



Review

Information technology and everyday life in ageing rural villages



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A B S T R A C T

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The role of information and communication technology (ICT) in easing the hardships of everyday life is an essential issue, particularly in sparsely populated areas. In this paper, the aim is to describe how people in remote villages use information technology (IT), and to reflect the use of IT from the perspective of social communality. The data consist of a questionnaire, answered by 255 respondents living in outlying villages in Finnish Lapland. First, the paper examines what kind of possibilities villagers have to use IT. Second, it focuses on how they use IT. Third, the villagers' perception of IT as a method to maintain communication and for coping is described. The results showed that the most popular ways to use a computer were searching for information and online banking. Communicating with family, friends and relatives had also specific place. Through the use of IT, communality takes on new forms. IT may replace some of the old structures supporting local communality. On the other hand, IT may exclude people from the community if they don't use new devices. The use of computers was strongly connected to age. Youngsters have adapted IT as a part of their everyday life. Working-age individuals use IT as a tool. However, people in the age group 65–79 years had the strongest confidence in the possibilities of IT to ease everyday life. Based on the results, the authors argue that IT offers an important option to create and maintain communality in remote areas.

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1. Introduction

The use of information technology (IT) has been seen as an important opportunity to improve living conditions and ease everyday life in rural areas (e.g. Valentine and Holloway, 2001, 383–384), despite the finding that the technical preparedness is lower in such areas (Grimes, 2000, 13–14, 17). Hence, technology-based solutions have increased in significance in the current debate on living conditions (Bandias and Vemuri, 2005, 239–240; Evans, 2004, 8–9), also in remote areas (Vuoti, 2011). An important aspect in the discussion has been the question of connection between communality and increased use of IT. IT is argued to be an important tool to enhance social community in outlying villages and rural areas. There are a lot of expectations considering IT, which could offer a contemporary tool to create and maintain online communities (Preece, 2000, 8–12, 267–298). IT is recognised as an essential tool to increase co-operation and exchange information between the different actors of villages, municipalities, regions and the state. In addition, IT is considered to be a tool for the citizens of remote areas to reach authorities easily. Encouragingly, IT is also

seen as providing possibilities to improve welfare services by making them accessible via the Internet (Harlow, 2003, 19).

Technology is expected to be at least one possible answer to the problems of the ageing population (Information Society Programme, 2006, 10). At its best, IT enables elderly citizens to engage in the development of common issues and to participate in activities taking place in their own communities (Tuuva-Hongisto et al., 2006; Roivas, 2009, 353–356). However, due to insufficient knowledge on the subject, it is difficult to build strategies relying on IT as a solution to service accessibility and community building in remote villages. We also do not have enough information about the Internet's influence on people's lives (Sum et al., 2008). More empirical research knowledge is needed about IT to gain an understanding about the extent of its use among different demographic groups and about the way in which it is used in everyday life.

Hence, our aim is, through a case-study, to determine how people, especially older adults, living in remote villages use IT. Our empirical research is focused on Lapland, the northernmost region in Finland. Lapland is defined as a sparsely populated area in Finland (Malinen et al., 2006, 8). It covers almost one-third of the whole country. However, it has only 183,900 inhabitants, which means a very low population density: only two inhabitants per square kilometre. But this is just the average density; altogether, 113,000 inhabitants live in the four cities of Lapland. Consequently,

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people not residing in cities live in extremely sparsely populated areas.

In recent years, as in peripheral rural areas globally (Walsh et al., 2012, 385–404), municipalities in Finnish Lapland have undergone dynamic changes. The tendency has been towards depopulation (Malinen et al., 2006, 37–38), and over the coming years, many rural villages will probably lose even more inhabitants. Even so, aged individuals are likely to stay in outlying villages; thus, the population of these villages keeps getting older. In some villages there are very few children or teenagers. On the other hand, there are many people who want to move back to the villages, at least for part of the time (Aho and Ilola, 2004b, 160–167; Countryside for Vigorous Finland, 2009, 16–17; Jauhiainen, 2009, 25, 33). These are mainly people who want to move back to their home village at the age of retirement.

Beyond the attraction of Lapland's natural environment, there are several reasons to live in remote villages, despite the sometimes challenging living conditions. As has been reported by various researchers, a very important element for individual wellbeing, regardless of residence, is the vicinity of nature (e.g. Strandell, 2011, 15); obviously, natural surroundings abound in sparsely populated villages. Nature gives a rhythm of life to villagers, it is their private place of relaxation and empowerment and it also provides a livelihood to some extent (e.g. Kilpeläinen and Pohjola, 2007). This is a meaningful factor of social communality in remote villages for both newcomers and original villagers. Another important factor is the emotional bond that a person has to a village. A village has been someone's birthplace, and after having lived elsewhere, the person may want to return to his or her roots (Jauhiainen, 2009, 32). On the other hand, the emotional bond may also motivate a person to stay in a village for a lifetime (Aho and Ilola, 2004a, 2004b).

The living conditions in Lapland's villages can be quite harsh. The geographical distances are vast, the climate can be demanding and public transport is hard to reach. Many services have transferred to population centres recently, which has made daily life even more laborious. This kind of trend in developing services has turned the focus of action to IT. At its best, IT has possibilities to diminish the ongoing migration development in remote villages of Lapland.

In this paper, the aim is to explore the ways IT is used in remote villages by using a case study. What is the role of IT in the everyday life of people living in sparsely populated areas? Before achieving this aim, it is necessary to focus on how villagers use IT. The basic questions are: Do they have relevant opportunities to use IT? How do different age groups differ from one another? The focus is on the oldest population of villages, which is compared to the other age groups. Thus, the research will determine to what extent IT has some kind of role in Lappish villagers' mundane life and routines or whether it is something extra to be used only occasionally. Moreover, of particular interest is to consider the use of IT from the perspective of social communality. How can our findings be interpreted from the perspective of community building? We have investigated the question through a questionnaire survey directed to the households of nine small villages located in Lapland.

2. Communality in remote villages

Traditionally, a village can be considered to be a community of the people living in it. A remote village can be construed as a compact area either geographically or mentally. A village is a unit of cohesion, which can be functional or symbolic, include norms and be expressed culturally (Lehtonen, 1990, 24–28; Liepins, 2000b, 326–327). The traditional sociological discussion concerning communities has focused on three elements of community: place, interest and identity. In a close-knit community, all these elements

overlap extensively. In recent studies concerning the role of communality, two of the above-mentioned elements have been in focus: communities of place and communities of interest (Means and Evans, 2012, 1300–1302).

While confidence in interest-perspective remains strong in contemporary discussions, the importance of place and space has been either questioned (e.g. Valentine and Holloway, 2001, 383) or underpinned (Pflug, 2011, 134). It has been argued that especially for the older people, place has high importance, partly because they usually spend more time in a neighbourhood and they have more likely been living in the same local area for a longer time than the younger residents (Phillipson et al., 2001; Seppänen, 2001; Means and Evans, 2012). According to Chris Phillipson (2007, 336), the major influence that community attachment and belonging (including the spatial aspect) have in our contemporary society on the well-being in old age has to be re-discovered.

Still, many researchers have emphasised that other factors, such as questions about identity and life-style, are more important than physical place for the social construction of old age (see Means and Evans, 2012; Gilleard and Higgs, 2005). However, IT might change the nature of attachment to place. Based on survey data, Chris Gilleard et al. (2007) have discovered that there is a negative association between one's attachment to neighbourhood and ownership and use of domestic information and communication technology among older people.

Ruth Liepins (2000a, 32), in her conceptualisation of community, argues that space together with structures is one of the key elements of community, mainly because the cultural and economic dimensions of life occur in spaces through structures. During the past several years, in many rural areas, the assembly halls and other places for villagers to gather together have become fewer, which also means the disappearance of spaces that create platforms for communality. Parallel to that development, new forms of technology have challenged the importance of place in the building of communities. Accordingly, the question arises: As communication is no longer tied to place, how do local communities exist in a changing society? This question has been raised, as it has become obvious that information and communication technology have created powerful new manifestations of community. The emphasis has moved from communities of place towards communities of interest, which operate either through the Internet or through traditional means. Still, it is argued that while technology-mediated communities give rise to new social groups, they can also take on more traditional forms. These forms include reunited families, political movements, people living in rural areas, etc. (Delanty, 2010, 138; Means and Evans, 2012, 1313).

In any case, communication in its various forms is a central feature of the communities of postmodern society. It is argued that continuous communication about the sense of belonging is at the core of communities, which are constructed in communicative processes rather than within institutional structures or spaces. Modern communities differ from traditional ones in many ways, but one important difference is found in the sense of belonging. People have different feelings of belonging concurrently; it consists of multiple and overlapping bonds and each bond may last for long or short periods (Bauman, 2001a; Delanty, 2003).

In different strategies of the institutions of our society, IT is seen as a means to ensure access to services for all citizens in every part of the country (Information Society Programme, 2006; Ubiquitous Information Society, 2008; Godfrey and Johnson, 2009, 633). As a result of the development during recent years, a big share of contemporary consumer services and public services are provided via the Internet. The growth of online shopping and access to services has been linked to the closure of local service outlets, especially in rural communities (see Means and Evans, 2012, 1321). The

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