

Community Based Research and the Internet

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by

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Throughout the ES400C course I have learned the many benefits of community-based research initiatives over regular research. Although more difficult and much more time consuming, participatory research has the potential to foster real improvement in communities, in large part because of its emphasis and respect for human interaction (St Denis, 1992). Where standard research treats communities as “laboratories” for testing academic theories and new programs, community-based research aims at establishing a reciprocal education process between community and researchers (Green, George, Daniel, Frankish, Hepert, Bowie, O’Neil, 1997). It seems obvious that action research that is conducted ethically has the potential to change the process of data collection from a “research and run” affair to a mutually beneficial long-term partnership. Today’s emerging technologies and the world wide web in particular offer new ways of disseminating and presenting information, and I believe they could play a key role in strengthening community-university connections. I will explore this theme by looking at the many benefits that the internet can bring to community-based research, such as the avoidance of research duplication, easier network-building between action research organisms and convenient information sharing between communities and researchers. This will be followed by a brief description of some negative points that can arise from relying too much on the Internet.

As Nadine Crookes put it during our visit with her in Pacific Rim National Park, one of the major irritants for community members who deal with researchers on a frequent basis is having to answer the same questions repeatedly as waves of researchers come and go. Of course the same holds true for the researchers, since there really is no point in conducting the exact same research project somebody did a few years back. While it is possible to find out about possible duplication of research energy by physically going to many different locations and doing manual searches, the amount of time and energy involved is prohibitive to somebody who has a limited amount of time and resources to devote to a research project. Electronic database projects like Sylvia Harron’s Grey Literature catalogue, which is available through CLARET’s website (<http://www.clayoquotalliance.uvic.ca>), are helping to solve this problem. It allows

researchers to efficiently search thousand of documents, thus increasing the likelihood that one's work will complement what's already been done instead of repeating it while also diminishing the potential for frictions with "over-researched" community individuals.

As community-based research gains in popularity and more and more organizations such as science shops are created, the Internet is playing a vital role in network building between the different players. Loka's Living Knowledge Database, for instance, is "a free, publicly-accessible resource for science shops, community-based organizations, university and funders world-wide" which aims to "provide users with the most up-to-date knowledge about community-based research activitie[s]" (http://www.livingknowledge.org/living_knowledge.htm). As the network of participatory research organizations grows, it could well follow that meaningful communication between community and the institutional bodies such as universities and governments will improve, hopefully leading to the creation of research projects that closely match both parties' needs. What's more, thanks to the ever-popular "links" section present on most websites, one can easily explore that network virtually, bouncing from one relevant page to another in search of a specific aspect of community-based research.

Another issue that can be addressed via the Internet is the need for improved ways to share the final product of a research project with the community members who participated. As Jur Bekker pointed out during our meeting with him, there is no shortage of useful research to be done in BC's parks, yet he is still selective in giving consent for a research project to be conducted inside the park boundaries; researchers who are committed enough to give back more than just a photocopy of their thesis are not exactly plentiful. With the help of the world wide web, a researcher who has the time and the resources to put a website together can create something that presents all the important conclusions from the acquired data, yet is much easier to understand than a peer-reviewed paper, is visually pleasing and can be accessed from any computer that is hooked to the Internet. Even better, such a researcher can set up an electronic discussion forum on the

site, establishing a live feedback loop with the community that is sure to provide some insights on the things that could be improved for subsequent research project while opening up the opportunity for continued education and action.

With all of this said, there are still obstacles to using the full capacity of the internet in the context of community-based research. While millions of people are currently connected to the grid and vast numbers are joining every year, there is still a significant portion of the population that does not have access to the web. Even worse, the people who stand to benefit the most from a two-way communication with the ivory tower are often the ones who are the least likely to be online, as remote communities are harder to connect. This was well exemplified by Josie Osborne, who told us about the contrast between the expectations of the government in obtaining electronic catch data from barnacle fishers and the cultural reality of the fishermen who, for the most part, didn't even have access to a computer. Another important thing to mention is that while the Internet could be harnessed to provide a convenient and elegant way of sharing research conclusions and establishing stronger links with communities, proper community-based research is much more than building a pretty website. In the words of Verna St. Denis: "Community-based participatory research [is] a qualitative methodology that emphasizes respect for the individual and a commitment to social change" (St. Denis, 1992). It seeks to "empower rather than to exploit those studied" (Kurelek, 1992). The Internet should be treated as a handy instrument to reach these goals and not as an end in itself

Despite these points it still seems very likely that the Internet can, and in certain cases is, being used as an important tool in addressing issues concerning community-based research. It is by the success or failure of such projects as the Living Knowledge Database that we will see if indeed the Internet can act as a platform from which ivory-tower scholars and grass-roots folks can meet eye-to-eye.

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