

Dissertation abstract

## **Social networks, social capital, and the use of information and communications technology in socially excluded communities: a study of community groups in Manchester, England**

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This study investigates grassroots community groups in low-income or (more specifically) socially excluded areas using information and communications technology (ICT) and the social ties that support their ICT use. How and to what purpose do groups not expected to use ICT—because they are formed from “digitally divided” populations—in fact do so? Who or what helps them use it?

The study makes a contribution primarily to the field of community informatics, drawing concepts from social capital and social network theory (Granovetter, Lin, Putnam, Wellman). Data concerning where community groups get help with ICT are analyzed to see whether and how strong and weak ties and bridging and bonding social capital play a role in helping the groups.

The study finds that having more ties providing ICT help—and more strong ties, more bonding social capital—is associated with more extensive ICT use by the community groups. Based on 25 measures of ICT, the groups fall into three progressively more extensive categories of ICT use: downloading (using computers and the Internet, particularly e-mail), uploading (maintaining a group Web presence), and cyberorganizing (helping others to become uploaders or downloaders). These three categories align with group purpose (tenant groups, cultural groups, or social support groups), suggesting that the groups use a particularly social form of ICT (SICT) relating very closely to group purpose. The 31 groups are reaching across real or perceived digital divides in accessing help with ICT; the ties utilized are likely to be younger, more white, more male, and more in the workforce.

The method helps to move the new field of community informatics beyond the case study by analyzing a sample of 31 community groups and their 62 ICT helpers. Empirical proof is provided via statistical tests on closed-end responses (quantitative) along with narratives extracted from interviews (qualitative).

Social exclusion is often oversimplified, not taking into account the phenomenon uncovered here: groups that reach across ethnicity, class, gender, and generations for skilled help, yet stay close to their strong-tie, bonding-social-capital networks, relying largely on people in their own communities. Policy models might usefully take into account the relatively invisible but active networks within socially excluded communities.

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