. But there is little point in celebrating either their putatively organic political community (ignoring the technical and synthetic character of community) or the fantasy of the technological solution (ignoring technology's error-prone and social character). Instead, we seek to describe the place and purchase of such conceptions within the mundane daily workings and administrative adaptations of technology. This means detailing the process of information seeking and intervention: faulty efforts to assemble information, to organise and co-ordinate actions, bringing actors and groups to the point where they can articulate their interests for a purpose. It is in these painstaking

processes that technology and political thought meet and make what we call community.

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