

ICT AS AN ENABLER IN THE COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR IN AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the results of a study exploring people's views of the impact of ICTs in facilitating and influencing democratic processes in Aotearoa/New Zealand. A survey was used to gain a broad understanding of how current users of ICTs in the community and voluntary sector are utilising them to supplement and enhance community activity. The preliminary findings from the study highlight the importance and impact of ICTs in engagement within community groups and with government agencies. High levels of social capital and political awareness exist but resourcing and sustainability issues exist in terms of time, skills and access deficits.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the preliminary findings of a study exploring the perceived impact and role of ICTs in facilitating and influencing citizen-led democratic processes in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It describes the provisional results of a survey that was

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developed to gain a broad understanding of how current users of ICTs in the community and voluntary sector use technologies such as mobile communications and the Internet to support, supplement and enhance community activity. Participants for the survey were drawn from the community and voluntary sector in Aotearoa/New Zealand, including community activists, NGOs, elected representatives and local and central government. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to an emerging eDemocracy debate, an area where limited research exists, particularly in terms of citizen and community centric approaches. The paper contributes to establishing a baseline for eDemocracy research in Aotearoa/New Zealand and acts as a guide for further research in this field.

The paper contains a discussion on relevant literature relating to social capital and community informatics in order to contextualise the study. There is particular emphasis on the role of ICTs in the community sector in Aotearoa/New Zealand and a critical discussion and contextualisation of relevant local policy initiatives. Also presented is a summary of the design and dissemination of the survey instrument and a presentation and discussion of the key findings.

BACKGROUND

ICTs do not exist in isolation and it is important to situate community informatics initiatives within a social setting. Social capital (Putnam, 2000) is an important issue in terms of democratic engagement and there is evidence that ICTs are an appropriate tool to increase participation in civil society. This section highlights the key literature relating to social capital with specific reference to community use of ICTs to facilitate participation. It will contextualise the discussion in terms of local conditions in Aotearoa/New Zealand by describing considerations and issues for local community informatics initiatives. It concludes with a critical discussion of key policy initiatives, including the Draft Digital Strategy (Aotearoa/New Zealand Government, 2004).

Social Capital

Social capital emphasises the importance of social ties and shared norms relating to the well being of society (Bourdieu, 1970; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). It is a measure of the connectedness of individuals to each other and the 'social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam, 2000, p.19). As Coleman (1988, p.1) suggests, 'unlike other forms of capital, social capital adheres to the structure of relations between and among actors.' The value of a civil

society is not in the good intent of the individual but in the way those individuals are connected and embedded within a 'dense network of reciprocal relations' (Putnam, 2000, p.19). Social capital is a major enabler of democracy (E. Cox, 2002) and has significant political consequences. Where it is strong, it is likely to foster more participatory forms of government and higher levels of involvement and partnership between government and civil society (Norris, 2002; Putnam, 2000).

Social Capital in Aotearoa/New Zealand

Social capital in Aotearoa/New Zealand appears strong by international standards (Norris, 2002) and, if not actually rising, it is at least relatively constant. Social trust, defined as an 'expectation that arises, within a community, of regular honest and cooperative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms' (Fukuyama, 1995, p.26), is increasing, whereas in Australia, the US and the UK it has fallen (Dickson, 2004). Dickson reports that 42% of adult Aotearoa/New Zealanders were members of a sporting organisation and 25% an arts organisation, compared to average participation rates of 16% and 10% respectively across 32 European countries. Following trends seen elsewhere (for example, Putnam, 2000), Aotearoa/New Zealander's disaffection with democracy is inversely proportional to educational achievement and income and higher income and education levels are reflected in a greater confidence in civic institutions (Dickson, 2004).

Community Informatics

For Bourdieu (1970), social networks were based on material and symbolic exchanges and assume an explicit acknowledgement of an economic or social space in terms of geographical proximity. New networked ICTs disrupt this concept, since physical proximity is no longer a pre-requisite for the creation of social networks (Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004). The Internet can dramatically affect the way people communicate, extending social and community boundaries (Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004; Wellman, Boase, & Chen, 2002; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). ICT-based community networks can lead to the development and maintenance of strong, intermediate and weak ties that are able to provide support and information across both broad and specific relationships within a community (Tharp, 2004; Wellman, 1996).

Community Informatics (CI) as a field of both research and practice is well defined and various normative definitions exist, for example Gurstein (2000) states that CI is about 'how ICT can help achieve a community's social, economic or cultural goals' (p.3). Loader and Keeble (2004) argue that CI has a distinctive research agenda that

privileges *information* and *communication* ahead of the *technology* and which 'emphasises a grassroots perspective whereby community members are centrally involved in the application of ICTs for community development' (p.4). A primary aim of most CI initiatives is to bring about the effective use of ICT, which Gurstein (2003, p.9) defines as 'the capacity and opportunity to successfully integrate ICT into the accomplishment of self or collaboratively identified goals.' CI encompasses an implicit shift away from the essentialising technocratic top-down approach, recognising that solutions can and do emerge from within a community. Such solutions are owned by the community, privileging local needs and aspirations (Marshall & Taylor, 2004; Schuler & Day, 2004).

The Aotearoa/New Zealand Context

In the Aotearoa/New Zealand context, CI initiatives include literacy and training, access and telecentres to websites, management tools and discussion forums. Many appear highly successful and some world-leading and research indicates that ICTs are improving outcomes for stakeholders of community organisations by making services more inclusive and accessible (Craig, Dashfield, & Thomson, 2003; Craig & Williamson, 2005). Research also indicates that local CI initiatives tend to be over-reliant on goodwill and voluntary resources and, because of this, their existence can be perilous (Day, 2004). Whilst community groups might recognise the value of good practices and policies, their ability to implement them can be impeded by operational and financial constraints (Craig & Williamson, 2005; Williamson, 2003).

Government Policy relating to CI

The potential value of CI is recognised at a policy level through the Connecting Communities Strategy (Community Employment Group, 2002), which aims to improve access to and the effective use of ICTs amongst communities. More recently, the Draft Digital Strategy (Aotearoa/New Zealand Government, 2004) was developed to 'provide an integrated framework for existing and future initiatives to encourage the uptake and effective use of ICTs for economic, social and cultural gain' (p.2). The strategy is significant because it promotes a whole of government approach to ICTs and recognises that ubiquity and sustainability of ICTs cannot be assumed. It is also significant because it is likely to set the policy (and therefore funding) agenda for CI initiatives in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The Strategy addresses social and cultural good, however its primary driver is economic benefit. In this regard it differs significantly from traditional approaches to the

digital divide, which position exclusion as a primarily social problem (Thomson & Craig, 2004). The strategy does little to suggest how this might work in reality and remains rooted in a paradigm of central government delivering services out to citizens, failing to advance discourse on harnessing the emerging and transformative potential ICTs to re-orient interactions between government and citizens. It places business and, to a lesser degree, government, at the centre of a knowledge economy. In such an approach communities become conduits and citizens resources – skilled and effective users of technology whose ultimate purpose is to staff the knowledge economy.

The Digital Strategy appears *laissez-faire* and subjective. It fails to promote frameworks for evaluating outcomes or effectiveness and there is a naïve and flawed assumption that what works in one location will be successful in another. CI projects generally disprove this myth; they are not the result of technological determinism but of the appropriate social construction of technology in a specific and localised context (Williamson, 2003). Any distinction between projects and ICTs as a ‘business as usual’ component of communities is absent from the Digital Strategy and other policy and, perhaps the most worrying aspect, is that the strategy does little to address how projects can become operationalized and sustainable. The economic model privileged in the strategy re-enforces a short-term approach to competitive funding and technocratic/bureaucratic intervention at the expense of sustainability. As Day (2004) notes, this short-term approach has been historically detrimental to community informatics initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

A survey instrument was developed to explore:

- Computer and Internet use
- Involvement in political and democratic activities
- Community activity was

The survey was developed in both an online (web) version and a paper-based version using a rigorous, multi-stage process to test questions, questionnaire structure and overall construction of the survey instrument (De Vaus, 2002). The online survey was developed using a commercial survey tool (www.surveymonkey.com) and was accessed via a website providing participant information. A hard-copy version was available on the website or from the researcher.

Data collection occurred between November 23, 2004 and January 31, 2005. Survey participants were recruited because of their involvement in community and political activities at a local or national level and because they were existing users of ICTs. A survey announcement was distributed by email to 117 individuals and four Aotearoa/New Zealand community technology email lists. A follow up email was sent to the original individual distribution list in early January. In total, 153 completed surveys were received. Four of these were provided in hard copy form and the remaining 149 surveys were completed online. Of the 153 surveys, 12 contained no data beyond agreeing to take part and these have been discarded from the sample. Therefore, for the purposes of this discussion, n=141.

RESULTS

Community Membership

The results indicate that community activity was high with 76% of respondents considering themselves to be a member of one or more community and 65% having active roles in those communities (excluding sport and religious organisations). Of those identifying as a member of a community, 68% had been involved in establishing a community group and there was evidence that involvement in community activities was a normal part of the respondents every day lives; 67% of respondents who considered themselves to be a member of a community participated in community activities on at least a weekly basis (46% participated more often than weekly). A further indicator of strong levels of social capital was that respondents were also highly connected: 95% of respondents had visited a neighbour or nearby friend in the month prior to the survey and 47% had visited six or more times.

Usage and Adoption of Technology

The survey targeted existing users of the Internet and the data shows that many respondents were long-time users of ICTs; 76% of respondents (n=138) indicated that they had been using a computer since before 1990 (51% first used a computer in the 1980s and only 2% first used a computer after 2000). More surprisingly, Internet uptake was at its peak amongst this cohort between 1995 and 1999 (45%; n=133). This was earlier than the researcher had anticipated based on general Internet adoption statistics for Aotearoa/New Zealand: Where the 2001 Census (Statistics Aotearoa/New Zealand, 2002) shows Internet usage in Aotearoa/New Zealand at 37%, amongst this

cohort it was 98%. Only 14% of respondents started using the Internet in or after 2000 (Figure 1).

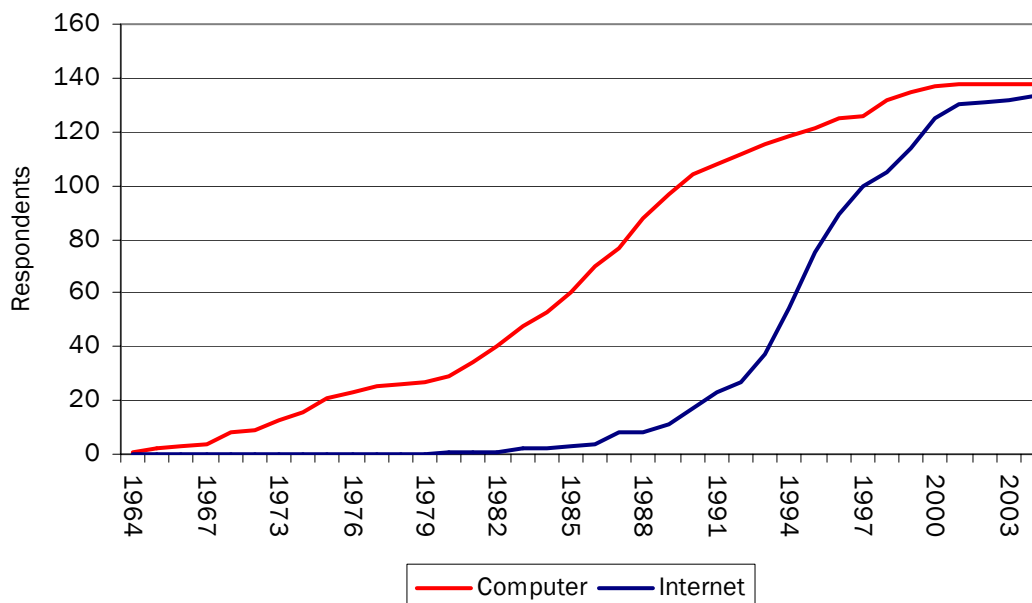


Figure 1: Cumulative Computer (n=138) and Internet (n=133) uptake.

Accessing the Internet was a daily occurrence for 138 respondents (n=141) and only one respondent accessed it 'now and then' from any location. Respondents were most likely to access the Internet from home (94%) or from work (90%). They were more likely to access the Internet from work (97%) and home (80%) on a daily basis. This compared to 19% of respondents who accessed the Internet at some time through a school or tertiary institution or cybercafé and 18% who used a library or community centre. Respondents who used public Internet access facilities were less likely to do so regularly than those who accessed the Internet from home or work. Table 1 shows that 19% of respondents used a mobile device but that most did so infrequently.

Location	Percentage	Frequency of access			
		Daily	Weekly	Month	Now & then
Home	94%	80%	13%	2%	5%
Work	90%	97%	2%	0%	2%
School/Tertiary institute	19%	56%	0%	11%	33%
Cybercafé	19%	0%	11%	11%	78%
Library/Community centre	18%	8%	8%	12%	73%
Mobile device	19%	19%	26%	0%	56%

Table 1: Percentage of respondents who access the Internet at varying locations (n=141)

The cohort primarily adopted technology because it was perceived as useful (66%), only 4% were early adopters of technology (4%) and 8% avoided buying technology products. 15% of respondents considered themselves to be an expert user and 78% an experienced user.

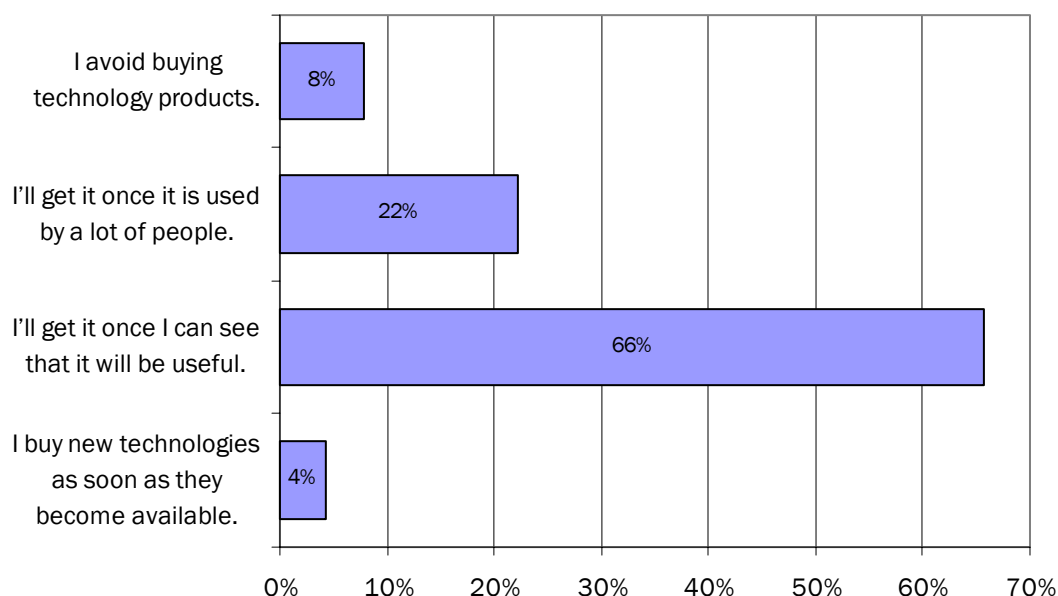


Figure 2: Reasons for adopting new technology (n=141).

If usefulness was the primary motivation for adoption of ICTS, then what individuals use ICTs for is of interest. The main personal activities were keeping informed and up to date (99% of respondents, 70% on a daily basis), carrying out research (98%), however this was more likely to occur infrequently with 50% doing so on a weekly or monthly basis and 33% daily. Supporting a hobby or personal interest was cited by 94% of respondents and accessing government services by 95%. Table 2 shows that using the Internet to communicate with others was cited by 96% of respondents and that communication was the most frequently occurring activity, with 89% of respondents doing so on a daily basis .

Activity	Percentages	
	Use	Use daily
Keep informed/up to date	99%	70%
Do research	98%	33%
Communicate with others	96%	89%
Access government services	95%	18%
Support hobbies/interests	94%	30%
Find out about my community	91%	18%
Book travel/accommodation	87%	3%

Education	85%	26%
Buy products/ services	84%	4%
Find health/medical information	79%	3%
Banking	79%	16%
Pay bills	76%	4%
Entertainment	76%	14%
Online games	21%	4%

Table 2: Online use and daily usage (n=141).

Given the above data, it is unsurprising that respondents overwhelmingly felt that the Internet was useful or very useful in keeping them informed (90%). The data on personal usage has shown a high level of adoption for the Internet amongst the cohort and a level of continuous adoption, demonstrated by frequency of use and accessing of the Internet from multiple locations. Indeed, 59% of respondents (n=139) indicated that they were using the Internet as much as they needed to. Reported barriers to use included cost (33%), risk from viruses (23%) and needing easier access (21%).

Online Community

Whereas 76% of respondents considered themselves members of a community, 63% identified as belonging to an online community. A major theme to emerge from the data was the ability of respondents to communicate with like minds who were physically separated and it is clear that the Internet is judged as an effective tool for communicating across distance. It was also seen by respondents as a tool for resourcing local members more effectively and as a way of using limited time and resources more efficiently and of being 'kept in the loop'. Further evidence of the adoption of the Internet by the cohort in their community activity is demonstrated by the fact that 30% of respondents have been involved in creating a community website. The data suggests that the Internet plays a role in supporting the community activity of the majority of respondents.

Figure 3 shows that the online activity most likely to occur in support of community activities was researching an issue (96%), followed by visiting a local government website (92%), central government website (88%) or another community website (88%). The Internet was used for planning and managing community activities by 73% of respondents and was the activity most likely to occur on a daily basis (18%). The Internet was least likely to be used to contact the media about a community issue or event (58%), to publish information on a community website (58%) and 63% of respondents had used the Internet to present a view that challenged a council/government statement or policy.

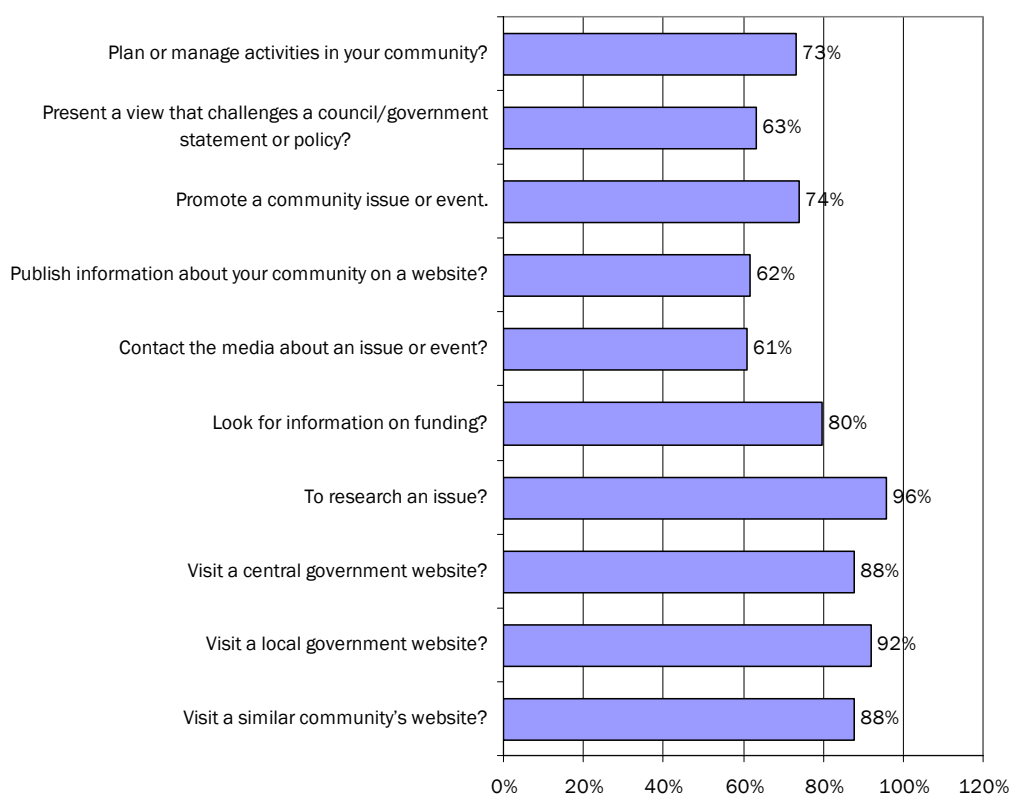


Figure 3: Internet use to support community activity (n=125).

Issues relating to greater use of the Internet in community activity were identified by 73% of respondents and only 18% of respondents said they were using the Internet enough in their community activity. Primary amongst the issues identified was needing more time (54%), followed by the need for more computer skills (33%) and a lower cost of publishing (33%). Only 12% said they would need to see greater value in the Internet before they used it more and 16% cited a requirement for easier access

Political and Democratic Activity

Despite the literature revealing a decline in interest in and awareness of politics and in people's perceived ability to influence government, the results from this study show that this is not the case for the respondents. Only 9% felt unable to influence government and 88% felt that they could exert at least some influence over government.

Unsurprisingly, Table 3 shows high levels of interest and awareness in political issues amongst the respondents, with 48% identifying as 'very aware' and only 5% claiming to be 'not very aware'.

		How would you describe your general awareness of political issues?				
		Not very aware	Some-what aware	Very aware	Total	Percentage
Do you believe the statement 'whatever I say or do, I can't influence government'?	No	2	39	45	86	63%
	Somewhat	3	21	14	38	28%
	Yes	2	4	6	12	9%
	Total	7	64	65	136	-
	Percentage	5%	47%	48%	-	-

Table 3: Perceived ability to influence government and political awareness (n=136).

In terms of the nature of the political activity of the respondents in the last three years, 89% had discussed politics with friends or colleagues and 87% had followed a political issue or debate in the media (but only 55% had visited a political party website). Voting was certainly a feature of political activity amongst respondents. The 83% who had voted in a national election is slightly above the national average for central government elections, which stands at 79% (IDEA, 2002). It was also found that 88% state that they have voted in a local election and this points to a significant increase in voting activity above the societal norm (voter turnout at local elections in 1998 was 57.5%). In Waitakere City, the 2004 voter turnout was 35% (C. Cox, 2004), yet 93% of the respondents resident in Waitakere City indicated that they voted in the 2004 election. Whilst only 4% of respondents had stood for political office, 18% were members of a political party, somewhat higher than the 13.3% figure in the World Values Study of the mid-1990s (Norris, 2002), 69 (49%) attended a political meeting and 84 respondents (60%) attended a meeting of elected representatives.

Information Sources and Publishing

Results from the study found that respondents were using the Internet to publish political material and to make comments about government or political issues. This was most likely to occur through email - 23% published to an email discussion list and 22% through an email newsletter. The least used methods were Blogs (4%) and Chat (4%) and Internet Newsgroups were used by 9% of respondents. The Internet impacted on levels of political awareness, with 77% of respondents being more aware and it making no difference to 23% (again, levels of political awareness or activity did not seem to influence this perception).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The cohort in the study exhibit characteristics of strong social capital, being well connected with neighbours and communities of interest (online and offline). It would appear from the study that ICTs have become an important tool in supporting activities in the community and voluntary sector, allowing enhancing the extent and quality of social networks amongst the respondents. The preliminary findings highlight the importance and impact of ICTs in facilitating community engagement within the civil society sector and with government agencies and that social trust and reciprocity amongst the cohort appear high in this regard.

Respondents were politically aware and active, comfortable with their ability to exert influence over government. The level of Internet usage in connecting with Government was high, with 95% of respondents doing so personally, 88% accessing a central government website as part of their community activity and 92% a local government website. This contrasts with a recent study of methods used to contact government in Aotearoa/New Zealand where 28% used the Internet (Curtis, Vowles, & Curtis, 2004).

Since the community sector is not recognised as a leader in terms of the adoption of ICTs, Internet adoption amongst the respondents occurred earlier than the researcher had anticipated. Usage patterns, length of adoption and reported levels of expertise, suggests the cohort is at the forefront of community informatics uptake in Aotearoa/New Zealand and that usage is motivated by perceived value, not technology.

The findings of the study point to issues with the sustainability of community informatics initiatives in Aotearoa/New Zealand, particularly in terms of an over-reliance on voluntary resources: time and lack of skills are key issues. The findings also suggest that immediacy of access is increasingly important as ICT becomes more ubiquitous, suggesting an access deficit for communities who lack ICTs at home or work. Current government policy in Aotearoa/New Zealand is biased towards projects rather than process or sustainability and it is not apparent how the key issues identified here can be addressed at a national level.

ICTs are now a key tool in the community and voluntary sector in Aotearoa/New Zealand. ICTs provide support and resourcing to a wide range of civil society groups and, although barriers to more effective use clearly exist, they are being used innovatively and successfully to communicate, research, resource, engage and

promote. The findings presented here raise questions of how, where and through what media citizens engage with each other and with government. Further research is suggested that moves beyond concepts of effective use to identify how ICTs can be used to support citizen-centric solutions for effective engagement.

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