

A Study of a Southern California Wired Community: Where Technology Meets Social Utopianism

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to examine the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the creation, organization, and functioning of a networked community. The reference community is Ladera Ranch located in Orange County, South of Los Angeles.

1 Introduction

In the last few years, there has been a growth of networked or wired communities in some selective parts of the US, and also in the UK and Europe (Dohoney-Farina 1999, Horan 2000). Both from a technological and social point of view, such communities have operated with varying degrees of success. In order for these communities to function as viable social settings and derive the benefits from new technologies, several factors come into play: A well understood concept of family and community networking, the technological readiness of families, the quality of services, advanced technical support of developers, high bandwidth into the homes, sustaining financial backing, continuous user interest, updating of technology as new systems appear, and a host of other social and technical factors. Experience shows that some wired communities may have failed because the standards of performance on these various factors may not have been met.

One wired community that is attempting to succeed at all costs is Ladera Ranch, located in South Orange County, halfway between Los Angeles and San Diego.

2 Study Purpose

The purpose of the study is to examine the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the creation, organization, and functioning of a networked community.

3 Background Description of the Wired Community and Key Issues

Ladera Ranch is a planned/wired community that came into existence in 1999 and the first set of residents began to move into the new housing in early 2000. There are currently 2000+ families living in Ladera Ranch which is expected to grow to 8,000 homes within the next 5/7 years. All the homes in Ladera Ranch are completely hard-wired for a variety of communication devices. Practically every room in the home is Internet/cable ready. All the communication infrastructure and services are provided by COX Cable, a major player in their industry.

Here is how Ladera Ranch promotion material introduces the community to prospective dwellers on their website. (<http://www.laderaranch.com/homes>)

“With the rugged beauty of protected Rancho Mission Viejo lands as a backdrop for the best new homes in Orange County, life at Ladera Ranch reflects the independent spirit of the American West while nurturing the diversity of the Southern California Style.”

The concept driving the planned community is inscribed in “Ladera Life” which is the marketing slogan. The developers of Ladera Ranch have apparently learned from the successes and failures of similar start-up communities nationally and have meticulously planned their own version of a community where the idea is a) the latest technology should be available to the residents, b) the technology should be user friendly and the residents should be able to master it in a very short time, and c) no matter how advanced or sophisticated the technology is the ultimate success of the community lies in achieving its community oriented goals. Over the last two years, as the community has begun to expand and homes have been susceptible to great demand and appreciated in value, the Ladera Ranch management has been putting less and less emphasis on technology component as a marketing tool while still paying attention to it from an infrastructure and amenities standpoint. This community orientation represents some sort of social utopianism of the suburbia that dates back to Leavittown more than fifty years ago, and more recently to California’s experiments with various planned communities.

The research question facing us is how is Ladera able to blend the promise of new technology with social utopianism of sorts. What are the perceptions and behaviors of the residents in regard to their participation in a technology driven networked community? How successful is this community both from a technological point of view and from a social angle?

4 Research Method and Analysis

This is an in-depth study of 25 households and their use of computers and communication technologies in their homes. The study is a work in progress as more families are being added to the sample. Research methods include long interviews, ethnographic observation and monitoring of an online community forum. Community ethnographies date back to the pioneering work of Herbert Gans (1967) in the New Jersey town of Levittown. In terms of wired communities, some recent work has been reported by Carroll and Rosson (1996) in Blacksburg, Virginia, and Hampton (2001) in Toronto, Canada.

4.1 Findings

In this short space, we can only highlight some of the important findings. In the following, we limit our discussion to the community Intranet. (A more complete document and research report can be obtained from the first author.)

4.1.1 Reasons for moving into a wired community

Different families have moved into the wired for different reasons. One important theme that emerges from our study is that technology is only one aspect of the wired community life. People move into the community also because of its physical attraction, its location near a mountainous region and road access to the neighborhood/city attractions and workplaces. The community is perceived as children friendly because of all the amenities and the freedom and the safety with which children can run around with minimum supervision within the immediate neighborhood. This is indeed a major concern of families living in the urban regions of America. What the developers have successfully done is to market the community on the basis of the latest technology but by promising traditional community values and living patterns.

Thus many of our respondents felt that the park like environment, the scenic background, the walking trails, play grounds for children, and the ability to take their dog for walk are the major reasons for moving into the area. The technology is simply a bonus.

4.1.2 Intranet as the Centre-Piece of the Community

The center-piece of the wired community is the Intranet. Each household has access to the community Intranet via a dedicated password. The intranet serves different purposes. First, it creates a public forum where members can exchange their view and ideas and offer suggestions and critique on various community related issues. These issues can range anywhere from such mundane topics as trash collection to more serious problems concerning traffic congestion to the planning of the next shopping mall. A second purpose of the Intranet is to permit members to start their own interest groups and social clubs. Thus there are wine testing clubs, moms with infants, bridge groups and so on. Some of them are more active than others.

We observed various behavior patterns in terms of the Intranet use. We found that there are some community regulars who are always on the Intranet and dominate the discussions. Some families complained that those people who dominate the discussion boards may be the reason why there is not a more even handed expression of views. There are others who go on the Intranet only when the topic is of interest to them and when they are directly affected by related developments. So, for example, people in the immediate vicinity of a shopping area were more vocal about some of the plans that affected them directly by management's decisions concerning those matters. A large number of the community members are interested in following the Intranet material instead of actively participating in the discussions. They feel a need to be aware of the happenings and follow the Intranet mostly for the news value and sometimes for the entertainment value when discussions get heated.

The public Intranet is also used for announcing garage sales and exchange of medical information and announcements from the local schools and the shopping areas.

In general, we found that women tended to read or directly participate in the public forums than men. Thus there is a gender phenomenon here. This is particularly true of stay-at-home mothers who are tending to their young children. This is also true of working women. When it comes older retirees, there does not seem to be much gender variation.

4.1.3 Special Interest Groups and Social Clubs

There are many social clubs and interests groups that are active. This is a very important part of the community life. What is interesting is that the technology plays a key role in keeping community members in contact with each other. For instance, MC's (a member in our sample) participation in the Ladera Life Wine Club has exposed him to a handful of new contacts. Correspondences with these people occur over the community website, and if not for the community message boards, MC would never have met this group of people. The wine club contacts can be classified as *weak* relationships, but they are important in showing the role of technology in a network system. Because MC had access to the community board, he was exposed to a whole new group of people. MC's family/ social network was expanded and shaped by his participation in the community board.

4.1.4 Some Emerging Dimensions of Communication

Based on our study of the wired community the we have identified the following dimensions of the Intranet as an emerging communication technology.

Distant vs. Local
Family vs Community (Social)
Urgent vs. Non urgent
Socialize vs. Informative
Engaged Dialogue vs. Terse Dialogue
Personal vs. Casual
Formal vs. Informal
Archaic vs. Technical
Convenience vs. Hassle
Easy vs. Hard
Faster vs. Slower
Protected/ Secure vs. Unprotected/ Insecure
Vulnerable vs. Invulnerable
Intimate vs. Non-Intimate

4.1.5 Network Issues – Some General Observations

From the social dimensions and emerging trends, certain patterns begin to coalesce. Three large patterns of technology and communication were identified: Network Growth, Network Management, and Negotiation and Empowerment.

4.1.5.1 Network Growth

Communication technology and the human decision to employ it expand the social network in two ways: by expanding the emotional web of social and by making it more feasible for new relationships to enter the network. With the onset of computer-based communications, individuals can send an e-mail, nice and quick, and maintain a relationship without the time and emotional investment of writing a handwritten letter or making a phone call. Technology has offered new ways to maintain relationships, ways that have new properties that are not afforded by just one form of communication. An individual can now maintain a relationship with someone, be it a strong *or* weak relationship with forms of communication that offer low *and* high intimacy. Thus,

technology has provided individuals with different levels of bonding (e.g. high and low levels of bonding) in their social networks; the emotional web of an individual's network has grown.

4.1.5.2 Network Management

The Intranet as a communication technology lends itself to Network Management in two ways: by improving the efficacy of scheduling events, and by giving families more security measures.

Having a breadth of communication technology provides more options for families to manage family and community events. For instance, the convenience of scheduling a family party is not more apparent than in an Intranet communication scenario where other families can be contacted through one correspondence. Similarly, participating in community events, like CB's (one of our subject families) children's athletics team, is made more efficient via the intranet. Without the Intranet, families would still do what they do, but there would be a lack of this convenience. The Intranet provides extra security for families. When an individual goes out of the home, he or she can check up on the rest of the family in by firing off a quick cellular phone call, as in the case with JD.

4.1.5.3 Negotiation and Empowerment

People are empowered by the negotiation process of communication technology via the Intranet. The tech-enabled network allows its members to choose a mode of communication that suits their *experiential needs*.

Take this scenario: DG needed to contact her neighbor to notify her of something. However, DG was fearful of being "trapped" on the phone, because the neighbor is an absolute "chatterbox." So DG chose to use the Intranet. DG's experiential needs in this case were quickness, a measure of protection from a long, affected conversation. The nature of her correspondence was informative—not a social call. Where the DG-example shows how people can "push-off" on a correspondence, a second example will show the opposite side of the coin—when communication scenarios call for stronger impressions. Of course, having a bevy of communication technologies give people a choice, and having a choice is part of an empowered state of being.

5 References

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