Research on Community Networks: What’s Old is New Again

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ISER: More than 60 years of public policy research
What difference did it make?
Historical Context

• Early studies on mass media
  – Educational radio and TV
  – US, UK, then developing country projects

• Early research on interactive communications
  – Telemedicine, satellite experiments
  – Impacts of rural telephony

• Internet and mobile communications
  – Studies on community access to the Internet
  – Mobile applications in developing regions

• Digital divides
  – Measuring access and lack of it
  – Telephony, Internet, broadband
Key Concepts

• Power of networking
  – Metcalfe’s Law
• Externalities
  – Indirect benefits, often overlooked
• Infomediaries
• Diffusion
  – Early adopters, laggards, etc.
• Chain of inference
  – Links between early use and eventual benefits
Connectivity: Necessary but not Sufficient

- **Context**
  - Economic
  - Cultural
  - Infrastructure: electricity, transport
  - Policy

- **Content**
  - Relevance
  - Languages, literacy

- **Capacity**
  - Digital literacy:
    - Finding information
    - Assessing quality and veracity of content
    - Using popular software and apps
  - Organizational
    - Putting information tools to use
Challenges to Effectiveness: Sustainability

- Often ignored in evaluation research
- Why do positively evaluated projects die?
- Funding:
  - Capex vs. Opex
  - Short term vs. longer term
- Organizational issues
  - Volunteers vs. paid staff
  - Training in management and planning
- Covering operating and maintenance costs
  - Grants
  - Subsidies
  - Providing services
  - Charging users
Challenges to Effectiveness: Engagement

• Consultation with community members in project planning
• Getting “buy-in” from community
  – Donated facilities, people to be trained, etc.
• Meaningful consultation
  – Need for follow-up and evaluation
• Involvement in project evaluation
  – What have we learned?
  – What would you tell other communities?
Challenges to Effectiveness: Digital Literacy

• Training for Users
  – Use of popular software, platforms, apps
  – Searching for information
  – Evaluating content
  – Privacy, security of personal data

• Training for Staff
  – Infomediaries (digital navigators)
  – Technical skills for jobs: installation, operation, maintenance of community networks
Community Network Evaluation

- Need for micro, not only macro, studies
- Need research on users and usage
- Research from several disciplines
- Sector-specific research
  - Distance education
  - Telehealth, telemedicine
  - Businesses, organizations
- Costs, benefits, sustainability
Conclusions:

• Lessons from previous research are still relevant
• Still many unanswered questions:
  – Can short term outcomes contribute to long term benefits?
  – What do we know about diffusion and adoption; do demographics of adopters change over time?
  – How should externalities/indirect benefits be assessed?
  – Under what conditions is connectivity necessary but not sufficient to achieve socio-economic benefits?
  – What conditions are necessary for community networks to be sustainable?
Thank You

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