

Intelligent Community Forum

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<http://www.intelligentcommunity.org/index.php?submenu=News&src=blog>

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What's the Web Doing to Your Community?

On Fridays, National Public Radio in the US runs a show called "On the Media." The April 3 show (play it here using the link below) had a story near and dear to my heart: whether the Web is good or bad for society – a source of isolation, deviance and depression or of growing knowledge, broadening viewpoints and expanding relationships.

I was interested because I addressed this topic in the final chapter of ICF's new book, *Broadband Economies*. To me, the discussion says more about the people having it than the topic itself. In the face of big transformations, people can always tell you why they're bad – but are generally incapable of foreseeing the benefits. Not because we're close-minded and short-sighted by nature (though we are!) but because the bad effects are so immediately recognizable, and it takes time before we can see and feel the benefits.

Remember buying your first PC or mobile phone? You bought it without really knowing much. And how long was it before you said, "I don't know how I lived without it?" You only grasped the benefits at a gut level once you experienced them.

In November 2008, the MacArthur Foundation published results from its Digital Youth study into how young people actually use social network sites, online games, video-sharing sites and mobile phones. Viewed from outside – say, by a parent – the kids appear to be wasting time and avoiding exercise while opening the door to dire influences from stoners and perverts. But what did the study actually find? Most kids use online networks to extend the friendships they already have in school, religious organizations and sports. In what the report called "friendship-driven" practices, the kids are essentially "hanging out" online. We may think hanging out is a waste of time, but it is clearly an exercise that builds bonds in the community and engages young people in local culture.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Web offers communities a powerful tool for social engagement and culture development. If I had harbored any doubts, however, they would have been erased by my back-to-back site visits to 2009 Top Seven communities Fredericton and Moncton, both in New Brunswick, Canada. Today, on my first day back, my mind is too full of impressions to sum them up. But here are just two examples of Intelligent Communities making themselves better places to live through broadband access to the Web.

Fredericton hosts one of the largest music events in eastern Canada, the Harvest Jazz and Blues Festival. Launched by volunteers, it is now a \$1.5 million event attracting 80,000 people to a small slice of downtown, and nearly 1,000 volunteers are still the engine that makes it go. The fuel driving that engine is the Web. The organizers use an online management system to schedule events, assign volunteers and keep everybody alerted, aware and collaborating. The pride those volunteers feel is, to paraphrase Shakespeare, such stuff as community leaders' dreams are made on.

Meanwhile, about 150 kilometers east, Moncton has its own concert site on Magnetic Hill. While I was there, they announced that the next AC/DC tour would stop there, following in the footsteps of The Rolling Stones and The Eagles. Talk about local pride. The concert site is able to attract such big name acts partly because of the city's WiFi network, which gives it state-of-the-art capabilities like ticket scanning and e-commerce for the merchants who flock to serve the capacity crowd. I'm more of a classical-music kind of guy, so I was more pumped up by another part of the WiFi puzzle, which is wireless access on the bus. While there, I was shuttled from place to place in a city bus, surfing all the way. While cruising at 30-40 km per hour, we watched streaming videos that stood up remarkably well to the strain, thanks to mobile wireless technology from local provider Red Ball Internet. But here's the real point: equipping the buses has significantly boosted ridership in a small city with lots of parking where it is easy to get from place to place by car. The city is actually doubling its bus fleet to handle the rising load. I work in a city with outstanding mass transit, and I can tell you that it is a form of social "glue" that binds the community, as well as a means to get around. That's why New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg makes sure to get out of his limo from time to time and ride the subway. It's an underground "commons" where New Yorkers from every walk of life learn to get along together.

More to come as I sort through notes and catalog my impressions of Fredericton and Moncton, two of the outstanding Top Seven Intelligent Communities of 2009.