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Connecting people

Investigating a relationship
between internet access and
social cohesion in local
community settings

A THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN COMMUNICATION
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ABSTRACT

The assumption that internet access is a means of building stronger communities is commonly found in a number of sectors, particularly in New Zealand government social services policy. In response to this assumed relationship between internet access and social cohesion, the present multiple case study research project examined the experience of free home internet access among families participating in New Zealand's Computers in Homes scheme in low socioeconomic school communities between 2003 and 2005. The goal of the study was to assess how internet access and social cohesion are related in a free home internet scheme.

Two propositions derived from a literature review underpinned the research goal: first, that internet access leads to ongoing use, and second, that internet access is positively related to social cohesion. The research was designed to test these propositions using a qualitative, constructivist approach with a mixed methodology. The principal method was interviews with adult Computers in Homes family members concerning their internet use and their sense of belonging to, and involvement in, the local community, across two waves of research about one year apart in two community settings. Additional data from observation, interviews and meetings with school principals and key informants such as Computers in Homes staff, provided context. Of thirty volunteer participants from among available Computers in Homes parents at two sites, twenty-six respondents took part in data collection at Time 1. Data from nine Case A and thirteen Case B participants contribute to the results. Nine of the original group participated at Time 2 one year later, seven from Case A and two from Case B.

Internet use declined across the group as a whole, a negative outcome mitigated by positive experiences and individual success stories, and the emergence of 'high-connector' internet users. While evidence of social cohesion was found at both case study sites initially, it was noticeably associated with the activities and interpersonal influence of confident internet users at Case A where significantly greater retention of ongoing internet use also occurred. A key finding of the study is therefore that ongoing internet use was more successfully achieved in a setting where social cohesion was more readily apparent at the time the free internet scheme was implemented. Thus a positive relationship existed in this research between internet access and social cohesion in one case study of two, where conditions included the presence of opinion leaders and social solidarity.

Opportunities for face to face social interaction and support such as are present in Computers in Homes practice are potentially significant for ongoing internet use. The Computers in Homes concept extends participants' social experiences of community through the way it is structured and implemented. In combination with the mobilising behaviours of leader figures, these social experiences may be factors associated with longer term viability of a free home internet scheme as much as the presence of the internet itself. A range of significant barriers affecting individual internet users at home, and larger obstacles such as confused accountability when external agencies are involved in project management, is signalled in this research.

Recommendations aimed at increasing the benefits of a free home internet scheme in terms of participant retention and social cohesion are proposed. Opportunities for further research arise from this study, in clarifying the conditions associated with positive social outcomes for internet interventions with a particular focus on the role of existing group cohesion and leadership dynamics.

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In 2002 I heard a conference speaker say that completing a PhD is like going on a solo trip to Mars: it’s not something that you can share with anyone else. Unable to fully appreciate the analogy at the time, I now understand that those close to you have no choice but to let you go on this strange sojourn. Their permission and their sacrifice are required. My patient family and friends have given me the necessary space and time; words cannot adequately express my appreciation for this. My dear brother chose to take a different kind of journey, *the darkest evening of the year*. I know from this heavy time too - *and miles to go before I sleep* – that we have to let one another go on our journeys. As I watch some vanish over the horizon, others come into view, and swing into step beside me, silently offering support and encouragement.

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