"If you have the vision…"

connecting people in the Network Society

A report to the Quest Trust on teleconferences and related communications activities, based on the *Euroline* project 2000-2001 which formed part of their EC Funded Project (VS/1999/0672)

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'Is it worth it?'

'It's worth it, if you have the vision'
		Kjeld Lohmann, Avedore, May 2001

Personal names of local residents who participated in events have been changed.

1   Introduction

"'Community' and 'communications' share the same etymological root, and one cannot exist without the other."[1]

Interactive communication channels are fundamental for social inclusion and democratic participation. Where people's information income is dominated by communication from powerful interests within society, and they feel they have not the skills, opportunities or quality of interaction that reflects their experience, they may withdraw. This dissipates social capital and can lead to policies that lack community involvement, and which are therefore less likely to be sustainable. Conversely, if people are offered valid opportunities and an appropriate context for debating the issues that affect their lives, they will explore and exploit the technologies.

Technologies have been developed, and shaped by use, to augment the various forms of personal interaction that societies have evolved. One size doesn't fit all – no single technology or medium suits everyone's need for social contact, sharing information, and communicating with authorities and public services.

Some people are not comfortable using the telephone and prefer to visit agencies when they have to deal with them. Some would choose to read printed statements at their own pace, and go to meetings but seldom speak.

> "Estate Line is essential for networking, sharing ideas. Helps those who may not participate at meetings very well, when faced with strange faces. Helps others to encourage them to take part." *(Participant evaluation form)*

Social inclusion implies offering the widest practical range of communication options, and enabling people to find and exploit the media mix that suits them best. Formal and informal meetings, workshops, posters, leaflets, newsletters, telephone conferences, text messaging, email, community radio and various other media have their place. As the Network Society unfolds, the role of *personal* social networks is becoming more apparent, as the dominance of close-knit, mainly local, communities declines. There are implications for community development and social inclusion. As Barry Wellman has put it: "People must actively maintain each supportive relationship rather than relying on solitary communities to do their maintenance work."[2] That places unprecedented emphasis on communication skills and opportunities, because without them, the necessary social capital cannot be created. People will naturally invest in loose networks for the sharing of information and for various kinds of support, and it is

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[1] Boettinger p204.
[2] (Wellman 1999)

critical to understand how the options inter-relate, in generating trust and connections. In a far-sighted and revealing way, The Quest Trust has begun to explore this imposing theme.

The Quest Trust describes itself as "a communications charity in the field of social housing aiming to improve the quality of life on housing estates." The trust stresses "the sharing of information and ideas about successful economic and social regeneration, and in particular the promotion and encouragement of resident-led estate based projects." Two linked services have been developed, which they call "the people power tools": a newsletter called *Grass Routes* (which functions as a news agency), and the teleconferencing service *Estate Line.* *Grass Routes* is designed partly as a support service for community newsletters, "providing support when the original contributors are running short of ideas, and offering a range of items like puzzles to bolster the local product."[3] *Estate Line* is described as "the first national teleconferencing network for tenants and residents to debate ideas and views, and share possible solutions from all over the UK."[4] In addition, Quest runs a number of face-to-face workshops, usually on a regional basis, and usually linked to issues of community involvement. A programme of exchange visits between interested individuals working at local level is also underway. Implicit in all this work is the recognition that combining the media options enhances their applicability and value for social use.

This report is based on an evaluation of the work in this area developed by Quest and its partners, Focus Ireland and AKB in Denmark, in 2000-2001, funded within the EC's budgetary line B-3-4101, relating to 'actions to combat social exclusion and discrimination through the development of civil dialogue'. A series of teleconferences with these partners took place early in 2001, with participants from Dublin, various parts of England and Avedore, Copenhagen. This report is primarily, but by no means exclusively, concerned with the teleconferences.

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[3] (Andrews 2001), p7.
[4] http://www.questtrust.co.uk/

2   Connections and cultures

While the technology of teleconferences is well-established and largely trouble-free, technical difficulties do arise. One of the European events was affected by technical problems over connections to Denmark and poor quality lines. It can be hard for participants to recover from such setbacks, particularly where the experience is new for them and they do not know one another.

The European events brought out a different issue to do with use of the telephone. It became apparent that there is a weak telephone culture in Denmark - "the only time you spend a long time on the telephone is when you speak to your mother or your father." One participant summed up her experience:
>   "Not good. I was very confused when I left. The different language confused me, I don't like the telephone and it was a bad connection."

While telephone cultures may be stronger in Ireland and the UK, that does not mean that everyone finds it easy to use the phone. In Dublin, Jane said: "I was nervous beforehand, I'm not used to talking on the phone." She associates use of the phone with "someone important" – dealing with "the Corporation" for example. It's off-putting and Jane prefers to visit agencies. She doesn't use the phone for friends and family much.

Against that, the strength of a culture of community action is widely evident. Thus in Avedore in Denmark, there is a healthy tradition of informal communication among residents, also several people are members of several groups, so that a pollination effect occurs. Participants there made the point that they grew up in the neighbourhood, and problems always got solved by meeting people.

Not only do telephone cultures vary in different countries; as David Morley has said,
>   "There is now considerable evidence to support the idea that masculine and feminine modalities of telephone usage exhibit clear differences."[5]

The feminine culture of the telephone is associated with 'kinkeeping', caring, mutual support, friendship and community activity.[6] It is to be expected then, that women will predominate in telephone discussions concerned with community activity, and that men who participate might be playing what Morley describes as "in effect, a feminine role". It is not clear to what extent participants felt events were more about the *process* – *ie* unusual use of the telephone – than about *content*, sharing ideas and experiences: but it is certain that most people recognised the exercise as being about networking. As one participant put it:
>   "Networking is important to most groups who need to be able to represent their tenants… To keep in touch with other groups in the same situation is vital for feedback and ideas."

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[5] (Morley 2000, p93)
[6] See also: (Moyal 1989)

3   Participants

3.1   Quest staff identified the following main categories for their existing audience:
- Landlords and tenants, especially members of tenants' associations.
- Housing Associations
- People with disabilities
- People in rural communities.

One member of Quest staff noted that "sheltered housing residents, young people, leaseholders tend to get left out." Participation in the programmes is largely from white older people, although the European teleconferences seemed to involve a broader age-range.

Certainly, participants came to the *Euroline* events with what the Dublin chair of one session described as "very different, varied levels of experience". To run a session on housing, for example, you would need to have in common a certain level of information about the established housing systems. "The difference with the Danish system was basically unclear and so we had incomplete communication." Then reference was made to the English system, with mention of 'tenant scrutiny', and there wasn't time or space to unpack what that meant. Such difficulties had of course been anticipated by the project partners, who prepared an information pack comprising contributions that described the various housing contexts. However, this was clearly no guarantee of ensuring anything like comparable levels of understanding as a platform for discussion.

The ratio of women to men participating tends to be approximately three to one, and the *Euroline* events followed this pattern, with participants (excluding chair and speaker) numbering as follows:

Men	4
Women	13
Not known	1

3.2   Recruitment

Recruiting participants to teleconferences can be problematic. To the uninitiated, it's not obvious how the service works or what will be expected of them. Indeed, one professional who was a lead speaker in a *Euroline* conference reported:
"Until half way through the phone call I found it hard to visualise this method as a medium of communication and how it could have any real benefits."[7]

"You can't explain the service in five minutes… It often takes the personal touch to get people on board. Once they start they continue with the service because it's valuable to them and they enjoy it."[8]

Residents' participation usually has to be funded (for example by their housing association, or through some other external funding source); there has to be some motivation for them to spend an hour of their time listening and reflecting; and an appropriate balance of participants' experience and background must be considered. Sometimes people drop out at a late stage - in one instance a recruit forgot all about the event and went out at the appointed hour – and just one change can upset the balance, perhaps tipping it towards a meeting of professionals with one or two hesitant residents feeling they are eavesdropping. (We consider the participant mix further below). According to Quest staff, people are not booking for advertised teleconferences unless they are being telephoned personally. This is an extravagant and unsustainable process, hopefully to be overcome by various new means including the establishment of the *Questnet* website and better publicity.

Among the possible explanations for recruitment difficulties, it could be that:
- there is insufficient advance information, or it is not sufficiently advanced
- the initiative is too programme-driven and not need-driven
- the 'hot' subjects are not being identified
- the right people are not being reached.

However, the key difference is probably the perpetuated distinction between individual benefit and agency interest. It is the agencies which provide funding, co-ordinate action, receive publicity, have alternative contacts and so on. But it appears that they do not often gain clear feedback on the teleconferences nor have a clear understanding of their potential. All the perceived benefits are with the individual rather than with the community or the intervening agency.

A related issue has to do with the distribution of *Grass Routes*, which is designed to provide copyright-free material which people can re-use. Evidence is cited of a Registered Social Landlord who subscribes on behalf of his organisation but

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[7] (Feehan 2001), p9.
[8] Marie Osborne, personal communication, 14 May 2001.

"openly admits that he … never lets it out of his office."[9] Similarly, one participant who is a Tenant Panel representative complained that *Grass Routes* content was being censored, by council staff, from the tenants' own newsletter. In one sense, this can be accounted a reassuring indicator of the empowering potential of the services: if some landlords are uncomfortable with the idea of their tenants having access to these democratising tools, their potential power at least is very apparent to someone. At the same time, it suggests that the services need an extra boost – perhaps in terms of publicity and recognition - to get beyond such barriers so that more visible change can be effected. This research shows that individuals find the service of benefit and they imply that they make use of the experience in their local context. But that is not sufficient to generate much further use of the service without a wide range of agencies also perceiving the benefits.

3.3   Numbers

Quest has run teleconferences since 1997, and one would expect that an understanding of an ideal range of participant numbers would have emerged through experience. It's reasonable to suppose that any more than about 10 people would lead to an unsatisfactory conferencing experience, at least for some of the participants.

> "Numbers participating need to be limited to five…"
> *(London participant)*

This is perhaps a key distinction from face-to-face meetings, which is worth acknowledging. With the visual channel, all kinds of non-verbal signals are sent and received by participants in a room, both through the chair, if there is one, and through one another. Signalling scepticism, agreement, impatience, doubt, endorsement and so on, *without interrupting* – these are all significantly easier in the face-to-face context. It follows that such meetings can function effectively with greater numbers. In a teleconference, techniques for intervention and feedback are limited to a far narrower range of options. Therefore, the point at which the total number of participants stifles effective and rewarding interaction is considerably more limited. Experience would quickly dictate effectiveness, and the consensus is for between 6 and 8 people, including chair and speaker.

Rewarding exploratory teleconferences have been run with as few as four people, but in such cases they are particularly dependent on an appropriate mix of participants and a stimulating choice of topic.

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[9] Andrews, p7.

3.4 Language and dialect

In the European teleconferences there were difficulties relating to language. These affected the Danish participants most clearly, but were apparent among Irish and English participants also. There are three distinct issues:
- English as a second language
- accents and dialects, and
- specialised language.

One Danish resident had particular difficulty with the Irish accent. She said: "I have been in Ireland lots of times and had no problem, because when you meet someone you talk a lot with your hands and with your face…"

> "Some tenants will find it hard to understand some of the terms used and what is going on – if they're not up-to-speed, that's where they might not get so much out of it." *(Focus Ireland representative)*

The community development professional working with the Danish residents noted that "the language with professionals is technical English and is 'too high'. The issue for informed activists is: 'do you have enough knowledge to understand the professionals?'"

"In Denmark there is a need for balance between having good ground-based tenants and those who can speak English well." He had provided a thorough glossary but there were still difficulties.

One of the Irish participants said she "had difficulty understanding one of the Danish accents" but did not feel burdened by language or jargon. Other participants had to concentrate hard to follow some of the widely-differing accents and dialects from participants based in England.

It was apparent that several participants felt their concentration slipped because of having to follow technical language.

3.5 The people mix

When the pitch of the discussion is oriented towards professional issues, and the mix of participants is not quite right, tenants themselves feel a strong sense of exclusion. "I felt it was taken over in some way by experts." This has been a key lesson of this research: the sense of commonality, with professionals who share their concerns, and understand the structural nature of their issues, is shown to be quite fragile in a given communication context.

This raises questions about the intended audience for the *Euroline* exercise. The

partners point out that, as with the stated target constituency of *Grass Routes,* it was aimed at "informed activists". At a national level, for example in England where the *Estate Line* programme has been shown to be successful, this makes sense. However, the notion of finding sufficiently informed activists at a local level, to participate in international discussions, was probably over-optimistic and proved to be one problematic area which, like the difficulties of language, slightly undermined the potential of the programme. At Focus Ireland for example, it was noted that there is "a complete dearth" of experienced housing activists.

The upshot was that participants were as likely to be articulate residents, prepared to 'give-it-a-go', as they were to be informed activists. The fact that on the whole the programme was still seen as stimulating and rewarding, merits comment. Partly, I suggest, it is down to the enthusiasm and commitment of the partner agencies; and partly it is down to the straightforward and manageable nature of the process – in the end, it's about talking, and some people love to do that.

3.6   Reaching people who experience exclusion

Recordings of the teleconferences demonstrate clearly that it works in practice, and discussions with the participants re-enforce that impression. This raises an important question about self-selection. We can presume that teleconferences attract people who are comfortable with the medium and those most likely to benefit from it, but they may play no role in engaging more excluded people in civil dialogue. Herein lies one of the critical features of the *Euroline* experiment, because it drew in one or two reluctant or hesitant participants from Dublin and Copenhagen, for whom it was an unnatural and challenging experience.

For example, one Dublin participant was Jane, who doesn't like to use the telephone, and associates it with important agencies and officials whom she prefers either not to see, or to visit in person if she has to. However, her experience of the teleconference proved to be very positive. Jane commented afterwards that she "would have liked to have spoken more, I had more to say."

> "I enjoyed it a lot and would like to do another. It was really great to hear their side - but we had the worst."

It follows that this sort of programme genuinely has the potential to have an impact among people who experience the most profound exclusion. However, to do so, it will need to engage with them on their own terms and in their own context, which requires the process to be 'sold' to the specialist agencies which work with the groups in question. The potential gains are enormous and investment in early experiment is called for. Given the potential of the media mix, it has been suggested that one category of users who could benefit significantly would be homeless people, travellers, refugees and asylum seekers.

4   Content

4.1   Pertinence and relevance

One participant represents a number of tenants where there are low levels of community activity, but not the kinds of problem associated with some areas. She was conscious of a high level of apathy on her estate with regard to housing issues, and astounded, in teleconferences, by the problems others experience. So she tends not to give out much of her own experience during teleconferences, but says she "gains confidence from hearing that others have similar problems." (We consider issues to do with reciprocity in section 6.4 below).

The topics chosen for the Euroline conferences were:
- "A place for everyone"
- "A voice for everyone"
- "A community for everyone"

Danish participants noted that the topics were "too general and vague, not problem-driven." Some *Estate Line* participants made observations about the importance of getting the content right. For example, Jenny spoke of how her colleagues have not been very impressed with the teleconferences because they just listened, they found them a waste of time. Jenny admits that "a lot of it isn't going to crop up in our community" but argues that it is still of value to hear about others' experiences.

Another English participant said:

> "The lead speakers take too much of the time, people are over-polite, what people want to say doesn't get said, so it never quite gels."

4.2   Practical or exploratory teleconferences

Most Quest teleconferences are exploratory and do not follow a strict agenda, although the chair may well have in mind an outline of progress which they may wish to see. It is important to recognise that these have *not* been decision-making processes or forums, although the technology can be used successfully for such purposes. "Practical teleconferences work if the agenda is not overloaded or over-complex." – *(Quest staff workshop)*

The objective Quest has set, with *Estate Line* and *Euroline*, has been the rather more ambitious one of providing people with space and opportunity to explore some of the issues which affect their lives, to promote civil dialogue in a non-hierarchical structure. That term 'explore' has connotations: it implies involvement and responsibility on the part of participants for their collective negotiation of the terrain in question. They have with them two guides – the chair and the speaker – but they do not have a set route nor a specific goal to achieve.

It follows that the outcomes and benefits are largely subjective, although none the less valid for that.

Several *Estate Line* respondents suggested some kind of specialist teleconferences, for example:

> "a series of more permanent groups so that an ongoing consensus of opinions can be developed."
> "I feel we need to have people from central government take part on issues like crime, education, DETR funding, etc…"

It could be argued that *Estate Line* and *Euroline* have been experiments with a fairly narrow range of styles of event. In what follows I consider further the typology of teleconferences.

4.3   Typology of teleconferences

There are various ways of thinking about teleconferences. Two of the main categories suggested are: (i) discussion format (*ie* the degree to which it is a discussion, consultation or decision-making meeting), and (ii) facilitation (*ie* the extent to which it is expert-led, chaired, or a round-table discussion).

All sorts of permutations of these categories are possible, and it can be helpful to identify the best-suited combinations, for example:

	General discussion	Problem-oriented discussion	Consultation	Decision-making
Expert-led		✳		✳
Facilitated	✳	✳	✳	✳
Round-table	✳	✳		

Other useful criteria for teleconferences would include the following:

- ✦ Local / non-local
- ✦ Specialist ('professional') / generalist (residents) / mixed
- ✦ Linked to other media / stand-alone

Again, various permutations are possible, for example:

	Local	Regional	National	International
Residents				
Professionals				
Mixed				

	Stand-alone	Preceded by workshop	Info-pack and report	email and web follow-up
Residents				
Professionals				
Mixed				

Among the other categories suggested by Quest staff were:
* Information giving / exploratory, and
* Teleconferences which are about making contact – 'first links'.

4.4   Timing of teleconferences

Teleconferences usually last one hour. Most people find this to be about right. No-one reported them to be too long, and a few participants have suggested the time is too short.

> "An hour is the right length, but not long enough to get to know the subject." – (*teleconference participant*)

There is a 15-minute extension option for teleconferences, but this is seldom if ever invoked, and it may be that some chairs are unaware of it. The trade-off is mostly between comfort and interest: if the discussion is very absorbing, people are likely to tolerate the discomfort of pressing an earpiece against their head for sixty minutes, but not perhaps for much longer. Ideally, participants would wear comfortable headsets, but these are hardly in widespread use. In this respect, the gradual increase in the numbers of people who only have mobile phones, and not a domestic landline, may need to be kept in mind in the future. Mobile use for lengthy calls is discouraged on health grounds.

4.5   Speaker's role

There are different styles for speakers, from the authority-figure around whom the conversation magnetises ('hub-spoke' model), to the more low-key 'kick-off' contribution to what is effectively a round-table discussion. The former leads to a kind of Q&A-type conference, which is wholly legitimate but is not the main purpose of Quest teleconferences. Sometimes one of the speakers can almost take over the discussion, and this can happen with the implicit consent of the other participants if it appears that there is an unmissable opportunity to tap the speaker's knowledge. This is one of the risks and challenges of the format. By extension, it is possible that these events could be hijacked by the politically-motivated, although no instances of this were reported.

More usually, the speaker performs a crucial role of scene-setting and mood-setting. In collaboration with the chair, they provide people with reference points to their own experience, a structure for discussion, material for further elaboration and exploration, and a sense of openness and sharing.

4.6   Listening

One of the enduring constraints of real-time human communication is the impossibility for more than one person to speak at the same time, if the participants are to be able to share meaning. In a one-to-one telephone conversation, this means that for most of the time, one person needs to be listening. In a telephone-conference involving eight people, at any given moment at least seven people need to be listening.

> "The amount of input a person can have is very limited."
> *(London participant)*

They do so wholly without visual clues to allow them to anticipate a pause and a legitimate moment to contribute. There are subtle social conventions at work here and not everyone finds it easy or natural to adjust to them. Thus some participants may find they begin to speak at the same time as another, then retreat into silence, confounded by the difficulty of intervening and perhaps having missed 'the moment of pertinence' as the discussion sweeps on. It's an imperfect format, but like a face-to-face workshop, it reflects the richness and complexity of group interaction and can be very rewarding for those who say little and for those who make their contribution.

The role and importance of listening merits closer attention, particularly with regard to the gender balance of teleconferences. Ann Moyal quotes Dale Spender as saying that "little research has yet been done on listening, a form of interactional work particularly associated with women and 'as complex and important as talk.'"[10] In this respect we may well learn from studies of 'lurking' on email discussion lists.

It is reasonable to suppose that fewer people 'drift-off' during teleconferences than during face-to-face events. This is because removing the visual channel results in greater focus: the telephone consumes closer to 100% of our communication mode, and therefore the act of listening is less vulnerable to distractions.[11]

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[10] (Moyal 1989) p30.
[11] We discuss the visual channel further in section 6.6 below.

5   So what? A note on outcomes

5.1   We lack the tools to demonstrate the social value of these experiences, nor can we readily fit them into any cost-benefit analysis. They have been experimental, and driven more by values and commitment than by any notion of testing a viable business model. Having said that, elsewhere the measurement of social capital has yet to reach convincing levels of scientific rigour. There is a need for a framework of indicators, to help assess the benefits and contribution of effective communication channels for social change, and indeed to demonstrate the overall economic benefits which ensue from investment in social capital. In the meantime, the success of the *Estate Line* and *Euroline* programmes, on their own terms, is evident in many of the comments of participants. For example:

> "Estate Line has been a very important learning tool for me, it has put me in touch with other people who are participating with their own landlords and tenants. It has given me ideas, it helped me realise I was not alone in my views and opinions." (*Participant evaluation form*)

Another *Euroline* participant said: "You learn a little bit from each one. There should be more of them." She added that she "would love to chair a teleconference" herself. Again, one Danish participant remarked: "I learned a lot about what you must think about when you communicate with another culture."

If we are to clarify what outcomes we might expect, and which we might in due course be able to measure, I would suggest the following:

- Personal development of the participants
- Perceived value for the participating agencies
- Identifiable action resulting from shared information
- Perceived impact on local policies
- The added value of richer networks.

This last category may seem the most vague but is without doubt the most important, and is discussed in section 6.5 below.

5.2   Benefits to individuals and groups

A Quest staff workshop identified the following key benefits offered in the *Estate Line* and *Euroline* programmes:

- **influencing local agendas**
- **information-sharing**
- **mutual support**
- **self-development and motivation.**

In addition, it was felt that two characteristics in particular were critical to providing these benefits:

- **being accessible and flexible**
- **being non-threatening.**

> "It is good to be able to discuss points with other organisations because this highlights features and clarifies the possibilities when starting up new schemes, in that you can draw on others' experiences, which help to direct your own efforts." (W*orkshop participant*)

5.3 Examples of ideas and information transferred

Some tenants' associations make use of reports from teleconferences, as well as *Grass Routes*, through their libraries and information collections. The reports are also re-used by Quest as contributions to subsequent teleconferences on the same or similar themes.

While it has not been a declared purpose of the teleconferences, it does appear that occasionally an idea passed on during an event gets taken up by another participant, or at least takes status as having potential for replication. The following are examples identified during the course of this research:

Introducing job descriptions in a tenants' group

Working with children in areas of social deprivation and getting them involved

Using plants to make security fences less intimidating

In Bradford, tenants study so that they can help other tenants with grievances

Hearing about government anti-drugs scheme

Having a social evening (also Bradford) after every tenants' meeting, with quizzes, bingo

6 Theoretical issues

6.1 Teleconferences and democratic participation

In a context where approximately 20% of the UK adult population have difficulties with basic literacy and numeracy,[12] there is an identifiable role for teleconferences in sharing information and experience, and exploring issues, at local level. By promoting connections between local activists, without depending on the less accessible technology of print and the prevailing knowledge industry, Quest's programme is helping people to explore aspects of empowerment and democratic participation, around issues that affect them such as neighbourhood safety, facilities for young people, allotment gardens and so forth.

In his seminal 1977 study of democratic participation, Kenneth Laudon sets out three criteria for communications technology, as follows:
(i)   the ability of local groups *to co-ordinate points of view* and develop coalitions to assure adoption of these points of view
(ii)   the application needs to have some *real political consequences* – can the technology increase the real power of local groups, and how?
(iii)   it must be cheap enough and the skills in its use be sufficiently widespread – a technology *capable of widespread use by less institutionalised groups* in a democracy, groups that do not typically possess a great deal of technical expertise.[13]

Discussions with community development workers, as well as with Quest staff, suggest that there is probably a market for *local* teleconferences. It would be false to assume that just because people live within a bus journey of a community centre, they will necessarily go to meetings but not take part in a teleconference. To begin with, it may only take a tiring day at work, or a minor crisis at home, for people to decide not to attend a face-to-face meeting on a cold dark evening. But teleconferencing can ride certain other demands as well: one of the *Euroline* lead speakers, cited earlier, remarked:
> "… it was 6.05 before missing husband returned from work. For the duration of the conference I endured the sound of my baby crying and vomiting in the next room."[14]

And there is no reason why options of presence (face-to-face meeting) and telepresence (telephone conferences) should not be combined, thus contributing to Laudon's first criterion.

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[12] According to the Basic Skills Agency recent research undertaken as part of the International Adult Literacy Survey suggests that as many as 1 in 5 adults in the UK have poor basic skills. (The figure in the USA is comparable: according to the Benton Foundation, 44 million Americans, 20% of the population, are functionally illiterate).
[13] (Laudon 1977)
[14] Feehan p9

The second criterion, concerning political consequences, calls for caution. While it is clear that people can reasonably expect the technology to help them organise, articulate their needs, and negotiate solutions, it would be as well to note Heather Hudson's conclusion from a review of research that:

> "…the existence of the telephone channel does not cause social changes, but rather allows them to proceed."[15]

As always, we must be wary of the rhetoric of 'great expectations', which places too great a stress on the technology and gives insufficient recognition to the need for people *to organise* in the interests of social change.

As for the third criterion, calling for a technology capable of widespread use by less institutionalised groups, it could be argued that teleconferencing fulfils this more comfortably than most new technologies. However, there remains the curious paradox of the 'secret simplicity' of teleconferencing: it is demonstrably the case, as mentioned above, that people do not find it easy to understand what happens when a teleconference takes place. This helps to explain, in part, the fact that it is not in widespread use as a communications process.

6.2   Horizontal communication and shared information

Laudon also says that teleconferences provide an *enhancement* in that they are more than a functional replacement for what already exists. We should perhaps add two further characteristics, which help to articulate the potential contribution of such technology-dependent processes.

The first is the significance of horizontal communication. As Laudon himself notes elsewhere:

> "The important aspect of technology to help a pluralistic democracy is the extent to which it permits horizontal communication amongst peers."[16]

Vertical communication dominated twentieth century Europe, carrying messages from centre to periphery, from desk to field, from haves to have-nots: and these inequities can be reinforced and perpetuated by the vertical systems themselves. It follows that the promotion of horizontal communication is in the interests of empowerment and participative democracy.[17]

Secondly, we should stress the importance of *shared* information. While it seems dubious to claim that 'information is power', we can observe that imbalances of power often result from *unshared* information – that is, information which should be shared but isn't. This is not simply a maxim to be chanted at people in positions of power; it is a principle to be adopted and used to power a quality-of-life movement. Forums which offer opportunities to receive and share information pertinent to community activity, bring huge gains in self-esteem and reassurance

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[15] (Hudson 1984), p29.
[16] (Laudon 1984)
[17] *Press enter*, *(1992),* p5.

– a theme which has run throughout this programme and this evaluation. This is because communication is closely related to confidence. Research carried out by Elfreda Chatman suggests that for some people on low incomes, feelings of powerlessness are closely linked to a culture of secrecy, and of not sharing or seeking information.[18] Open channels, like teleconferences, which can be exploited by people who experience exclusion, can offer sensitive contexts to overcome such stifling disadvantage. And it is not insignificant that they should do so in what remains essentially a commercial-free zone.

6.3   Community development and local community activity

Most Quest teleconferences are exercises in thematic community development. Each has a topic that is introduced by a lead speaker, and discussed by participants who (a) do not know all the others, (b) have an interest in the topic, and (c) usually have an interest in addressing the issue at local level.

In this sense, they help to give us insight into the relationship between communities of place and communities of interest. The exercises have to be seen in the context of media and communication options in people's daily lives, particularly broadcast media, some of which can be said to work against community development and community activity. For many people who experience social exclusion, there is a lack of correlation between most of the information which they receive (from the news, soap operas, fashion magazines, football reports, etc); and the issues which might involve or concern them about the neighbourhoods they inhabit. One of the roles of community development is to give people the space to explore issues which concern them, and to relate those issues to their own world. Television pictures of violence in the middle east or of politicians in Westminster can be disorienting without the ballast of local action to provide the context of, say, rivalries over territory or the approach of authorities to housing problems.

John R Pierce is quite blunt about the place of the telephone in the media mix:
> "In all of their uses… the telephone and mass communication are poles apart; mass communication distracts people from their neighbors and community and focuses attention on national soap operas or national or international affairs. The telephone draws neighbors and communities together (or splits them apart) by providing people with shared knowledge… Mass communication fits people to schedules; the telephone fits people." [19]

The teleconferences and their supporting media exemplify this issue, giving

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[18] (Chatman 1996)
[19] (Pierce 1977) p173.

participants the opportunities to express their concerns, to appreciate some of the difficulties others face, to offer information, discuss possible resolutions; and ultimately to feel empowered by the possibility of taking meaningful action. One evaluation respondent felt that they benefited through:

> "Encouragement and re-focus to help continue voluntary work. [You] realise that you are not alone, or the only one with a problem to which there can be solutions."

6.4   Reciprocity and social capital

These exercises draw attention to the essential role of communication in generating social capital. By sharing information, ideas and concerns, and in exploring commonality, people gain reassurance, confidence, and insights. Above all, they accrue the added value of connections. Those connections constitute social capital and they depend on a flexible degree of reciprocity. Some participants are conscious that they gain more than they give. Some are aware of giving more than they gain. Most of the time, slight fluctuations on these scales do not upset the rugged ecology of collaboration. But it is a dynamic relationship, and where people feel the reciprocity is unequal, in time they will withdraw.

- One participant is an active tenants' representative in Norfolk who is well aware that he gives more than he gets from teleconferences. He gets "reassurance from being informed" and from checking that his Tenants Federation is, as he puts it, "still in front".

- Another participant was conscious that he has experience from which others could benefit, "but it takes longer than two minutes."

- Similarly, a representative of a Registered Social Landlord commented: "As I was the only RSL on my session I felt the others were tapping my experience…"

- "One example where a presentation didn't lead to a subscription was in Southampton - the reason I was given was that their tenants would be 'giving' all the time rather than 'getting anything back' - they were a very sassy, clued-up bunch!"[20]

- One of the Irish teleconference participants said that she "went with no prepared ideas" but managed to get her say in. She felt she gained more than she gave, and was happy with that.

It is clear that social capital depends on loose assumptions about reciprocity, and it seems likely that we take account of that instinctively in the design of

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[20] Marie Osborne, personal communication, 14 May 2001.

communication events. There is however a broader issue to do with the nature of *network capital*, to which we now turn.

6.5   The added value of richer networks

The *Euroline* project laid stress on promoting civil dialogue in addressing social exclusion, and we have seen that in terms of connecting people and stimulating the flow of information it has been successful. The question which arises is, to what extent can that dialogue be sustained, and the connections further exploited? Given the extent to which Quest in its UK work has built up regional networks of participants by running workshops, organising exchange visits and circulating *Grass Routes*, in addition to organising teleconferences, this would seem to be the natural direction to explore.

Each of these communication options offers the potential to generate network capital. And it seems likely that when used in combination – say with teleconferences, email follow-up and exchange visits - that potential could increase enormously. Yet conversations with workshop and teleconference participants did not elicit a strong sense of network membership. It is as if huge social investment has been made at a very low rate of return, and is still waiting to be realised.

It is as well to acknowledge that communication has always been the subject of technological development. For example, it's commonplace to observe that a book is a technology in itself, and the argument that the alphabet is the most influential technology ever invented is persuasive.[21] Examining new technological developments allows us to assess their implications for communication and social capital. Immediately, we find huge potential in the networking power of online technologies.

Dystopian arguments have been put forward which suggest that 'community' is fragmenting all around us, as people multiply their weak ties, at the expense of strong ties, by connecting to remote others whom they may never meet. This is not the place for an extensive review of this debate, but we may note influential counter-arguments, which suggest, for example, that
> "…electronic communication almost always supplements and strengthens traditional forms of relationship, communication and exchange."[22]

Similarly, Barry Wellman and his colleagues have argued that "Internet use supplements network capital by extending existing levels of face-to-face and telephone contact."[23]

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[21] (Davis 1999)
[22] (Jupp and Bentley 2001)
[23] (Wellman, Quan Haase et al. 2001)

It's reasonable to suggest that astute exploitation of these technologies can enhance the richness of people's social networks, both in terms of their *extensiveness*, and indeed in the *strength* of the ties. The key may be what Wellman calls 'networked individualism' and the extent to which the technologies empower people to control their own communication environments. As David Wilcox puts it:

> "There are some things you can't easily do without this technology. It changes the nature of relationships because you can be part of communities of interest and practice with varying degrees of involvement and commitment. Your involvement and commitment can go up and down. You can distinguish between core people, interested people, and 'keeping-in-touch' people. You can opt-in to saying which category you want to be in. You can change your level of interaction, so you can organise personally your relationships and your degree of involvement with different people and networks."[24]

The implications for structured collaboration based on shared communication are not unpromising. There is no reason to assume that networked individualism implies a decline in networked collectivism, although Wilcox adds:

> "In the networked world the Net may be a necessary tool of empowerment, but it is a mistake to think it is sufficient. Power relationships have to change too."

As we turn our attention to the future then, our focus needs to be on the nature of network capital, and on the combinations of online and face-to-face communications which will generate it.

6.6   "Mixed media is the message"

> At an *Estate Line* workshop two participants were discussing local housing issues and politics:
> > "Dougie don't you think that writing is not the best way of getting round these things, don't you think you want to phone them…?"

These media are not watertight, one from the other. People smile when they're speaking on the telephone, and make gestures. Communication by mobile often seems to call for some sharing of physical context – "Where are you? What are you doing…?" We feel drawn to read the headlines of someone else's newspaper, and when a phone rings, we feel impelled to answer it. We talk to our dogs, our plants, our televisions. And when we're not doing anything but sleeping, our unconscious minds talk to us. Our world is relentless multimedia

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[24] David Wilcox, personal communication, 17 May 2001.

communication and, within it, single channel media, such as text-only documents, are an oddity.

The age of print excluded many from its powers, creating a context in which those least comfortable with reading and writing were least likely to participate fully in the generation of cultural capital. Opportunities for those articulate in other forms of communication remained limited, against the authority of the written word, with its hidden (and highly gendered) hierarchies of institutions behind it – educational, governmental, political, media. Hence the optimism in the 1970s surrounding community video, and in the 1980s for community computing. These movements may not have swept-in an irresistible wave of local empowerment, but they began to articulate the notion that more accessible and interactive media could be closely related to the changes in social structures which people were seeking.

These forces evolved into the community networking movement, where lessons were quickly learned about the relation between the face-to-face and online contexts: for example, as users found they emailed more with those they already knew, but could augment their networks with online contacts who they might meet subsequently.

The media mix remains exploratory but the signs are promising. At Blacksburg Electronic Village in Virginia, a pioneering wired community, they have found that online connection stimulates community interaction. For example, between 1996 and 1999, with increasing levels of online activity, they saw a 23% increase in people speaking at public meetings, from 4% to 27%.[25]

The *Euroline* project takes us to the start-line for some new discoveries. All *Euroline* respondents interviewed said that they would be interested in the possibility of email follow-up to teleconferences. This is a natural development which Quest is already working on. Suddenly the media mix is richer. In any community, there will be some kind of communications 'deficit' in the sense of members who experience a disability or strong reluctance to use one of the options (such as writing or using the telephone). As we have noted, one size doesn't fit all. The need now is to explore how people overcome such deficits, given the choices, and how they make their choices.	In a group discussion on housing issues, one resident said "People have the solutions in their own experience". A discussion followed about finding the right mix of communication formats, procedures and styles to enable that knowledge to become accessible to others who could benefit from it. Participants pointed to the value here of, for example, meetings, exchange visits, teleconferences, information packs and so on.

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[25] (Cohill 2000)

6.7   Adding the visual channel?

> "I'm looking forward to the day when video-conferencing via the Information Highway is the norm." (*evaluation form respondent*)

In discussion, several participants moved on to considering how teleconferences might be augmented in the future. One active Dublin resident felt she would not be happy with video conferencing – "what worked was that people didn't see you and didn't know who you were." In a review of several early studies, A.A.L.Reid suggests that although having the visual channel in group conversations does affect the outcome, "the practical importance of the differences remains open to question." He concludes:

> "Most of the effects of the medium have been subtle, small and elusive… These differences do not show the telephone inferior to face-to-face contact in any simple sense."[26]

We should note however, that Reid's review dates from the 1970s, and the research in question to took place during a period when expectations of the media were quite clear and distinct. Screens were emphatically about delivering information from the centre outwards: you watched a screen and were told something, by some authority in whom, usually, you trusted. The telephone was always about participating in a conversation, where usually you knew your correspondent or made judgements about what they were telling you. It is now more common for us to engage in some way with the information we receive via screens, to create or edit it; and to use telephones asynchronously (without there being another person at the other end). Subtle differences are emerging as we move into the Network Society, and our altered expectations of interactivity with the various technologies at our disposal may well change the quality of the experience. Thus introducing the visual channel online could well become a valid part of the Quest Trust's media mix, and certainly further experimentation, following an initial trial in April 2001, is desirable. That experiment came about because of the need to involve a workshop contributor who could not be present because of a disability. The technology functioned, but it was felt not to be entirely successful. One of the advisors makes the following point:

> "Unfortunately, audiences are so accustomed to seeing television link-ups with full screen, full motion video over satellite or large bandwidth links that they are disappointed by what is technically possible over a normal phone line."[27]

And there are other reasons why the perceived advantage of the visual channel is questionable. Recent research has shown that people are willing to disclose

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[26] (Reid 1977) p411
[27] David Wortley, *personal communication*, May 2001.

four times as much information about themselves when chatting 'blind' via email or in chatrooms. Introducing a webcam brought disclosure levels down to face-to-face levels.

> "Not being able to see the person you're talking to encourages intimacy and openness," explains Dr Joinson. "It is not an accident that the Catholic confessional is visually anonymous."[28]

As Steve Woolgar comments, "This suggests that there are other forms of feeling comfortable with people, which do not depend on being face-to-face with them."[29]

7   Concluding remarks

If it were possible to minimise cost and access differences between the media options, we might establish meaningful social experiments in which local people share experience and ideas with others. The purpose would be to assess how people make their own choices from the media mix according to experience and perceptions of the need for presence or telepresence, synchronicity or asynchronicity, ease of transmission and reception, and so on. Such choices are based on individual and group experience, education and culture, not just on available technologies.

The Network Society does not imply a diminution of the significance of locality. What it seems to imply is a need to understand the shifting context of communication as it affects localness; and to re-cast community development where, as David Morley puts it, "the ways in which we now define our identities can no longer be articulated through the traditional terminology of place-based belonging."[30]

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[28] (Kelly 2001) Kelly notes that "Another study revealed that people are 10 times more likely to research information about cancers perceived as embarrassing, such as prostate and lung, on the internet than through telephone access to helplines." See also (Young 2000)

[29] Steve Woolgar, personal communication, 18 July 2001.

[30] Morley 2000, *op cit*, p43, referring to Roger Rouse, 'Mexican migration and the social space of postmodernism', *Diaspora*, 1991, 1(1).

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