Information and Communication Technologies in Finland in View of its Social Capital

Abstract:
In Finland the state policy towards the ICT sector development has got a strong social component. The aim of this article is to present the characteristics of the projects which using the ICT tools address the problems of social exclusion, discursive space, and social and political participation. The aforementioned subjects will be discussed in the context of local programmes being developed in Tampere, Oulu and Upper Karelia Region. The interviews collected with the researchers involved in the projects allow the better understanding of the everyday practice in these specific programmes, as well as the evaluation of their successes and some problems.
Key words: ICT, digital divide, local communities, social exclusion, social and political participation

1. Introduction

New information and communication technologies have significantly influenced the image of modern Finland. Investments in this sector of the economy at the right time have resulted in this country overcoming its economic crisis of the early 1990s. The success of Nokia, which named itself after a small town near Tampere, an old industrial region, has become a symbol of success. Finland's trademark, however, is not only its mobile phone business. This country is also among world leaders of Internet usage with this medium present in the every day lives of most Finnish, at work and home.

New technologies' influence on Finland's social and economic development does not mean that they are entirely unique. What makes it special is the country's role in the continuous process of transformation. It was Finland's adapting its economy to fit world market trends while, at the same time, maintaining its welfare state. Manuel Castells and Pekka Himanen state that such a combination guarantees the building of information societies without social exclusions and thus minimising conflicts which arise from such[1].

Finland's key focuses - the economic and the social - are intertwined when it comes to its development of ICT technologies. The country's expenditures for ICT education, opening of new schools and financing of tele-information firms means social costs. On the other hand, the profits generated by this new sector of the economy have an impact on the country's social functioning. Among large scale plans, there is also room for decentralised in character projects including the involvement of local aut'   èH   ‚ƒ £H,, p -‡ãØgº ‰ₒpŸÂæ
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±" ¥Ì Ñ¼ ÁÉ•Í•¹Ð ¥¹¥Ñ¥…Ñ¥Ù•Ì Ý¡¥ ±Â using ICT tools, address the problems of social exclusion, discursive space as well as social and political participation. The aforementioned subjects will be discussed in the context of local programmes being developed in Tampere, Oulu and Upper Karelia Region. Also outlined will be common guidelines and ways of project implementation. According to Jukka Oksa, local social networks, build using knowledge (of tools, skills, and use of possibilities combined with broader systems, values, principles, etc.) and identity (individual – people possessing new skills and group – giving a sense of belonging, by common solutions to problems and social –

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[1] M. Castells, P. Himanen, *The Information Society and the Welfare State. The Finnish Model.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

regarding local communities changing with development of new projects) multiply social capital[2].

The interviews collected with the researchers involved in the projects allow a better understanding of the everyday practice in these specific programmes, as well as the evaluation of their successes and some problems. The article evaluates interviews carried out in 2003 with the creators of two Internet portals for the town of Tampere and its inhabitants as well as researchers of the Oulu website. Overall, ten people were interviewed, eight of which are academic scholars, one local government representative and one volunteer, project participant

2. Finnish Usage of the Web Specificity

Finland is among the group of countries in which Internet usage is most common. In 2004, 70% of Fins used the Internet which puts them in 3rd place in the EU, behind the Swedes (81%) and the Danish (75%), while the European average is at 47%. In Finland household usage is at 51%, which is less than in Denmark (69%), Holland (65%), Germany (60%), Luxembourg (59%), or Great Britain (56%). However, the Fins are high on the ranking list when it comes to broadband connection usage, at 21%, just behind Denmark (36%) and Holland (31%)[3].

Finland, just like other Scandinavian countries, is specific in that in the region there is less exclusion from Internet usage based on belonging to a particular social group or place of living[4]. Access to the Web among people who are employed or unemployed, of different education or living in metropolitan vs. rural areas is not as differentiated as in other countries[5]. For example, in Finland 54% of people with basic education and 89% with higher education use the Internet while in Italy these figures are at 13% and 71% correspondingly[6].

Finnish internauts are great fans of e-mail with 89% of people using it. This percentage is slightly lower than in Luxembourg (91%). Meanwhile, nearly 100% of Fins have surfed the Web in search of information and 50% have read on line press. Moreover, Fins are the most keen of all Europeans on using Internet banking, at 71.5% of those connected. Also, more often than in other countries, Fins go job hunting through the Web, i.e. sending out CVs by e-mail (31,4%)[7].

Apart from Luxembourg, it is in Finland where the highest percentage of people checks out Internet government and local administration sites, with 62% of people visiting these at least once every three months prior to the research. 83% of these people were looking for specific information, 45% contacted their representatives and 27% used the services available. Finland, except Ireland, Austria, Sweden and Great Britain, is considered to have the best quality public institution websites regarding content and contact opportunities[8].

Interesting, in terms of usage of the above mentioned sites, is the comparison of Finland and Great Britain. Although both countries make available high quality sites, the British, in contrast to the Fins, are reluctant to use them, especially regarding contacting the officials. In Great Britain the percentage of visitors is one of the lowest in Europe. This means that access to new technologies does not necessarily mean greater use of them. All the more

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[2] J. Oksa, *Difficult job of transferring a success-story*, 4S and EASST Conference "Public proofs: science, technology and democracy", Paris, August 25-28, 2004, p.11-12.

[3] C. Demunter, *Internet activities In the European Union*, Eurostat, Statistics in focus, 2005.
Nordic Information Society Statistics. Nordic Council of Ministers, 2005.

[4] Holland is also in this gorup.

[5] Especially Sweden.

[6] C. Demunter, *The digital divide in Europe,* Eurostat, Statistics in focus, 2005.

[7] C. Demunter, *Internet activities In the European Union*, Eurostat, Statistics in focus, 2005.

[8] F. Reis, *e-Government 2004: internet based interaction with European business & citizens*, Eurostat, Statistics in focus, 2005.

so, it is difficult to treat it as an independent indicator of social transformations. Local culture as well as social determinants play an indirect but key role.

3. Social development of new technologies on the local scale

In Finland there exists an active state policy regarding new technologies. It includes strategies and programmes for regional and local development. The policy is decentralised to an extent, as local governments play a key role in the country. Among other things they are responsible for the functioning of the welfare state. Local authorities enjoy a high level of independence as far as the creation and implementation of ICT programmes. Additionally, organisations created by the state to realise its welfare policy, such a SITRA, financially support local initiatives in this field. Local authorities or other regional associations also look for and find other partners, such as regional governments or private businesses to support them in their activity[9].

Caring for the development of information technology infrastructure and its usage has economic, socio-political reasons. Often it is tied to the strategy of survival of poorer or less populated regions of the country. Popularisation of ICT also aims to equalize life chances for local communities. Through the propagation of access to the Web and various training programmes the goal is to increase people's qualifications in this field and to indirectly generate new job spaces. Within the projects there is also time devoted to the strengthening of local community ties, supporting local activity and encouraging people take part in local government policy. In some cases, national minorities are also targeted to be involved[10].

In Finland, these types of projects are treated as 'continuous education' processes. Taking part in them are local authorities, inhabitants and researchers themselves. They are also tied to the significant role of universities, often initiators and co-ordinator of the projects. The projects evolve or become cyclical, the activities are subject to evaluation and in result, change. The names of the projects illustrate this well, for example "Learning Upper Karelia", "Educating Regions of Eastern Finland" (Northern Karelia), or "Evolution of E-communities" (Tampere, Oulu).

The creation of websites, with frequent organizational meetings, is based on local people's involvement. It is imperative in such cases to select local group leaders who will make others follow them in their activity. In some city districts this method is similar to adding on subsequent links to a chain, that is those already involved bring in new participants. Group work here is crucial due to 'citizen innovativeness' which is created as a result[11].

In such local programmes the participants can count on access to computer equipment, Internet connections, and training on the use and web page design. In some cases also available are specialised trainings in the field of *online* journalism. Such experiences and qualifications can later be useful in jog hunting or future careers.

The researchers, who are also the initiators and project co-ordinators, can definitely be called 'active' in their research.[12] They do not just observe but take part in the trainings (website design), as well as in the creation process, in the discussion groups in order to

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[9] A. Aldea, E. Lehto, J. Oksa, *Access to Services in Rural Finland: Examples from Kainuu and North Karelia*, University of Oulu, University of Joensuu, 2004, http://cc.joensuu.fi/~alma/deserve/raportit/rep04-finland.doc, accessed: 14.03.2006.

[10] Maarit Makinen, *Digital Empowerment as Inclusion by Enabling People to Become Subjects of the Information Society – Assessment of Some ICT Based Community Communication Projects*, http://www.uta.fi/~tlmama/PISTAmakinen.pdf, 2004, accessed: 14.03.2006.

[11] Phrase by dr Hekki Hekkila from University of Tampere, during an interview, 2003.

[12] S. Kotilainen, *Proactive Media Research is enabling the Change*, article not published, provided by the author, University of Tampere, 2003.

delineate goals and activities, to reach them to meet local communities' needs. They also organize meetings with local authorities and report on the progress *on-line*.

The researcher-subject relations go beyond their standard roles. Coordinators, however, should not impose on participants any particular activity. The people need to decide this on their own. The coordinators need to help the people meet their community's own needs and expectations. The participants are provided with only a general plan of action and the rest is their creativity. Meetings *online* and *offline,* debates and the resulting activity complement each other and are equally as important as the projects themselves.

Despite the above mentioned common key goals for most projects, many differentiations can be observed in various local communities. Similar to a comparison of various countries, regions, local communities or city districts, there are differences in interest levels and the final use in political and social aspects. Also cooperation between local communities, their leaders, local authorities, public organizations, inhabitants and media differs from region to region. The projects, to a smaller or larger extent, are carried out based on cooperation, understanding and a decentralised decision making system. Every project resulted in different websites and their offers. All ideas were individual as well as their realisations. Local socio-political culture was definitely one of the key factors conditioning the diversity.

In order to illustrate the results of the projects, three regions in Finland will be compared. In all these parts involved in the projects were local authorities, social organizations and educatÍ'd O·   ]"   Äp   —   #zL   ('> 8   >

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In Finland there is a tradition of cooperation between centres carrying out implementation of ICT projects for local communities, in order not to avoid social exclusion and to socially, economically and politically activate the participants. Involved in the these projects also have become other local projects taking into consideration the specificity and needs of particular regions. For example, in Tampere and Oulu these are "Locality in the Global Web" (1998-2000) and "E-Communities Evolution" (2001-2004) and in Oulu and Northern Karelia "DESERVE – Delivery of Services to Remote Rural Areas" (2004-2007). Cooperation between these means combining programme elements, exchanges of experiences and network of social connections.

Upper Karelia

Upper Karelia is located in eastern Finland. For research purposes only a part of it was selected, including three administrative districts linked together by common experiences and a network of connections. The sub-region is a relatively large territory inhabited by 20 000 people, making it sparsely populated. It is a predominantly rural region experiencing, since the 1990s, higher than average unemployment.

ICT technologies usage experiments for local communities began here in 1986. The project, known as local community information network, was locally initiated in 1998. Within two years, 25% of the region's inhabitants were registered as its participants. The network, according to Finnish researchers, was supposed to be a tool eliminating social exclusion, supporting innovation and improving people's standards of living[13]. These are, of course, general guidelines delineating activity.

For the most part, the project was geared to provide access to Internet connections and training as far as its usage. The applied method was specific. Free of charge courses were administered by a group of unemployed, earlier trained, inhabitants of the region. Their locations were greatly diversified in order not to exclude any local communities. These were not only limited to education centres or local libraries but, among the 31 places in total, there were also locations in shops, banks or in the street. Additionally, it was popular to organize trainings at homes. It is visible that the trainings were planned to reach people who otherwise would not have the possibility of access to the Internet or to obtain the skills.

It seems that this kind of training system, in a rather fast and effective way, was aimed to include in it a large majority of the local population and this can be considered its main success. The resulting website was perhaps not greatly developed but it created the possibility to obtain local government information such as employment opportunities. It also enabled people to gain access to non-government information or local businesses. Moreover, the site possessed its own discussion forum. Thanks to it, popularised were such initiatives as a local electronic 'flea market'. The project and its results were positively rated by institutions financing it which resulted in it spreading to neighbouring areas and, eventually, the most remote villages[14].

Oulu

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[13] J. Oksa, J. Turunen, *Local Community Net. Evaluation Study of the Learning Upper Karelia Project*, Karelian Institute, University of Joensuu, 2000, http://www.sitra.fi, accessed: 4.09.2003.
J. Oksa, *Difficult job of transferring a success-story*, 4S and EASST Conference "Public proofs: science, technology and democracy, Paris 25-28, August 2004.
[14] Website, http://unk.pkky.fi/, part of the project, is no longer active. The following to which it has been changes, http://www.oyk.fi/, is also no longer active, accessed 10.03.2006.

Oulu is the one of the largest cities in Northern Finland with a population of over 120.000 inhabitants. There is a university, a polytechnic school and it is considered a centre of information technologies' development. The city's image, closely tied to the new media, is supported by local authorities' projects such as wireless access to the Web and services offered by the city council. The initiative is also carried out together with local education centres and a communications company. The development of infrastructure and wireless access for all of Oulu inhabitants serves to include the entire local community. Everyone receives not only an e-mail address but also their own home website. Additionally, people have access to computer terminals, the local community portal and trainings. Oulu is the first city in the world to have such wide access to free Internet services[15].

The city possesses its own website with an information service for its inhabitants and interaction options. Aside from the standard surveys and e-mail contact, there is the opportunity to put forward individual project initiatives[16]. Moreover, Oulu authorities set up various other experimental projects enabling usage of services by various mobile technologies, including telephones. For example, a popular service in Oulu is obtaining fishing permits this way[17].

Another initiative, different in character, is the portal "Neighbours" created in 2002. It is a university project with broader scope, also including the city of Tampere. Local active district groups were asked to create the site. The project was open to anyone who wished to take part. The inhabitants were informed about the idea and the available training sessions. Their proposals regarding content were consulted with other members of local communities. The website was created on a local newspaper's server[18] and it includes links to city district sub-sites which wished to be involved. It consists of social and local life information, a calendar of events, the town's history and discussion forums according to district. Depending on the district's activeness, one also might find local policy information and its expected changes. In some cases, there are youth sub-sections or shopping information, such as the 'flea market'[19]. Unfortunately, it seems that in this case the project is on the downturn, as it has not been updated since its expiration, with last updates made in 2004.

Tampere

Tampere is the third largest city in Finland with a population of 200 000 inhabitants and impressive information technology background. The local authorities present the city as the first in the world to use GSM mobile telephone technology, GSM data cards, WAP and WLAN servers. The city's policy to propagate new ICT technologies has resulted in the opening of 150 Internet access spots as well as various training opportunities. There is also a Netti-Nysse city bus with a wireless web connection and access to computer and Internet courses[20].

Research carried out in 2004 indicated that 80% of Tampere's population has access to the Internet[21]. Between 2002-2004 the number of internauts increased by 7%. If this tendency keeps up, there will be no access problems in the future. The only differences will be

[15] A-V. Anttiroiko, *Towards Ubiquitous Government: The Case of Finland*. "e-Service Journal", nr 3, 2005, p. 86-87.
[16] http://www.oulu.ouka.fi/, accessed: 10.03.2006.
[17] http://www.oulu.ouka.fi/smartoulu/english/paasivu.htm, accessed: 10.03.06
[18] http://plus.kaleva.fi/naapurit/, accessed: 10.03.06
[19] I. Kumara, *Neighbours – a portal for districts and residents in Oulu,* [in:] *Towards active citizenship on the net. Possibilities of citizen oriented communication: case studies from Finland, ed.* E. Sirkkunen, S. Kotilainen, Tampere: Journalism Research and Development Centre, University of Tampere, 2004.
[20] J. Seppala, *eDemocracy in Tampere*. Tampere, 2003. Document from the City Council in Tampere.
[21] http://www.tampere.fi/tiedostot/537ouCEIh/ictutkimus2004.pdf, accessed: 10.05.05

regarding the quality of connection and the resulting possibilities of usage. In Tampere there are three websites devoted to the city and its residents. First, from an academic initiative, second – created by the city council, and third – constructed by the local media. All the sites have, to an extent, similar content, i.e. access to discussion forums. But there is also some differentiation due to their different patrons and backgrounds.

Project eTampere, coordinated by the local government, has been named by Manuel Castells as one of the most well known examples of local communities ICT development. This is mostly due to the relations between the city authorities and its residents[22]. Finnish researchers admit that its administrative bodies are quick to adapt new technologies for their own purposes.[23]. The project not only allows people to make use of various electronic services but also lets them play an advisory role in the planning of budgets or land development plans.

According to data from a survey carried out in 2003, 87.4% of the city's inhabitants using the Internet have visited the city's eTampere site. Within this group, 26% visit the web page at least once a week, 33.3% - once a month and 40.7% – from time to time. The reasons for visits are diversified, for example, to check bus schedules or to send petitions. Most of all, people are interested in finding information on local events (73.5%), services offered (59.4%), local policy information (40.6%), or entertainment (41.6%) and lastly – consulting services or being involved in the decision making process (36.6%)[24].

Meanwhile, the university born Mansetori project developed, within the initial period, in connection with local social organizations[25]. It was financially supported by the city council as well as the local newspaper which resulted in some confusion as far as the roles, competences and cooperation between the two partners. Mansetori, according to Eso Sirkkunen, one of its initiators, was directed toward developing the people's involvement in the public sphere, with a particular goal to have them take part in discussion forums and expand non-professional journalist activity *online*. Its ultimate aim was for participants to have greater influence on the media and the authorities in the city's planning and decision making process.[26]. Other goals were to equalize people's skills in Internet usage and also to encourage people to create their own sites. The researchers have organized special training programmes for those wishing to take part in the project.

The Mansetori web page is composed of three elements (sub-sites) that make up a whole. Sub-site Manse – neighbourhood is d0　　　ÊÈ@æ　9•ÄC"Ìø†　IÍ　ƒ™gÆ°　„e
　　　Ÿ　Ì@ÆÒèò@ÈîÊØØÊäæ@ÂÜÈ@ÒÜÆØêÈÊæ@ØÒÜÖæ@èÞ@³various districts' websites. Thanks to the site, a quarter of districts can be accessed via the Internet. The first district site, for Viinikka-Nekala, was created in 1998.

Similarly to the project in Oulu, taking part in the creation of Manse- neighbourhood were active individual participants. This part of Mansetori is their co-creation. Its content is, for the most part, positive, non-polemic and serving building ties among local communities. Manse-neighbourhood includes a history of the city's districts. According to project

[22] M. Castells, P. Himanen, *The Information Society and the Welfare State. The Finnish Model*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 124-126. Source of direct information about the eTampere project (2000-2005) http://www.etampere.fi/caset/caset_hallinto, accessed: 10.03.06.

[23] Based on an interview with a researcher from the University of Tampere, dr Hekkim Hekkila, September 2003.

[24] *Use of Online Services and Information Technology in Tampere 2003*. City of Tampere. Taloustutkimus. Tampere: Finnish Social Science Data Archive, 2004.

[25] These include the researchers, city inhabitants and members of local communities.

[26]E. Sirkkunen, Towards Civic oriented Information Networks [w:] *Towards Active Citizenship on the Net. Possibilities of Citizen Oriented Communication: Case Studies from Finland, ed.* E. Sirkkunen, S. Kotilainen,*Tampere: University of Tampere,* 2004, p.9-24.

coordinators, it is similar to an archive with text and pictures. It also contains classified advertisements targeted at Tampere's different regions and a schedule of various up-coming events. Another popular element, similarly to Karelia and Oulu, is practical information such as the 'flea market'.

Another sub-site, Manse-media illustrates the demand for citizen journalism. Its authors are often people without professional journalist background. This type of writing is supposed to be complementary or alternative to that in regular newspapers. It can, at times, present an alternative to official media information content or its hierarchy.

Finally, Manse–forum meets the need for public debate. It offers a presentation and discussion of topical for Tampere issues. The sub-site's co-creators, or anyone interested can offer his points of view. The issues discussed, among others, are traffic problems (bicycle routes), ecology and land development planning. The site is, however, not entirely limited to debate. It also includes background information, created in 2006 by a six member volunteer group, to keep the site alive. It offers articles and politicians' answers, reports from monthly thematical discussion groups organized by Manseforum coordinators in cooperation with city council authorities as well as citizens' rights manual and a non-government information section.

Both projects, eTampere and Mansetori, were created in order for new technologies to help people in contacts with local authorities. Additionally, eTampere was built to use the Internet in establishing partner communication relations between the two groups. That is why there is strong emphasis on the individual inhabitant, not just a client who is offered services *online*, minimising the need to contact the authorities directly.

All of the above mentioned projects were geared toward activating people. They offered training and access to infrastructure to avoid social exclusion. Due to the region's specificity, the Karelia project was more strongly targeted at professional development. In Tampere, a large city, targeted were predominantly national minority groups. Everywhere, assumed was greater than previously, participation of inhabitants in defining local issues and taking them directly to local authorities through the Internet and outside of it.

4. Local networks' successes and difficulties

Within the last few years the above mentioned local projects have allowed researchers their analysis and a verification of earlier made theories about the development of information societies. Research results provided us with some successes and difficulties which the local networks are experiencing. Following discussed will be the conclusions of researchers who took part in the project as coordinators.

The opinions, for the most part, regard the Mansetori and eTampere projects, as these two were the most developed. Most of the researchers interviewed are employed at Tampere University. Nevertheless, as stated above, the Mansetori(Tampere) and Neighbours (Oulu) projects belong to the same broader programme and thus, usually they are researched together. The network of cooperation also includes the Karelia region. Therefore, the scholars' conclusions can be applied to all three places. Regarding Upper Karelia, its researchers were contacted by correspondence.

The first question that arises is the local communities interest level in the proposed projects and their participation in public life through the use of new technologies. As far as Karelia, 25% of the population took part which can be considered a success. In other parts of the region the percentage was lower. As far as Tampere, the majority of its inhabitants are familiar with the city's website. Regarding Mansetori, with the idea of continuous updates and active participation (city history, forums) the outlook is not as positive.

The researchers are aware that not everyone is informed about the existence of local websites, "Mansetori is not very well known in Tampere, which is surprising, since it was established five years ago. Most people are not aware of its existence. This is a problem. People with whom I work (volunteers) often joke about this fact but really they would like to have greater recognition" [R 6][27].

Despite the projects' attempts to eliminate inequalities, the issue of lack of new technological skills or difficulties in sharing one's opinions in written form remain topical, "For people who work in factories or finished their education 20 years ago writing is not easy. The keyboard is something new and strange if you haven't seen it before. There are also other factors – the activities are time consuming and expensive" [R 5]. Working people are busy with daily chores and responsibilities, while the unemployed remain outside the focus of public activities – these are some obvious explanations for lack of interest in public activity but not the only ones.

Groups of active participants, which are the core in building the websites, are limited in size. Moreover, not many people come to meetings with officials and experts, which are then reported on through the Web. Few people visit discussion forums and there is little reaction to articles written by journalists. The issue of participation is that, as one of the respondents stated, "Mansetori is not part of people's lives but rather the researchers" [R 5].

Expectations that people will actively comment on the on-going events turned out to be overrated. The inhabitants say, "People do not visit the sites as ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS who want to take part in everything. They are mostly just searching for information" [R5]. "Many people do not want public recognition. They prefer to sit at home and read what others have written" [R 2]. It does not help that there are two alternative discussion forums, on the city portal and the newspaper's. But they do enjoy greater popularity than Mansetori. The newspaper forum seems to be more successful, with a variety of topics discussed and the debate more open in character than on the city council portal. According to researchers, a variety of discussion forums has its positive and negative points. The possibility to have a choice is a plus but it does lead to debate fragmentation. The participation takes place in different places at the same time and therefore it is hard to say that the Internet is a good place for a popularisation of ideas, or as tool in reaching the majority of local communities. The local newspaper is more successful in this area.

Low attendance on the Mansetori discussion forum can be explained, according to coordinators, by its theme specificity. The forum discusses public issues such as city spatial planning, safety, ecology as well as more abstract terms like democracy or public participation which may not be considered very exciting. It is a paradox that such a debate, as a element of public local problem solving, requires a rational approach which turns many people off from participating. Researchers say that Mansetori is too 'academic', based on the kind of language that is used on the forum. In result, there is self social exclusion from the debate.

Nevertheless, it is Manse-forum which is the most recognized and popular part of Mansetori. Because of it, its activity goes beyond the Internet with the media taking an interest in the site. Despite this, participants of Manse-neighbourhood rarely visit the forum. According to one researcher, people involved in one project are not always very keen on the activities of another. The forum's polemic character is conflictual in character while taking part in projects for the local good should mean a focus on common goals and not differences. Mansetori's division into parts which do not necessarily co-operate with each other, as they play different roles, can be perceived as a downside.

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[27] The square brackets indicate the different interviews conducted.

The researchers are realistic in their assessment of the situation. It is impossible to count on massive interest and general involvement. Those people who have negative attitudes toward taking part in public life will not be convinced. However, everything that can should be done in order to get those involved who want to but maybe do not know how, "Usually it is a small group of people who take part but there is a bigger group as well who wants to if the situation presented itself" [R 1]. The researchers' goal is to reach such people,
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ˆO‡„ˆ ,   O   ˆOˆ ‡ˆ ,   Œ   O   fˆ   y've had in this sphere. Helpful in this area should be the local media, officially supporting Oulu and Tampere projects. Often, however, their reactions to what is happening are not very supportive or simply inexistent. According to Manse-media coordinator, the journalist section of Mansetori is neither a great source of information nor competition to the local traditional newspaper (1000-1500 entrances per month). He is not even sure whether all journalists are aware of this project, being so busy with everyday routine work.

Despite not the greatest membership level and lack of numeric proof of success, the general opinion is that the projects have been successful. The researchers are mostly interested in finding out, "what did those people learn who took part in the projects, how did they change as inhabitants of a certain region, town or city district and also how were they affected by being involved in the process of creation of local democracies" [R 1].

It seems that the two methods by which the projects worked; group work and the combination of various forms of communication, including regular meetings (once or twice a month), have been successful. The team working for Manse-media stated, "It became obvious that things don't work if you communicate only through the Internet. We've been told that face-to-face meetings are crucial. People can meet each other in person, discuss, support one another. They do not feel alone, sitting in front of a screen, in what they are doing. When they meet they can say, 'their problems are similar to mine'. This is very important for people who cooperate with Mansetori." [R 6].

According to researchers, even if the number of people involved is limited, it is positive that there is public debate going on in which various opinions are presented, local issues are discussed and proposals for new initiatives are presented. Such Internet discussions, when they are taken into consideration by the local authorities, allow making decisions considering the alternative opinions of various local communities. The debate, usually slow at first, gains speed to keep up with crucial events that go on in the life of local communities. This was the case regarding building of a bridge on the Tammerkoski river, protested on the Web and outside of it.

Another positive effect is the traditional media taking ideas from the projects' websites and reporting on them. This means that some interesting issues to the local communities may be presented from the non-official point of view on local reality. All in all, it is hard to judge what effect Mansetori has had on the public opinion or official decision making as it difficult to differentiate the influence of various factors, for example, as was the case with the above mentioned bridge.

Researchers assess that some ideas and solutions present on the eTampere site are based on Mansetori's site creations, "The city is creating a system thanks to which its residents will be able to take part in the creation of local policy and that is why they are using some of our experiences. They are making use of what we have done in this field and presenting it as their own" [R 4]. Among the available forms of participation there is the opportunity to speak one's mind on forums, send e-mails to local authorities and present proposals for citizen initiatives.

Mansetori's influence on the city's official Internet site is visible also according to one journalist volunteer, "In Tampere during the decision making process a debate goes on in the Internet and people can express their opinions. Authorities often ask the people what they think. I believe that Mansetori has helped in that. When the officials launched the project, they did not think of their residents are 'e-citizens', they were just thinking of bigger things and forgot how they could help Tampere's inhabitants get to know the Internet and make use of its sites. I don't know if it's true but I think that Mansetori has helped a lot in this sphere. Earlier there was a project for a site [local government, prior to eTampere-A.P.] and they had

a lot of ideas for it to be unique but they did not think of the inhabitants like Mansetori did." [R 9].

Researchers admit that people prefer to use the local government site and there are several reasons for that. First, it includes more topical and useful news and people usually look for concrete information. Moreover, the fact is that the site's official character gives them more hope for solving particular issues or problems. Significant here is also their trust in the local government as well as the portal's content and the offered forms of interaction with officials.

Non-official sites are different or active on another level, as they are an intermediary between the citizens and the authorities. One opinion is that, "In my neighbourhood people would want the relations between Mansetori and the city council to be more clear and direct so that they can be sure that what they discuss, include on the website or plan to do is read and taken into consideration by the authorities. People hope for the interactions to be direct and that their activities have an influence on policy. We cannot guarantee that. Mansetori is independent and allows for freedom of activity. Nevertheless people hope for influence." [R 5].

One government representative states that from the city council's point of view Mansetori's presence is appreciated. He acknowledges the positive sides of the forum and its independence but also stresses that officials are not obliged to answer or makes statements on the site since the council has got its own portal. The council finances Mansetori's activity, particularly sponsoring technical training programmes and upkeeping a network of people involved in the creation of neighbouring sites, supporting local integration within different districts. It also appreciates the savings that volunteer work for Mansetori brings.

From the council's perspective, the new medium at its present level of accessibility and local involvement gives people the opportunity to transmit information without the limitations that traditional media impose. Introduction of electronic services is only costly initially but with possibilities for future profits.

From the local authorities' statements it seems that there are both advantages and difficulties regarding the use of this new medium in local policy. In contrast to transmission of information or e-administration, the issue of participation through the Web seems to be the most controversial. It involves several issues. Firstly, both the citizens and the authorities are learning new ways of usage of this medium. According to one official, in Tampere the difficulty in communication with inhabitants is beyond technical issues but regards competence. Easier access to exchange of information with officials means also that, "people ask questions and present opinions that are one sided, for example, they don't take money into consideration while it usually is the key issue." [R 10]. Things still are at an early phase and a true effectiveness assessment of the Internet in communication and participation in local policy will be possible after a few decades.

Nevertheless, the use of ICT technologies is a necessity for local government as stated by Finnish law, "With the development of the Internet and new technical possibilities for participation [social and political – A.P.], Finland stresses greater emphasis on participation overall and this is the direction of change. State and local government have more responsibility to listen to what the people have to say." [R 10]. Hence, there have been some changes. For example, spatial planning needs to be consulted from the very early stage of a project's development, not just before the council vote. The plans are available on the Internet as well as the possibility to present opinions about them. There are also more and more survey forms to fill out, although the authorities are still far from considering referendums as an effective tool in decision making.

5. Conclusion

In Finland the policy for the development and propagation of ICT tools does not only encompass the administrative and economic spheres but also the social and civic. The projects, with aims to popularise Internet usage skills, especially among people who do not have access to this type of knowledge, the creation of public space in this sphere, and supporting civic participation, are targeted at local communities. They are initiated by local authorities, universities and individuals active locally.

The projects have been considered successful largely due to the cooperation of the three above mentioned groups. This was crucial at the onset of the experiment and throughout its existence. It seems, however, that the most difficult moment was at the end of the project's official length time. The sites, so far supported financially, technically and from an advising point of view, are now solely within the hands of the people. Some initiatives, functioning up to now within the local p   Úè   Ð K™øç&Ιðΐîsãƒ b à` ã"   â
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The Finnish system is sensitive to inequality aspects through trainings, technical assistance and initiation of contacts between people and the authorities. There is also evaluation and discussion on proposed changes which makes for ideal conditions for growth. According to some researchers, however, such far reaching assistance can also be a down side in the projects becoming fully independent. At the same time it is a necessity in order for the initiatives to be successful, not just in terms of massive participation but regarding quality change within local societies. Overall, this method may be named 'assistive' as far as the creation and activity of websites.

The Fins are rather realistic in their assessment of the situation and the scale of its success. Their attitude can be described as moderate optimism. They do not expect revolutionary but rather gradual changes evolving and consistent if the activity remains topical. They advise patience and observation of quality change over the years of which there already are some examples. The goal is not necessarily to keep up with technology but to change the people's consciousness and civic culture, with the help of new technologies.

Even in a country with such favourable conditions for development of ICT tools, like Finland, one needs to be careful not to make too far reaching conclusions as far as ongoing positive changes. The projects described in the article provide a realistic perspective, as they are based on actual experiences, in observing an information society in its civic duties. This is itself valuable. The projects can offer a lot more if taken seriously from the learning perspective to the proposed issue.