

LAST ORDERS'ⁱ AT THE RURAL 'CYBER PUB': A FAILURE OF 'SOCIAL LEARNING'?

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Abstract

An initiative to stimulate innovation by putting rural public houses 'on-line' as one element of making the pub 'the hub' of service delivery in UK rural communities is explored. Research findings are presented which show that the initiative did not develop as intended and ultimately – even in pilot form - became difficult to sustain. This abortive attempt to appropriate computer and Internet technology is explained as a failure of social learning. In particular, whilst aiming with some success to assist in the configuration of the technology to the specific context and setting of the rural pub, the initiative failed to focus on developing the means and mechanisms that might have supported the development of a stronger learning culture. This could have provided the basis for the kind of social innovation required to develop and sustain a model of the rural 'cyber pub' that might then have been more widely appropriable.

Keywords: social innovation; public Internet access; digital divide; service industries; social learning; public house retail

INTRODUCTION

The idea of the public house as a place where customers might combine the imbibing of an alcoholic beverage or two with surfing the internet would a few years ago have seemed somewhat futuristic and more likely foolish. At the time a British tabloid, for example, published a 'crystal ball' feature in which the pub was seen as being transformed into an environment with virtual bar staff, drinks being ordered by wi-fi enabled devices and delivered by robots whilst 'hologram' karaoke provided punters with their musical entertainment. One commentator observed in horror, 'what a pub should have is beams, smoke and ale. None of this cyber nonsense.' (Sherriff, 2001). Whilst the

smoke has gone as a result of government legislation, this or indeed any other realisation of the 'cyber pub' has yet to take hold.

This is especially so in the case of public houses in rural communities. In this instance, it might be thought, that there are compelling social if not economic reasons for exploiting internet-based technologies to build upon the pub's established role as the focal point of community life - perhaps the only remaining one in some communities - to provide access to services by digital means that might otherwise be denied in more remote areas. Indeed as we will see, for some, the future of the rural pub is bound up with a diversification of the services it offers beyond its more traditional role as a place for the sale and consumption of alcohol in convivial surroundings. One aspect of this is the idea of putting the rural pub 'on-line' that would enable it to better fulfil a more diversified role and to serve social and community needs in rural settings.

In this article we report on a sustained campaign in the UK, backed in part by Royal Patronage, by some leading pressure groups, rural agencies, pub owning corporates and local authorities. This initiative began in the early 2000s with the objective to promote the pub as the 'hub' of the rural community. This was to be facilitated by an initiative to support the installation and use of computers and the Internet for the use of the community in public houses. As we will see, this initiative although successful in some elements, ultimately failed to stimulate a broader take-up of the idea of the pub as an 'on-line hub' of the community. In particular a follow-up study conducted some one to two

years after the initiative had concluded its funded phase revealed that, even within the original pilot pubs, the concept was proving difficult to sustain.

We suggest that this ‘failure’ provides an interesting opportunity to explore the importance of social innovation in technological change and in particular the role of what has been termed ‘social learning’ (Williams et al, 2005) in the appropriation of new technologies. Such learning is not just restricted to how best to configure technologies to work in particular contexts but also involves something more akin to ‘social innovation’ (Mulgan, 2007) where existing elements (e.g. public houses and computer technology) are brought together to create new hybrids (e.g. ‘cyber pubs’) that provide ‘innovative spaces’ where previously separate individuals or groups (e.g. within disenfranchised, excluded or disadvantaged rural communities) can access (e.g. through computers and the Internet) information, resources and opportunities (e.g. public services, training and educational programmes) which they otherwise would not be able to.

We begin by introducing some conceptual ideas on the nature of social learning in technological innovation. We then explore the initiative to create rural ‘cyber pubs’ by putting the ‘local on line’ in England. This is followed by a review of the results of our follow-up study of the initiative. Finally, we return to the discussion on the nature of social learning and social innovation and, through a comparison with other more successful attempts to provide public access to computers and the Internet, seek to explain the failure of rural cyber pubs to become established.

SOCIAL INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

Few students of the adoption of new technologies in both work and domestic settings would now argue that the full import of what is involved can be defined in terms of the physical adoption and installation of new systems themselves. Early studies of technological innovation tended to focus upon the first commercial adoption of a new technology and the subsequent pattern and rate of diffusion through the rest of the economy (see, for example, Rogers, 1983). It is now widely understood that, if we are to understand why some innovations 'fail' and others 'succeed', there is far more to the innovation process. Indeed, as Dawson et al note (Editorial, this issue) the tendency in social studies of technology to view any distinction between the 'technical' and the 'social' as highly contingent and as itself 'socially constructed' suggests that innovation always has an inherent 'social' dimension.

In particular, it has been argued that the outcomes of technological innovation do not reflect the effects or impacts of technology itself but rather are the product of complex interactions between the technical and the social, especially during the deployment and adoption of technologies in specific contexts of use. As Williams et al (2005) argue, the appropriation of technology by users in this way involves both 'innofusion' (Fleck 1988) and 'domestication'. The former recognises that technologies require considerable local customisation and configuration for them to function in different contexts and meet the requirements of users. The latter recognises that to be successful a technological innovation must also be regarded as 'socially appropriate' in the sense that from the user viewpoint it serves a purpose. How users interpret a technology in terms of who they are

and what it means for them becomes, therefore, a key factor in the take up of that technology. As a result, appropriation requires both work that involves ‘practical efforts to make technology work’ (innofusion) but also work that effectively ‘creates meaning’ and enables a technology to become integrated into the identity of the individual user and embedded in the culture of the user community as a whole (Williams et al, 2005: 55).

The appropriation of technology defined in these terms also shows how social learning – mainly in the form of ‘practical problem solving’ and ‘learning by doing’ by users - becomes a core element of the social aspect of technological innovation. Such learning, ‘starts with the ways in which players, with complementary capabilities and domains of experience and expertise, work together in resolving the issues surrounding the development and appropriation of new technology-based products and services’ (Williams et al, 2005: 58). The manner, means and effectiveness of the way in which the work required to accomplish both innofusion and domestication occurs therefore becomes a critical factor in success and failure.

But where, when, how and by whom might this work be accomplished? According to Williams et al, the answer lies in the expanded ‘space for social learning’ and the consequently ‘wider range of individuals and groups who can engage in technological innovation’ over and above the conventional roles played by ‘technical specialists and corporate professionals’ (Williams et al, 2005:75). Of particular importance in this respect are the activities of ‘appropriation intermediaries’ who seek to link this wide variety of innovation actors together. Such intermediaries, they argue, have a key role in

this process by ‘acting to bridge the various domains of development and use’, by providing ‘key points of the interface between potential users and new ICT products and services’, ‘*configuring* ICT components and systems towards particular potential user constituencies’ and engaging in ‘a domestication effort, to make technology relevant and attractive’ (Williams et al, 2005: 80-83).

This conceptual and empirical work on social learning, in particular in the appropriation of technology in user domains, puts some flesh on the proposition that social innovation can have a significant bearing on the success or otherwise of technological innovation. This is especially so in the case of configurational technologies, where implementation and use provide many opportunities for both technological and social learning – intended or otherwise – to occur. Particularly significant in this respect may be the role of intermediaries in giving meaning to a technology for users and assisting its integration into the culture of the user domain through activities such as facilitating, configuring and brokering. With these ideas in mind we now turn to the case of rural cyber pubs.

THE RURAL PUBLIC HOUSE IN CONTEXT

There are around 60,000 public houses in the UK, of which we estimate that between 15-20,000 can be categorised as country pubs in rural and village locations. Pubs in some form are found in most English-speaking countries as places for convivial social gathering and interaction based primarily around the consumption of alcoholic beverages, but also the consumption of food, provision of accommodation, and leisure pursuits such as games (electronic and non-electronic) and the hosting or organising of community events and activities. Within the British Isles, the history of pubs and their ‘drinking

culture' can be traced back hundreds of years to Roman times. A significant expansion of public houses came in the 18th century as Inns and hostelries were established, in particular in country areas, to provide overnight accommodation for travellers. Many contemporary public houses can claim to have been in business at locations that date back to this period if not before. With the advent of TV and Radio the central role of the public house ('the local') in local communities – whether urban or rural – was further emphasised (and probably mythologized at the same time) as they were represented in popular culture. For example, TV and radio 'sitcoms' based around local communities invariably deploy a public house to stage much of the action and in the longest and still running shows fictitious hostelries such as 'The Rovers Return' ('Coronation Street'), 'The Red Lion' ('The Archers') or the 'Queen Vic' ('Eastenders'), have almost become national institutions.

Until the end of the 1980s, the brewing industry exhibited a high degree of vertical integration (Crompton 1998) to the extent that it was unusual then to make a distinction between the 'brewing', or supply, and the 'pub retailing', or demand, side. The industry was dominated by five or six large brewers who were responsible for the entire process from buying the barley and hops, brewing the beer, distributing it to the pubs and selling the beer to the customer. Critically, they controlled over 70% of the pub retailing market with their estates of managed and tenanted pubs, as well as exercising indirect control over many of the so-called 'free houses' (Preece et al. 1999). To this point any changes that had taken place in the industry could be described as emergent and gradual, with relative stability and predictability being the norm.

However, since the late 1980s to the present day, the sector has become increasingly turbulent, with instability and innovation more accurately characterizing the *modus vivendi*. A number of factors have been involved here but the trigger was undoubtedly the UK government's 1989 'Beer Orders' that arose out of a government enquiry into the industry. This found it to be dominated by the brewers who were 'restricting competition at all levels' (Monopolies and Mergers Commission 1989). 'The Orders' comprised various measures designed to stimulate competition and give more choice to the customer, and most notably required brewers owning more than 2,000 retail premises to either cease brewing, or sell, or lease free from any tie, half the pubs they owned over the 2,000 mark. The reactions of the brewers stimulated a wholesale transformation of the industry as they restructured their businesses to comply with the Orders. The net effect of a complex set of changes was to reduce the influence of brewers over the new public house retail (PHR) sector, and to open up opportunities for new entrants to the retail market – in particular the new so-called 'PubCos' (that is, companies which own and/or run pubs only, and have no brewery capacity) – many of which originated by buying tranches of the large number of public houses which were put up for sale by the national brewers (Preece et al, 1999: 12-13). It has been claimed that these changes had the effect 'of revitalising the pub industry by paving the way for more innovative pub and bar formats to emerge' (Knowles and Howley, 2000).

These developments took place against broader demographic and socio-economic changes that affected the pub retail business. For example, periodic economic difficulties

were prone to affect consumer spending habits with an impact on the consumption of alcohol in pubs, whilst the rapid diffusion of new digital technologies (initially in the form of VCRs, video rental etc.) increasingly turned the home into a place of entertainment, reducing the attractiveness of a ‘night out’ at the pub. In addition, the proportion of 18-25 year olds in the population was declining, the impact of the ‘health lobby’ began to impact on lifestyle choices and so on. Other trends were more positive. For example, an increase in consumer spending on ‘eating out’ suggested new opportunities for pubs by expanding their ‘dry’ (food) as opposed to ‘wet’ (beer, spirits, wine, etc) trade whilst increasing consumer sophistication and market segmentation suggested a need to experiment with a variety of pub formats. However, the idea of ‘branding’ pubs in different ways, challenged a core industry norm that customers ‘wanted a “personal relationship” with the landlord, and to be treated as individuals...They were not consumers, they were locals in their local’ (Preece et al, 1999: 18-19).

Against this backdrop, innovation in the sector since the early 1990s has taken several forms. Much of this has been stimulated by investing and disinvesting in the retail estate as brewers with a retailing interest and PubCos that have sought to develop their portfolio around new brands and the marketing of new pub concepts. Amongst other things this has involved a significantly increased amount of capital investment in the PHR sector estate as a whole through technological innovations, in the form of back office computer work stations, beer lines measurement and monitoring and, especially, electronic-point-of-sale (EPOS) systems. On the other hand, it has also resulted in ‘estate-churning’

becoming an everyday aspect of company strategy and operations, the net effect of which has been to create a ‘virtuous circle’ of investment in those pubs that are achieving the highest margins and profits, and disinvestment at the opposite end of the estate (Knowles and Egan, 2002; Steven et al, 2002). In the latter case, either the pubs are sold off to another organization – most likely another company operating in the PHR sector - or are retained in the form of tenancies (rather than managed houses). Of course, very unprofitable pubs are closed down.

In more recent years, a, if not the, key driver of much of this process has been the so-called ‘financialization’ of the sector (Thompson, 2003). This has meant that companies operating in the PHR sector (whether brewers retaining a retail interest or the new PubCos) have had to meet the expectations of the capital market, as well as those of consumers in product markets. For the financial markets, the value of an estate asset (such as a tranche of pubs) is not established in terms of the value of the ‘bricks and mortar’ involved. Rather, value is seen in terms of (what are seen as the near certain) cash flows for the company. These arise from the payment of rent by the landlord and the tied sale to them of beer – a pub with no beer is unable to operate - whilst the company keeps the discount from the brewer. The resulting predictability of future cash flows facilitates the favourable financing of loans to purchase more pubs and further enhances the dynamics of ‘estate churn’ as pub owning companies see their business increasingly as a series of ‘financial punts’ (Preece, 2008; Preece et al, 2005).

All of these developments have had potentially negative consequences for the nature and survival of the rural or country pub. For example, it has been observed that, ‘the new generation of large pub operating companies do not take full account of the special problems and difficulties encountered in running pubs within often sparsely populated rural areas’ (Jones et al, 2000). At the same time, one effect of the ‘Beer Orders’ has been to, ‘marginalise many small rural pubs which had previously enjoyed some measure of internal cross-subsidy within large and profitable brewery estate portfolios’ (Jones, et al 2000). Such potentially negative impacts of industry trends have a greater social significance as well. In many parts of the UK, the village pub is the last local facility left with the closure of other sources of community focus such as the village hall, local store, post office, school and church. Such events have further emphasised the pivotal role of the pub in community life and its essential function as an access point for other services and products. Indeed many pubs have taken on other retail activities performed previously by the village store and post office.

The focal role of the pub in rural and remote communities is further defined by the notion that the customer is a ‘local’ and far more likely to be ‘known to the landlord’ (a feature also of course of local pubs serving traditional working class communities in more urban areas). From the point of view of a ‘financial punt’ the rural pub may not be a particularly attractive bet - not least because local demand is unlikely to segment readily into different branded elements in the manner available to retail outlets in urban settings. Whilst there are opportunities at the ‘high end’ of the market to maintain and develop the business around the ‘dry’ trade, the rural pub, given the significant changes in the sector, has

become a relatively endangered species, with serious social and community consequences should it become extinct. One estimate suggests, for example, that over half of rural settlements now do not have a public house (Countryside Agency 2001).

PUTTING COUNTRY PUBS ON-LINE

It is in the context of these broader sectoral changes that we can now turn to the origins and development of the initiative to put the rural public house 'local' 'on-line'. A concern of public policy in the UK has been how to provide public access to the Internet, and in particular encourage new users and provide access to those who would otherwise be denied. In particular, the UK Government's social inclusion agenda has sought to address the problem of a digital divide emerging as internet technologies diffuse, one aspect of which is a division arising because of the differential access opportunities available to those in urban as opposed to rural areas (see Skerratt et al, 2004; 2005). Moreover, it has been emphasised that the digital divide is not only a question of access opportunities, it also about the creation of resources, skills and capabilities to use the technology and act upon its affordances (Servon, 2002).

An attempt to place the country pub at the core of an internet-based strategy to provide services to rural communities is therefore of considerable interest, in part because of the contribution this might make to the bridging of any emergent digital divide, but also to provide some enhancement of the chances for survival of the country pub itself. On both counts there would be obvious benefits for efforts to sustain and regenerate rural

communities and their economic and social well-being. Accordingly in 2001, the UK Countryside Agency, a statutory body at that time charged with improving the rural environment and economic and social opportunities for rural communities, published a guide entitled *The Pub is the Hub*.ⁱⁱ The guide contained a forward by HRH the Prince of Wales in which he warned of the challenges facing rural pubs and identified the pub as, in many instances, the last remaining opportunity to halt the decline of services to rural communities.

The pivotal role of pubs in village and rural life was outlined in the following terms:

Pubs have long been established at the heart of rural communities and are often important focal points for social interaction. Where there is no village hall, a pub may provide the only public meeting place. They have traditionally been involved in sports and recreation, playing host to local clubs and encouraging leisure facilities which are available to members of the community of all ages. Pubs also offer employment opportunities and contribute to the local tourist industry by providing overnight accommodation and running local events. (Countryside Agency, 2001: 4)

The guide also warned that the rural pub was under a similar threat of decline to that of other rural services, and argued for the diversification of rural pubs into the provision of new services, such as a post office and shop. This would enable the running costs to be spread and services to be retained on a smaller scale, thus preventing their loss altogether.

Twelve ‘best practice’ case studies of pubs offering diversified services and the benefits of this were also presented (Countryside Agency, 2001).

In May 2003, in collaboration with the UK Government’s Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the Countryside Agency launched a funded initiative entitled ‘Locals on-line’.ⁱⁱⁱ This was to be an initiative aimed at ‘wiring up’ country pubs and overcoming elements of the so-called ‘rural-urban digital divide’ (Countryside Agency, 2003). Nine rural pubs were to be ‘wired up’ in two English counties (five in Dorset and four in Northumberland) as part of a pilot project. The objectives of the pilot included: (a) to provide a test-bed for establishing a network of well-used, sustainable community ICT centres, and (b) to ‘attract hesitant adults who have had little experience of using computer technology, to encourage lifelong learning and ensure that centres meet the needs and interests of the whole community’ (Countryside Agency 2003).

Following a pilot project, the nominated pubs were provided with free satellite broadband connection, at least three high-spec PCs, two printers, scanners, digital cameras, paper, printer cartridges etc. Publicans were also involved in the appointment of a ‘facilitator’, ideally drawn from the local community, who was to be contracted to provide up to 12 hours per week on-site support, *ad hoc* training and advice. In Dorset, the five publicans were advised that this was to be a 12-month supported project, and that during that period they were to create a local committee to take over, run, and find funding for, the ICT resource. In Northumberland, publicans were not advised in the same way, and Northumberland County Council was subsequently brought in during May 2004 to take

over the support of the public Internet access facilities as part of its broader efforts to increase Internet access in the county.

Interestingly, at about the same time as the initiative was launched (June 2003), *The Publican* (a trade journal) carried an article about future possibilities for new and emerging service concepts using ICT within the PHR sector. These included innovations such as bars within bars catering for different client bases and ‘chameleon bars’ with changing provision at different times of day/evening as the demographics of the clientele changed. Within these concepts Internet access was seen as an essential supplement, whereby ‘a pub could become a virtual shopping centre where consumers socialise, eat, drink and browse on line...’ (*The Publican*, 2003:3).

THE FOLLOW-UP STUDY AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

In order to explore issues concerning the appropriation of the ‘on-line’ concept in the wake of this initiative we initiated our own research project designed to explore how far the innovation had been sustained, both in technological terms, but critically as a social innovation. Accordingly, we undertook a two-part study that was undertaken during a period one to two years after the rural pubs had ‘gone cyber’ (earlier reports of this research and fuller details on the research methodology can be found in Skerratt et al 2004, 2005 and Preece et al 2005). The first part involved a follow-up face-to-face interview-based study of the nine original pubs in the ‘locals-on-line’ pilot. The publican of each hostelry was interviewed *in situ* following a semi-structured format and interview schedule; these visits also allowed the researcher to observe the pub’s ICT facilities. The second was a telephone survey of 40 randomly selected rural pubs in Dorset and

Northumberland - the two counties that were the focus of the 'Locals-on-line' pilot project. Our concern here was to see how far the initial 'experiment' had prompted similar experiments and 'take-up' by other hostelrys in the same locale as the original public houses. In addition, face-to-face interviews were conducted with key informants from stakeholder groups, e.g. Regional Development Agencies, the Countryside Agency, local government authorities, and the organizers of the 'Locals-on-line' initiative itself. Our data is supplemented by the report of an unpublished evaluation conducted by the 'Locals-on-line' organizers at the conclusion of their initiative.^{iv}

We concern ourselves with the following questions in the summary and discussion of our data. First, to what extent did the initiative (and/or its component elements) act as an effective intermediary between the world of technology supply (and its antecedents, design and development) and the world of implementation and use (the PHR sector and its customers)? Second, how far did resulting appropriation by users result in a domestication of the technology through social learning and new social innovations in way consistent with the community objectives of the initiative? Third, to what extent can the outcomes of the 'Locals-on-line' initiative be understood and explained through a concept of technological innovation based on social learning and innovation by users. This latter question is considered in the following section.

It is clear from the objectives and specification of the 'Locals-on-line' initiative that an important intermediary role was envisaged. This had two core elements, first the activities of facilitators and second the envisaged role of publicans who would play a key

role in determining the sustainability of the project beyond its funded phase. Facilitators, in particular were seen as vital given the view that ‘significant use’ would not happen ‘automatically’ and that ‘volunteers’ alone would be insufficient ‘to build that critical mass of users’. The role of the publican, it was envisaged by the initiative’s organizers would become more important as the project progressed and would be particularly vital in sustaining the innovation process once a base of users had been established.

Significantly then, the envisaged role of the facilitators tended to be focused upon the configuration of the technology and associated training and initial attempts to engage users by promoting on-line services such as training courses and on-line education. In other words, activities associated with the inno-fusion dimension of appropriation and attempts to mediate linkages between the suppliers of technology products and on-line services and potential users. The domestication aspect of appropriation – understood in terms of the sustainability of the project and the building of a self-help community - was seen largely as something the publicans themselves would drive.

How far then had publicans ‘taken ownership’ of the initiative a year or so after the funded phase had finished by engaging in such ‘domestication’? For example, were they ‘championing’ the community and learning objectives at the core of the original idea as a basis for building a community of users? The first point to make is that our first follow-up study found all nine original public houses to still be in existence and hosting Internet facilities. Our own research also suggested, though, that the publicans’ motivations for continuing to engage with the project were largely instrumental (normally expressed in

terms of a perceived commercial or self interest benefit) and there was little indication that they now saw themselves as the key actors at the core of an experiment to develop a ‘community of users’.

For example, reasons for engaging with initiative included:

‘I was offered an “internet café”. I’m not a great fan of technology, though, but my kids wanted it, and the other staff use it.’

‘I thought it would be a good idea, and it wouldn’t cost us anything’

‘The facility was here when I arrived as publican. I liked the idea very much, especially because it didn’t cost me anything. Some people do homework, emails, and 9 out of 10 of them will have something to drink.’

‘I thought it would bring in more trade.’

‘We were told it was a free computer with Internet access, from Tony Blair. ‘Free of charge at the point of delivery’. We just had to provide space.

It’s an asset from a business point of view; it’s meant that I haven’t had to buy a high-spec computer with Internet access

A few publicans also saw merit in the technological and community objectives of the initiative:

‘I was an engineer, so I was interested, just to keep my head active. So I was enthusiastic from the start. And another thing was to stop people from being isolated, e.g. a couple of elderly ladies – they live here, but wouldn’t walk into the pub.’

‘I felt that it would be an asset to the pub and to the locals, plus my kids were abroad, and I wanted to be able to keep in touch with them by email.’

‘We were also told there would be a facilitator to provide support and training. I was under the impression that it was a pilot scheme to be extended nationwide. No self-funding was talked of.’

‘Tensions’ were reported with some facilitators, who sought an extension of contracted hours once they discovered how much work was required. Perhaps this view was in part

prompted by facilitators realising that publican commitment alone would be insufficient to sustain the project in the longer term. This is emphasised by the results of our telephone survey that failed to find any other examples of rural public houses experimenting with public Internet access in the two counties concerned.

It was clear also from the publicans we interviewed in the nine hostelrys that the commitment of the publican was a 'key success factor', although this seemed to be more to do with hosting the facility, providing the space, and regulating access to it, rather than actively engaging in the building of a user community. In part at least, this would seem to substantiate the observation by the organizers of the initiative that a 'culture of mutual support' developed in most of the pubs amongst users. However, in parallel to these observations, the initiative's own findings concerning use suggest that this was typically by novice users for basic information retrieval and communication. More advanced usage was less in evidence, indicated perhaps by the lack of enthusiasm shown by most users for formal courses (e.g. in web site building), taking on-line accredited courses and accessing adult education – all Internet-based services which the initiative aimed to embed in the user communities as part of the aim to support life long learning.

Our own observations did not suggest a significant change in the nature and pattern of usage. Indeed publicans reported that the regular users tended to be visitors (e.g. tourists booking their next place to stay); parents ('parking their kids' on the computers 'while they're having a drink'); local school children and university students returning home during vacations; and perhaps more significantly, members of the local business

community (e.g. farmers, SME owners). However, users did appear now to be more 'computer literate' in the publicans' view, many not having internet access at home, and where they did have dial up access, still coming to the pub 'because their own systems had crashed' or because the 'wife and children' were 'on the phone'. Of course, it was also the case that access to computers and the Internet at the pub was free and presumably the temptation of consuming a beverage or two had, on occasion, its part to play as well.

Finally, it is worth making two other observations. It was clearly in the interests of the organizers of the 'Locals-on-line' initiative to stress the achievement of targets in relation to community objectives. However, their assessment also noted the fact that it was the publicans who owned and managed their premises who were more likely to be committed to these objectives than those who were tenants (although not a criterion by which the pubs were selected for participation by LO, the majority being free houses rather than owned by a PubCo or a brewer). Our study revealed that, whilst access to computers typically coincided with pub opening hours, some landlords applied restrictions in the light of commercial considerations, for example on Friday and Saturday evenings or Sunday lunchtimes, when the pubs were often full and it was felt that the computers took up valuable eating/drinking space, and/or were a distraction to diners or those coming in for a drink. Another indication of the influence of commercial concerns is that, prior to the commencement of the initiative, there were in fact 12 selected public houses but three withdrew prior to commencement, in two cases because a commercial need had arisen to use the space identified for installing the computer equipment, and in the other because the pub was now to be sold.

DISCUSSION: A CASE OF FAILED SOCIAL INNOVATION?

According to (Mulgan et al. 2007), successful social innovations, rather than being totally new are: normally constituted by ‘new combinations or hybrids of existing elements typified by cutting across organisational, sectoral and disciplinary boundaries; and create ‘compelling new social relationships between previously separate individuals and groups’ which are themselves generative of new innovations. Given these criteria, and in assessing the extent of social innovation involved in the locals on line initiative, it is instructive to compare our findings in relation to rural public houses to situations where the access to computers and the Internet has more successfully been incorporated within a focus for community interaction.

Perhaps the most successful example of this is the ‘cyber café’. The first cyber café is said to have opened in London in the early 1990s (Liff and Steward, 2003: 314).

Significantly, in the UK the phenomenon gained recognition from an influential House of Lords (upper chamber of the UK Parliament) report which saw cyber cafés as a promising means of attracting new users to the internet, providing a convivial environment to encourage internet usage, and supporting such use with on-site technical help. However, at the same time cyber cafés were seen as a ‘transitory’ phenomenon that would become defunct as the growing sophistication of users led them to take advantage of new opportunities to equip their homes with the means of Internet access. As a result, it has been suggested that UK public policy has remained lukewarm to supporting cyber

cafés and has instead preferred to see public libraries and the like as a longer term solution to providing internet access to those who continue not to have facilities at home or work (Liff and Steward, 2003: 316-317). However, a decade or so after the first cyber café had opened it was estimated that there were over 6000 such facilities in nearly 170 different countries (Liff and Steward, 2003: 314).

Liff and Steward (2003) suggest (following (Oldenburg 1999) that cafés can be regarded as ‘third places’ of community quite distinct from the place of ‘home’ and ‘work’. By adding computer technology to this ‘third place’ new possibilities are created to both encourage wider use of the Internet by attracting novice users and enabling the further development of more expert user communities. These possibilities, they suggest, rest on a combination of weak and strong ties (Granovetter 1973) that characterise the social networks of café users. For example, the ready availability of the technology in a conducive and supportive environment can be encouraging to new users, whilst the ‘strong ties’ amongst those who join an existing group of ‘regulars’ supports becoming a more advanced user. As Liff and Steward note, this ‘strongly captures a notion of learning which involves becoming a member of a new social group employing a new set of practices, and through this gaining a new identity as a practitioner’ (2003: 322).

Liff and Steward (2003) identified four types of cyber café in their research defined in terms of the model of deployment and use of the computer technology. These can be regarded as different types of potentially ‘innovative social space’ in which social learning involving new relationships, practices and identities in ways that can result in

creative social outcomes of the kind highlighted by the notion of social innovation. For example, the first two types of cyber café identified had more to do with boundary maintenance than boundary spanning. For example, there were examples of what were termed *cyber/cafes* where the two activities were either, deliberately or for practical reasons, physically separated. Here the participants in the two activities did not interact, effectively mitigating against the ‘weak tie’ effect of individuals who were novice computer users being encouraged to try to use the Internet. By the same token the basis for allowing a ‘cyber culture’ to develop amongst regular café users was absent. In *cyber-style* cafes computers and the internet were deployed to provide a ‘theme’ to the café space with their primary role to ‘create a mood’ rather than to be used in earnest. Again this militated against the creation of a learning environment for regular computer users (Liff and Steward, 2003: 324).

Two further types of café suggested more innovative ‘boundary spanning’ social spaces had been created: (i) where the physical space was configured to suggest that computer use was an expected activity (e.g. computers were clearly in evidence in the café window). Whilst this potentially reduced ‘weak tie’ effects of encouraging new users, it was observed to provide the basis for supporting a strong learning community amongst regulars; (ii) there were cafes that were configured with the computer emphasised but with no overt expectation or pressure placed on the clientele in the form of expectations that they had to use the computer. This allowed more concerted attempts to be made to attract in new users.

Turning back to possible models of the cyber-pub. We might expect, given the example provided by cyber cafés, that the full appropriation into this third space of computer technology would required not only the local configuration of the technology to this new context but also the creation of the conditions for social learning where domestication could take place through more boundary spanning modes of action and understanding. It is therefore interesting to note that initially, the ‘Locals-on-line’ initiative faced similar degrees of scepticism to the notion of cyber cafés in so far as the public house was seen as an inappropriate environment for computing technology. In part this was because of a perceived higher threat of vandalism and theft but also because the culture of public houses was seen as not sufficiently socially inclusive. In addition, concerns were expressed that the provision of computing access would take up commercially viable space. In fact none of these fears were realised in practice and one might argue that the public house – especially in more community based settings as found in rural locations – has a similar sociality and tradition to the café as a meeting place for regulars and as a means of sustaining community relationships and ties. In principle, therefore, the rural pub could reasonably be regarded as at least as suitable a setting in which to deploy computing technology with innovative social consequences.

Indeed, on the one hand, the experience of the ‘Locals-on-line’ initiative is suggestive of some aspects of such learning and potential social innovation starting to happen in relation to both individual users and groups of users. For example, although we were unable to verify them, accounts were given of individuals who were pub regulars with little interest in the Internet but who were prompted to ‘give it a go’, and in one example

developed into a local expert who gave presentations ‘at the Parish hall’. Other examples included an 87 year old lady who had been able to become sufficiently computer literate to communicate by email with her son, a group of adults with learning difficulties who were able to develop not only computer skills but also social skills by virtue of being able to come into a pub environment, and a retired man and woman who had returned to work and who now used the pub facility to develop their computer and internet skills.

However, these examples of social learning and innovation do not characterise the outcomes of the initiative as whole. It is obviously the case that the initiative failed in its longer-term objective to encourage and facilitate the take up of the concept of the ‘cyber pub’ by other rural public houses. Indeed, by the time of our own study it was evident that it was having difficulties sustaining itself even within the pilot public houses.

However, on the other hand, on the available evidence, it was the case that the cyber pubs in the ‘Locals-on-line’ initiative tended strongly towards the boundary-maintaining pole identified by Liff and Steward (2003) in their research. This was exemplified, for example, by either deliberate or pragmatic efforts to create a separate space and time for the use of computers, and with efforts to make them a discrete and, if required, concealable addition to the basic public house environment. As such, as was found in the case of *cyber/cafes*, there was little evidence of the ‘weak tie’ affect that might support novices to use computers and the Internet or for more expert ‘regulars’ to develop their own ‘cyber’ culture in the context of being locals at the pub.

Whilst, none of the public houses in the pilot approximated to the characteristics of a ‘themed approach’ we might speculate that this would have had similar consequences from the point of view of facilitating social learning. In urban environments, as noted earlier, the themed and re-themed pub (‘jazz pub’, ‘Irish pub’, ‘Australian pub’, ‘chameleon pub’ etc.) has been one of the innovations and experimentation in pub and bar formats encouraged by the restructuring of the industry. Within this context one could see the ‘cyber pub’ as a possible marketing device with computers integrated with other ‘electronic’ pub leisure pursuits such as games machines, juke boxes, arcade games (many of which can now be played ‘on-line’ of course) or even as the ‘virtual shopping centres’ envisaged by some in the trade. Interestingly, the growing availability of wi-fi coverage and ‘hotspots’ in cities and town is now allowing some companies in the PHR sector to offer this service to customers with their own portable computers in the manner now well established by large coffee high street retail chains, hotels and the like. Of course, unlike the ‘Locals-on-line’ initiative, none of these services is normally offered as ‘free at the point of use’. They also assume clientele have their own computing equipment and know how to use it. Finally, of course, the services are provided for a commercial and not primarily community benefit and therefore the commercial model behind them would seem inappropriate to rural settings and issues of public access.

In short, we would suggest that for the ‘Locals on-line’ initiative to have succeeded in generating a model that would have encouraged the broader take-up of computer technology and the Internet, then a more ‘boundary spanning’ model of the ‘cyber pub’ was needed. This did not occur in the ‘Locals-on-line’ initiative for at least the following

reasons. First, though laudable and indeed successful in many ways, the initiative was focused more on the innovation rather than domestication aspects of appropriation. Whilst it did indeed play an important role in establishing the roles of intermediaries, the extent to which effective linkages and channels existed within the project to provide the means for learning through these mechanisms can be questioned. Indeed, the organizers of initiative took a decision early on (later identified by them as an area to be improved in future projects) not to create a means for interaction between the facilitators working with the public houses, as it was felt that they should focus only on the public houses they were responsible for. Second, the broader structural changes in the sector, as outlined in the first part of the article, can only have served to underline the commercial pressures faced by publicans – especially, but not exclusively, tenants – which clearly acted as a constraint on the degree of ‘community mindedness’ it was prudent for a publican to embrace. By the same token, it was probably unrealistic to see most publicans as being able to take on the mantle of intermediaries in the way that cyber café owners appear to have done. As a result, and in the light of our comparison with the phenomenon of the cyber café, the domestication of computers in the rural public house was always likely to be a patchy and limited affair and tend towards the ‘boundary maintaining’ models of use least likely to support social learning and social innovation.

Had a more boundary-spanning model of use been deployed how might the rural cyber pub have emerged? We can hypothesise that this might have brought about over time a change in the practices, identities and relationships between pub users. Supported by the development of a ‘strong learning culture’ this might have encourage pub regulars and/or

those who might otherwise not go into a pub and/or those without any other opportunity to use a computer or access the Internet, to turn the pub into an ‘innovative social space’. How such a change in the culture of rural pubs might have gone on to manifest itself is difficult to envisage. One issue being, of course, the threat that such a change might pose to the fundamental character of the traditional village pub and the core relationship between the ‘regular’ and the ‘landlord’. Nonetheless, at least some of the publicans we interviewed were convinced that there would be further development and change. As one commented, ‘There’s a *lot* more scope for it, but if people don’t know it’s there, that’s the point. People need to know what they *can* do with it; most have no idea. We need more advertising. People are really surprised when they walk in and it’s here.’

CONCLUSION

The initiative to put country pubs on line has not resulted in social innovations in the sense of throwing up significant and enduring new hybrids, boundary spanning activities and new forms of social relationships, and thereby provided a distinctive and sustainable form of internet access for rural communities. In his forward to the Countryside Agency *The Pub is the Hub* guide, HRH Prince Charles argued that addressing the decline of rural services and securing the future of the country pub required an ‘identification of the problems’ and the ‘practical ways to make a difference, preferably by learning from those who have already trodden this path’ (Countryside Agency, 2001). We have no hesitation in agreeing with this observation. Indeed, the argument of this article has been that, in so far as the domestication of these artefacts has proven problematic, the appropriation of computing and internet technologies in country pubs reflects a failure of social learning

as a basis for social innovation. The challenge, therefore, is not only one of overcoming barriers to access and increasing the opportunities to use the technology through its installation and configuration to suit the context of public houses in rural locations. The construct of social learning suggests that social innovation needs to go beyond the deployment and implementation of technology (including training and support for this activity) to focus more deeply on understanding and fostering the conditions for the appropriation of technologies by user communities.

The importance of social innovation in technology appropriation might be explored further by examining how other types of ‘third place’ provide potentially novel and creative settings for social learning in the deployment and use of computer technologies and the Internet. Urban public houses would be one example but more interesting settings might be provided by less obvious examples (one of the authors recently came across a rural launderette in New Zealand which enabled users to both ‘wash’ and ‘surf’!). However, if the results of our study of the ‘Locals-on-line’ initiative is anything to go by, opportunities to conduct further research in rural public houses attempting to appropriate computing and Internet technologies may now have almost gone for good. In short, ‘last orders’ may well have now been called on the future of the rural ‘cyber pub’ as a place and space for community orientated social innovation.

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ⁱ For the uninitiated reader ‘last orders please!’ is the traditional phrase called by the Landlords of public houses at closing time (the latter being defined by the hours the premises are licensed for the sale and consumption of alcohol). This call is normally accompanied by the ringing of a bell and is invariably followed by a final rush to the bar by drinkers to re-charge their glasses. A short period of ‘drinking-up’ time follows when, by law, no further alcohol may be purchased and during this period pub staff have to do their best to encourage patrons to ‘drink-up’ and depart the premises in an orderly manner.

ⁱⁱ Subsequently, the *Pub is the Hub* project has evolved into a voluntary initiative of His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales in his capacity as President of Business in the Community. The initiative acts as an ‘Independent Advisory Trust’ with the object of ‘encouraging pub owners, licensees and local communities to work together to help support, retain and improve access to essential local services’. See <http://www.pubisthehub.org.uk>.

ⁱⁱⁱ The other stakeholders were the Federation of Licensed Victualers Association and the British Beer and Pubs Association, organizations representing the interests of self-employed publicans and the brewing/retail sector respectively. In addition, a small consultancy company advised the initiative. A steering group was also established which, given the opportunity to address both the ‘digital divide’ and to channel local public services through the Internet to rural communities, included representatives from local government.

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