

# SHIFTING THE CENTRE: THE INTERNET AS A TOOL FOR COMMUNITY ACTIVISM\*

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## ABSTRACT

*Community websites can potentially humanise the process and experience of government and democracy by shifting debate from the political centre to the community. By discussing sites with a community representation/democracy focus located in Waitakere City, Aotearoa/New Zealand, this paper examines the potential of the Internet to promote discourse and democratic practices. A narrative case study of one community website, Laingholm, is provided and its evolution through to current hiatus and the rise of a cross-community eDemocracy project is mapped. Key issues and lessons learnt are highlighted.*

## INTRODUCTION

Many local communities in Aotearoa/New Zealand have developed their own websites, the majority of these are promotional and informational; electronic newsletters promoting community events and local businesses (CommunityNet Aotearoa, 2003). Others follow a more overt political line, employing technology to humanise the process and experience of government and democracy by moving debate away from the political centre and into the community at large.

This paper explores the Internet's potential as a tool for community activism and for enhancing participation in local government. It does this through a narrative case study based on the evolution of community websites in Waitakere City, Aotearoa/New Zealand. It will discuss sites that have emerged with a strong community representation/democracy focus, critically examining one of these sites, the Laingholm Community website ([www.laingholm.org](http://www.laingholm.org)), of which the author was a principal instigator and designer. Laingholm's use of the Internet has been critical in a number of key debates, particularly that of environmental protection and subdivision and, latterly, in terms of eDemocracy. The paper will map the evolution of the Laingholm website through to its current hiatus and the rise of a cross-community eDemocracy project, the Waitakere eDemocracy Group (WeDG), identifying lessons that have been learnt. Firstly, however, the paper explores the rationale behind community websites with a particular focus on their potential to enable discourse.

## CONTEXT FOR COMMUNITY WEBSITES

The typical community website seems to result from the vision and enthusiasm of a single person or small group. Technology is not the primary motivator and the web is seen as an important communications tool. These *net visionaries* (Hartman, Sifonis, & Kador, 2000) are responsible for developing the concept and, most likely, the initial site. As a site matures, the skills required to maintain it change. There is a need for regular updates and a migration toward people who can fulfil a more operational role, becoming the domain of what Hartman et al. refer to as the *net savvy*. This occurs against a background of limited voluntary labour, where finding people with the right skills can be difficult if not impossible and where funds to support development and hosting are limited if they exist at all.

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\* Cite as: Williamson, A. (2003). Shifting the centre: The Internet as a tool for community activism. In S. Marshall & W. Taylor (Eds.), Proceedings of the 5th International Information Technology in Regional Areas (ITIRA) Conference (pp. 149-155). Rockhampton, QLD: Central Queensland University.

Beyond the informational, the Internet offers the opportunity for active participation in the democratic and decision making processes, for greater and more immediate say in the function of government (Rosén, 2001). In reality, however, a gap often exists between this ideal and the availability of the necessary resources to effectively utilise Information and Communications Technology (ICT). It is not sufficient that citizens simply have access to ICT, communities must be literate in new technologies and resources must be available to motivate continued use and engagement. Ultimately, communities need to be empowered to become producers of new knowledge, publishing their own unique viewpoint (Williamson, 2002). It is only when this level is reached that technology is able to truly empower individual communities, giving them a voice of their own within the competing discourses. This still leaves a residual imbalance in terms of the dissemination of material, however, this goes beyond the scope of this paper.

## SITUATING LAINGHOLM

Laingholm is a peri-urban coastal and bush community located west of Auckland in the foothills of the Waitakere Ranges and bordering the northern edge of the 375Km<sup>2</sup> Manukau Harbour. Laingholm is a part of Waitakere City, one of the seven cities that form the Auckland region. Maori *Iwi* (tribe), Te *Kawerau a Maki*, hold *mana whenua* (guardianship) over the Waitakere coastline, including Laingholm. There are signs of Maori *Pa* (fortifications) in the area and an oral history identifying the local creeks as a source of logs for *waka* (canoe) making (LDCA, 2000).

Clear felled for farming following European settlement in 1853, Laingholm today is extensively covered in regenerating bush. The original farmstead was sub-divided into 474 sections from the 1920s onwards and Laingholm started to develop as a holiday community, originally marketed as an idyllic beach-side community, a place away from the busy-ness of Auckland (Laing, 1998). As road quality was improved and car ownership increased, Laingholm came within realistic commuting distance to the main areas of employment and today it is little more than a dormitory suburb of Auckland, albeit one on the very edge of the urban area.

Laingholm has a population of 2,457 (Waitakere City of 168,756) and is overwhelmingly *Pakeha* (European), with other ethnic groups under-represented in terms of city-wide averages (Data sourced from 2001 Census of Population and Dwellings unless otherwise stated: Statistics New Zealand, 2002a).

	European	Maori	Pacific	Asian	Other
Laingholm	87%	8%	2%	2%	0%
Waitakere	64%	12%	13%	10%	1%

Table 1: Population by ethnic group

Thirty-four percent of Laingholm's working population works within the city boundary and 50 percent in the other cities within the Auckland region (Auckland City, North Shore City, Manukau City and Rodney). Fourteen percent work in Laingholm itself and, since Laingholm lacks any serious commercial or industrial enterprises, one must presume that the majority of these are home-based and self-employed (23 percent of respondents identified themselves as generating at least some income through self-employment, compared to only 14 percent across the city).

Laingholm is on average more highly educated, with ten percent having undergraduate qualifications, five percent post-graduate and 15 percent having no qualification at all (the city average is 6%, 2% and 23% respectively). It is more affluent, with less people earning below the minimum wage and considerably more high-earning households:

	\$1 - \$20,000	\$20,001 - \$40,000	\$40,001 - \$50,000	\$50,001 - \$70,000	\$70,001 - \$100,000	\$100,001 or More
Laingholm	34%	17%	12%	13%	5%	3%
Waitakere City	45%	16%	9%	7%	3%	1%

Table 2: Income distribution

The Census report on ICT usage and Internet access observes that the more affluent a community, the greater the Internet access available to it (Statistics New Zealand, 2002b). This is reflected in the ICT statistics for Laingholm, which are above both the average for the city and for New Zealand.

	No Access to Telecommunication Systems	Access to a Telephone	Access to a Fax Machine	Access to the Internet
Laingholm	2%	98%	35%	53%
Waitakere City	3%	97%	27%	41%
New Zealand	4%	96%	25%	37%

Table 3: Access to telecommunications services and the Internet

Telecommunications access is through two copper cables to the Titirangi exchange of Telecom New Zealand. Laingholm is at absolute limit of Asynchronous Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) (~10Km from the exchange at the furthest point), however, the historical use of above industry standard copper cable (6mm as opposed to 4mm) means ADSL services are generally available (in some parts this is limited to lower specification 128Kbps ADSL). Because most of Laingholm does not have line of site to Auckland's two key telecommunications structures (Sky Tower in Auckland's Central Business District and the Waitatarua transmitter in the northern Waitakere Ranges), the only other Internet access methods are dial-up and uni-directional satellite (fast download, requires dialup for upload). Mobile coverage is variable and generally quite poor (WeDG, 2002).

### Residents and Ratepayers Associations

The original Laingholm residents and ratepayers group was formed in 1932, driven by frustrations over a lack of service delivery from the local council. The Laingholm District Citizens Association (LDCA) was re-established in 1998. It's original purpose was to manage the two village halls, however, it has evolved into representing the views of Laingholm residents to council and other statutory groups. The focus today is as much on lack of participation in voluntary activities as it is on local issues. The LDCA is dependent on funding from the City Council and other agencies and has virtually no income of its own. In line with community activity elsewhere (Putnam, 2000), involvement in community activity has fallen over the last 20 years and, although membership is free for all over 18, monthly committee meetings often fail to reach a quorum of five.

### THE LAINGHOLM COMMUNITY WEBSITE

The first version of the Laingholm Community Website was launched in 1998 and provided a small amount of information on the community, it had no real structure and the design was extremely simplistic. Version two of the website was launched in September 1999 after around three months of research and development. The team applied commercial skills to the design and philosophy of the site. Not only was the site given a radically new look and feel, one which matched an image used in the printed *Laingholm Handbook*, but the site itself was re-developed completely with all new content. Based on awareness of the need to generate continued new and changing content (Nielsen, 2000), the site was designed to include a news section that could be kept up to date with the latest local news stories. These are sourced from within the community or 'deep-linked' from other news sources (permissions were sought and received from both Independent Newspapers Ltd and the New Zealand Herald for this).

## Audience

The site was designed to be the online information source of choice for anyone interested in Laingholm. This included locals, friends and relatives of locals, visitors and potential residents, residents in the surrounding Waitakere Ranges communities and local schools.

## Purpose

Two of the primary aims behind the project are, in all likelihood, shared by most community websites, namely to keep the local community informed about issues and events that affect them and provide a central repository of information on Laingholm and its history.

However, a point of difference was that a third and equally important purpose behind the site was defined as being to provide and promote information on issues that relate to Laingholm to the local community and beyond from the perspective of the Laingholm Community. In other words, this site was intended not simply to publish information on the community but also to actively promote the views of the community itself both internally and to a wider audience beyond the village.

## Positioning

The website was promoted by the LDCA as being the place to go for instant news on the community. The local community already has a printed magazine, *The Roundabout*, which is distributed free throughout the area. This magazine, running since 1964, is dependent on advertising revenue and charitable funding to survive. The website group was extremely cognisant of this fact and of the value of *The Roundabout* in the community. As a result a decision was made to avoid any advertising or commercial activity on the website and to promote *The Roundabout* wherever possible, such that the website was positioned as an additional rather than an alternative resource. It was also noted (and is borne out by the statistics above) that, whilst *The Roundabout* is delivered free to every home in Laingholm, the website is only available to the sub-set of this group who have Internet access.

## BECOMING AN ACTIVE CREATOR OF CONTENT

White (1999) identified the Internet as a logical and convenient publishing channel for environmental activist groups, not least because it was economical but also because the participants were motivated to promote a cause and were more likely than the average population to have access to ICT and the skills to develop a website. These conditions were certainly also true for Laingholm.

The primary value of the website in its first two years of operation was that it gave the LDCA the ability to publish information that supported its position, instead of simply being receivers of information from other sources. This was most significant in the area of environmental protection and housing subdivision in the bush areas that surround Laingholm (subsequently the site proved to be a valuable tool in promoting eDemocracy issues and this is discussed later). Coinciding with (and in many ways a motivation for) version 2 of the website, the community felt that the city council had become heavily biased towards a pro-subdivision lobby group of land owners residing in an area between Laingholm and Titirangi (known as Little Muddy Creek). Despite intense public opposition, attempts were being made to carry out extensive sub-division of steep, often inaccessible bush areas and in almost every case the plans being proposed were far in excess of the limits permitted under council planning regulations.

Amid heated debate from both sides, the council commissioned a study intended to answer the question subdivision in the area once and for all. Issues included reticulation of water and sewerage, increased traffic, subsidence and fire risk. The report was expected to back the pro-development lobby however, when finally published, it came out against all but a very limited amount of further subdivision, stating a wide range of concerns. The pro-development council attempted to hide the report, refusing to publish it. Following the intervention of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Local Government, the city council relented. However,

they then demanded in excess of \$200 per copy of the report, stating that this was to recover photocopying costs. This in effect ensured that the report remained inaccessible to the public.

Feenberg (1992) has suggested that technology (including ICTs) can become a major source of public power and, therefore, that those who control such systems are able to wield considerable power to control and influence the development of society. In this instance the LDCA and the Karekare Residents and Ratepayers Trust ([www.karekare.org.nz](http://www.karekare.org.nz)) used their greater knowledge of ICT as a vehicle for overcoming systemic interference and control. Obtaining a copy of the report, this was then scanned and published on the LDCA and Karekare websites (LDCA, 2001). The availability of the report was widely publicised to ensure maximum exposure. Those with access to the Internet were encouraged to reprint and distribute at least key parts of the report, thereby ensuring as wide a circulation as possible of this controversial public document.

## LIKE MINDS, SHARING RESOURCES

In parallel to the Laingholm website, the West Coast community of Karekare also began developing their own website ([www.karekare.org.nz](http://www.karekare.org.nz)). Facing many of the same issues as Laingholm, it was not long before the communities started working together electronically and in face-to-face meetings. Internet activists in these two communities were also responsible for promoting Waitakere City-wide attempts at increased online participation, originating with the launch in 2001 of an online Community Hall for the city, known as '*Freespeak*'. Hosted at Karekare but accessible through either the Karekare or Laingholm site as an integral component of each, *Freespeak* is an online discussion board featuring fora for local communities and cross-community issues. Candidates in a 2001 council by-election took part in an online discussion forum hosted on *Freespeak* and the fact that this forum resulted in legal threats from one candidate probably highlights the volatility and passion of Waitakere City politics.

The success of the local websites as tools for promoting local perspectives on local issues led to discussion regarding the role of technology in the democratic process. A public meeting in Laingholm in December 2001, featuring US-based eDemocracy expert Steven Clift and local activists, aimed to push an agenda of city-wide access, infrastructure and models for electronic participation. The result of this meeting has been the formation of a local advocacy group, the Waitakere eDemocracy Group ([www.wedg.org.nz](http://www.wedg.org.nz)) and, through this groups activities, the raising of the profile of online access and empowerment within the City Council.

Commentators such as Surman and Wershler-Henry (2002) argue that that it should be left to citizens to form, structure and populate new online spaces. They argue that the true potential of what they describe as '*commonsplace*' lies in the myriad of micro-projects and single issue campaigns that draw small numbers of individuals together. Indeed, Dahlberg (2001) notes that it is necessary for discourse to be based on the concerns of the public and not be driven or manipulated by bureaucratic or administrative agendas. However the experience in Waitakere City is that this ignores the key issues of co-ordination, efficient use of scarce volunteer labour and the economies of scale that can be gained from a cooperative framework. In addition, capacity building and infrastructure projects (such as broadband and ICT literacy) are required before individual projects can be effective and these are well beyond the capacity of community-based groups working alone.

It is hard to see how such a laissez-faire approach to community informatics can work in the best interests of the community and perhaps a more suitable model is one where government agencies engage on an equal footing with other interested parties. Indeed Surman's (2002), description of successful community portals identifies a need for external funding in order to create and sustain such resources. The New Zealand government's 'Connecting Communities' strategy (Community Employment Group, 2002) defines a guiding principle that "improving community access to ICT is a responsibility shared by central and local government, the philanthropic, voluntary and private sectors, and communities themselves" (p.9). This model is used in Waitakere City through the Waitakere City Council's EcoTech Advisory Group (WETA). WETA is an equal partnership between council, community and business with a direct reporting line into

Council to ensure that words can be followed by action (and, critically, funding). WeDG is a founding member of this group and operates as an autonomous collective, the founding members being both ICT professionals and community activists, experienced in both local issues and in using ICT. The role that WeDG performs in Waitakere City is that of a community-based source of advice to council and others. Critically, WeDG does not attempt to represent 'the community', rather it offers a critical voice and the opportunity to form active partnerships.

## **LACK OF SUCCESSION PLANNING**

Unfortunately, one result of this focus change has been that the Laingholm Community website is in a state of hiatus. Participation is a key pre-requisite for the success of any community activity and this has proved a problem area for the website. As Bimber (1998) observes, citizens must somehow be motivated if they are to participate. Those responsible for the Laingholm websites' creation were motivated by the need to be active in the community and to be visionary about their use of technology. As the focus has moved onto eDemocracy the vehicle for this agenda has also shifted from individual communities to WeDG.

A general lack of volunteer resource in the community and a specific lack of technical skills has meant that no one has stepped forward to take over the site. As a result it has not been updated for sometime and its value is diminishing. This is perhaps also a reflection on the 'issue' driven nature of community activism. On a positive note, the Karekare website has undergone a redevelopment, although the net visionaries responsible for the original site are no longer involved and the site is now the responsibility of a sub-group within the residents and ratepayers association.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

### **Low-budget does not mean low-technology**

Communities can publish cheaply and easily. However, promotion of the site and awareness building through both online and traditional methods is critical.

### **Your view does count**

The website has proved to be a key strategic resource for Laingholm. It has been possible to use the Internet to strongly promote a localised discourse and a community position. It was also possible to report information that was previously being ignored by the local media. It has been encouraging to note that at least one local paper now uses local community websites as a source of news and local information.

### **Best practice is important**

There is an extensive body of literature on best practice in website design. Very little (if any) of this relates to technology, mostly it is targeted at understanding of the audience. Applying these commercial skills and best practices to the design and management of the website ensured a professional look but most importantly a logical and usable site.

### **Design a succession plan**

The succession from the net visionary creators to the net savvy maintainers of the Karekare site was volatile, which is perhaps more a reflection on the general nature of West Coast community politics. Although this was not entirely overlooked at Laingholm, the lack of volunteers in the community with the skills necessary has meant hiatus for the site. It is clear that a community needs to consider what happens when the website matures and inherent in this is valuing the worth of such a community resource.

## Build networks and share resources

Small communities simply don't have the economies of scale to tackle some of the key projects around the use of ICT. Community groups in Waitakere City have managed to 'punch above their weight' by working together, both on a personal level and online. The *Freekspeak* forum, shared between Laingholm and Karekare, and the emergence of WeDG are examples of this.

## CONCLUSION

The Laingholm Community Website, like others in Waitakere City, has never been a simple information resource. From day one the site was designed to be a tool to promote a community view to as wide an audience as possible, including elected officials and the media. This was made possible by a small group of skilled and motivated volunteers and Laingholm has certainly benefited from being a relatively prosperous and ICT literate suburb.

The experiences in Laingholm demonstrate that it is important to bring along a *second wave* of net savvy volunteers in order to keep a site running effectively as it matures. We are now in a second generation of community activism and resources are stretched. In Laingholm at least, vertical causes are taking priority over broader local capacity building.

The Internet is a low cost but high value medium, it is worth investing in the time to ensure communities have identified their audience and that the site is built around these needs. The primary success of the Laingholm website was in ensuring that the a small community was able to put forward an alternative position and stimulate public discussion in an effective way. By working with others, knowledge and resources were shared and, as a result, the site became even more effective. This cooperation has itself led to a more focused eDemocracy advocacy grouping which is now significantly influencing local government (and to a lesser extent national government) policy through a citywide advocacy network.

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