

**Community Democracy Online:  
A Preliminary Report from East Palo Alto\***

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prepared for presentation at the 98<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Political Science  
Association (APSA),  
Panel 30-6 ("Technology, Communities, and Participation"),  
Boston, MA, USA, August 31, 2002

*-- Draft version: please do not quote without permission --*

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## **Introduction**

This paper reports on the first year of a research collaboration between Stanford University's Symbolic Systems Program and the East Palo Alto Community Network. We are exploring whether and how the Internet can enhance the participation of East Palo Alto residents in community decision making. We aim to apply knowledge of the political and social environment in East Palo Alto, as well as results from community network and electronic democracy projects elsewhere, to the development of an online environment for expanding community democracy. In what follows we report on our experiences and study of East Palo Alto, and their implications for future design and intervention using Internet tools.

## **The Community of East Palo Alto**

East Palo Alto, California, is a city of 29,506 residents (according to the 2000 U.S. Census), which is situated near the southwestern shores of San Francisco Bay in San Mateo County. The city's reported ethnic populations in the 2000 Census included: 59% Hispanic or Latino ("of any race"), 23-24%<sup>1</sup> Black or African American, 8-9% Pacific Islander, 7% White alone (and "not Hispanic or Latino"), and 2-3% Asian (U.S. Census, 2000). This represented a substantial change from the 1990 Census, which reported a total population for East Palo Alto of 23,451, with 36% Hispanic, 42% Black, 12% White, and 9% Asian/Pacific Islander (Haas Center for Public Service, 2000).

Growth in the Latino population, and a decline in both the percentage and (to a lesser extent) the total number of African Americans in East Palo Alto, are part of longer-term trends that have existed over the last two decades. The African American population surged in the city largely as a result of post-World War II racial segregation practices in the Bay Area (e.g. "urban renewal" in San Francisco and real estate "block-busting" in East Palo Alto). African Americans' percentage in East Palo Alto grew from 25% in 1960 to 60% in the 1970s and early '80s (Ropenhagen, 1993).

The steep decline in African Americans' percentage of East Palo Alto's population since the 1980s partly reflects an influx of residents from other countries, which has increased the total population in the city. In addition, however, the total African American population in East Palo Alto has also declined. The Bay Area real estate booms of the 1980s and '90s, according to interviews with residents, have led many African Americans to move from East Palo Alto to other cities, such as Sacramento and Stockton, which have more affordable quality housing. The Latino population in East Palo Alto is younger, on average, than the other groups' (Haas Center for Public Service, 2000), and is part of a relatively contiguous area of Latino concentration in San Mateo County that includes neighboring East Menlo Park and part of Redwood City.

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<sup>1</sup> The lower figure in this range is those who reported only one "race"; the higher figure includes those who reported any number of races. The same convention holds for the other categories that are expressed as ranges.

In relation to San Mateo County as a whole (pop. 707,161; reported in Census 2000 as 50% White alone, 22% Hispanic or Latino, 20-22 % Asian, and 4% Black or African American) and also neighboring Palo Alto<sup>2</sup> (population 58,598; 73% White alone, 17-19% Asian, 5% Hispanic or Latino, and 2-3% Black or African American),

East Palo Alto has:

- substantially less household income (median \$45,006 versus \$70,819 for San Mateo County and \$90,377 for Palo Alto);
- many fewer high school and college graduates among those over 25 (48% high school and 11% college graduates versus 85%/39% for the county and 96%/74% for Palo Alto)
- more crowded living spaces (44% of housing units have more than one occupant per room, versus 12% for the county and 4% for Palo Alto);
- more family households (76% versus 67% for the county, 58% for Palo Alto);
- more renter-occupied units (57% versus 39% for the county, 43% for Palo Alto);
- higher unemployment (4.8% versus 2.2% for the county, 1.3% for Palo Alto);
- more poverty (in 2000, 81% of East Palo Alto students received free/reduced-price lunches; Peninsula Community Foundation, 2001);
- much lower, though continually rising and generally unaffordable, property values (median single family home price was \$251,000 in 2000, about half of the county median, but -- reflecting a steep rise in area prices -- up from \$155,000 in 1996; Beggs and Link, 2000; see also Lamont, 2000, and The Community of East Palo Alto, 2000);
- more residents who are not U.S. citizens (34% versus 16% for the county, 15% for Palo Alto);
- more residents who are under 18 (35% versus 23% for the county and 21% for Palo Alto); and
- a larger percentage of residents who speak English less than "very well" (41% versus 18% for the county, 10% for Palo Alto); but also
- a similar percentage of long-term residents (54% of East Palo Alto residents lived in the same house in 1995, versus 57% for the county and 55% for Palo Alto).

(Unless otherwise noted, comparisons above are for East Palo Alto versus San Mateo County and Palo Alto from U.S. Census, 2000; see also the section below titled "Preliminary Study of Language Communities and Demographics in East Palo Alto".)

The city also has a strong base of community organizations and churches, and a history of effective community activism. It appears to be the only city in the surrounding area with laws to protect residential tenants from arbitrary rent increases and evictions (City of East Palo Alto, 2001). In the 1960s, East Palo Alto became a center of the Afro-centric education and Black power movements, and a number of the city's community-based nonprofit organizations have had impacts regionally and even nationally. In 1992, East

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<sup>2</sup> Palo Alto is in Santa Clara County, home of "Silicon Valley". East Palo Alto lies within San Mateo County, but is on the border of Santa Clara County.

Palo Alto had the highest per capita murder rate in the U.S.: 42 total (Corcoran, 1996), but a concerted community effort steadily reduced the total down to just one homicide in 1999 (The Community of East Palo Alto, 2000).

East Palo Alto is one of the most culturally vibrant communities on the San Francisco Peninsula, and long-time residents generally report that the overall quality of life has substantially improved in the city over the last ten years. But East Palo Alto and its residents face formidable challenges that reflect many of those currently confronting California as a whole, including an increasingly multilingual population, widespread fear of crime, many residents who have been imprisoned, insufficient and unequally-distributed resources for education and health, extremely high housing costs, gentrification, and a boom-and-bust economy.

### **Development and Distrust**

In 1983, after seeing much valuable commercial land annexed by neighboring cities, and decisions involving freeway and railroad routing that had long put the community at a disadvantage, East Palo Alto won a decades-long struggle for incorporation. The young City Government had little money until the late 1990s, when some large new commercial developments were approved by the City of East Palo Alto and subsequently built within the City limits, giving it much-needed tax revenue (City of East Palo Alto, 2001). But these projects, which have included a large retail center that led to some residential displacement through eminent domain, expensive new housing that brought in a few affluent residents, and a hotel/office complex that required the bulldozing of a great deal of small business and nonprofit space, have left many with the feeling that long-time residents will not benefit sufficiently from development, and in many cases will be displaced.

The large retail center (Ravenswood 101) appears to have benefited at least some residents. It brought the only full-service bank to the city in the spring of 2002, and, according to a City Government newsletter (City of East Palo Alto, 2001), as of December, 2001, the shopping center as a whole was employing 450 people, of whom 42% were city residents. New housing (Ravenswood Village) has been added to the complex, including 87 units (out of 346 total) reserved for lower-income households (City of East Palo Alto, 2001). The City received a national diversity award for this project as the units went to an "ethnically balanced set of local residents," according to East Palo Alto's mayor (Bay, 2002). The shopping center failed to bring a supermarket to the city, however, which many residents had wanted.

The land on which Ravenswood 101 sits had previously remained mostly vacant for 20+ years. The University Circle office/hotel complex, by contrast, has completely taken over space known as "Whiskey that, until early 2000, was described as East Palo Alto's "downtown". According to one knowledgeable resident, while the eleven nonprofits that were located there have all been successfully relocated elsewhere, about 90% of the 50 or

so displaced small business have had to fold. There is no longer a concentrated area of locally-owned businesses anywhere in the city, and nearby apartment dwellers may eventually face eviction if the occupants of University Circle desire more nearby services such as stores and restaurants, which may not be managed or owned by East Palo Alto residents. City officials have put their stake in proposed developments that may benefit residents more directly, but these are still in uncertain planning stages, and promises of a supermarket have yet to materialize.

The City Government and the local School District have been plagued in recent years by scandals and controversies that reveal both some corruption among some of those in power and an even more noticeable *distrust* by residents of all colors in their city officials. In addition, although East Palo Alto often manifests an impressive, unifying spirit across its ethnic communities, there has been some tension between leaders from the city's older and more established African American community and the recently more populous Latino community over where resources are directed. The five-member City Council has four African Americans and one white, but no Latino, members (<http://www.ci.east-palo-alto.ca.us/citycouncil/index.html>), and the political and resource base among African Americans in East Palo Alto is generally stronger than that of Latinos and Pacific Islanders. Another racial group that could be said to have disproportionate power in the city is white people (e.g., both the mayor and current city manager are Anglos). The distribution of power in East Palo Alto can be viewed as a positive function of years lived in the community and membership in an established circle of leaders, which correlates imperfectly with ethnicity rather than being determined by it. As elsewhere, established families, older residents, and homeowners are more likely to have invested time in city politics and tend to have more clout, and these residents are found in greater proportions among African Americans and whites than among Latinos and Pacific Islanders in East Palo Alto. But recent initiatives in East Palo Alto have really been notable for their ethnic inclusiveness (see "One East Palo Alto - Neighborhood Improvement Initiative" subsection below) .

Nonetheless, representatives from the immigrant communities have expressed a clear sentiment that the City needs to do a better job of meeting their groups' needs (e.g., in language translation, adult bilingual education and immigration services). All the communities of color in East Palo Alto are resource-poor in relation to nearby white-majority ones, though, and whatever tensions exist between groups should not mask this basic fact. As a simple measure, one can compare East Palo Alto's general fund budget to that of the neighboring City of Palo Alto (pop. 58,598). Palo Alto's city budget in 2001-2002 was about \$126 million (Diamond, 2001; Snow, 2001), or \$2150 per resident, compared with \$440 per resident for the City of East Palo Alto (pop. 29,506, City budget: \$13 million; Kazak, 2001; 2002).

## **New Resources, New Decisions**

After decades of missing out on the benefits of Silicon Valley's economy, toward the end of the recent high technology boom (roughly 1999-2000) East Palo Alto experienced a sudden infusion of funds which became available for community services and investment. This windfall came in different forms; in particular (a) a large expansion of the City's tax base through new commercial developments, courted and approved by East Palo Alto's City Council and Redevelopment Agency; and (b) community investment funding in the form of two large initiatives: a Neighborhood Improvement Initiative , with primary funding from the Hewlett Foundation (one of three such Hewlett initiatives in the Bay Area), and a Digital Village Program grant from Hewlett Packard (one of three such HP initiatives in the U.S.).

The wave of new commercial developments in East Palo Alto, all of which are near U.S. Highway 101 (the Bayshore Freeway), have only partly been completed. The Ravenswood 101 Shopping Center has been open for three years, contributing around \$1 million per year to the City budget; but the University Circle office/hotel complex is not quite finished, and a large Ikea furniture store and a proposed small business office development have not yet been built (City of East Palo Alto, 2001). It is plausible that, when all of these developments are operational, they could increase the general funds available to the City budget by 50%.

Budget decisions regarding new tax revenues are being made by officials in the City Government, generally in accordance with City law, although residents have expressed some frustrations regarding this process. Our "Preliminary Observations and Findings" and "Conclusions" sections later in this report discuss the possible roles of the Internet in enhancing government decision making in East Palo Alto ("e-government"). But we have a particular interest in democracy outside of government, because the opportunity to use technology to affect collective decision making in civil society is more immediate, and wider in scope, than it is in government. Governments must do business according to well-established laws, and tend not to want to make use of the potential of the Internet to expand participation (Chadwick and May, 2001) whereas groupings outside of government are less formal and more fluid, procedurally. The decision making processes that accompany large new initiatives are interesting for the study of community democracy because they offer residents an opportunity to do a fresh, in some ways zero-based, allocation of resources.

For these reasons, we have paid particular attention to how community decision making has operated within the two privately-funded initiatives: the One East Palo Alto - Neighborhood Improvement Initiative and the East Palo Alto Digital Village. Both of these initiatives provided millions of dollars in available funding prior to exact decisions about how it would be spent, and their sponsors allowed community organizations and residents in East Palo Alto to work together to substantially make these decisions, in processes outside of the City Government. We feel that these experiences have led to

some useful insights, which suggest how community decision making in sub-governmental organizations could benefit from particular applications of technology.

We describe some of these ideas in later sections of the report. The initiatives themselves are described in the following subsections.

### ***One East Palo Alto - Neighborhood Improvement Initiative (1999 - present)***

In the mid-1990s, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation embarked on a program known as the "Neighborhood Improvement Initiative" ("NII"), providing grant support to "connect fragmented efforts to address poverty-related conditions in selected communities", among other goals (Beggs and Link, 2000). This was the Hewlett Foundation's first foray into community development. It is part of a movement in community investment philanthropy known as "comprehensive community initiatives" ("CCIs"), which began on a large scale in 1990 with the Ford Foundation's Neighborhood and Family Initiative (Pitcoff, 2000).

In a recent report on CCIs published by the Aspen Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives, they are characterized as follows:

"CCIs typically are multi-year enterprises located in poor, urban communities where physical and economic decline, social isolation, and political disempowerment are the norm. Their leaders and participants have sought to improve neighborhood conditions and the well-being of individuals and families by applying two principles:

- *Comprehensiveness* -- an attempt to maximize the likelihood of achieving positive results by simultaneously addressing the social, economic, and physical conditions of a neighborhood; and
- *Community-building* -- an emphasis on participatory processes that develop leadership, enhance 'social capital' and personal networks, and strengthen a community's capacity for improvement." (Kubisch *et al.*, 2002, p. 1)

Compared to earlier government- and foundation-led community development efforts from the 1960s through the '80s, CCIs have placed more emphasis on community direction throughout the process (including the identification of problems as well as solutions), relationships and capacity-building among already-existing organizations, long-term commitments on the part of sponsors, and planning for sustainability. Hewlett's Neighborhood Improvement Initiative approach has especially emphasized community-based governance that reflects the cultural mix of targeted neighborhoods, and partnerships between local nonprofits, community foundations, and universities (Pitcoff, 2000). So far, all of the targeted communities have been in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The first NII project area funded by Hewlett was in the Mayfair district of East San Jose in 1996, followed by the 7<sup>th</sup> Street / McClymonds corridor in West Oakland in 1998. East Palo Alto's NII, targeting a core area of the city with about 11,000 residents, began in 1999. After an initial planning phase lasting around one year, the grants to each of the three NII project areas provided a commitment of \$750,000 per year for six years from the Hewlett Foundation (renewed by Hewlett annually, based on performance), plus some additional startup money for the pre-grant planning phases. In each of the three project areas, Hewlett has acted as the sponsor and given management authority to a local community foundation. In each case, the community foundation has worked with local groups to set up resident bodies to govern the implementation.

After an almost year-long period of community forums and resident planning meetings, facilitated by the Community Development Institute of East Palo Alto with help from the Haas Center for Public Service at Stanford University and the Peninsula Community Foundation (the "partners" in the initiative), a community plan for the One East Palo Alto Neighborhood Improvement Project was submitted to Hewlett in June of 2000 (The Community of East Palo Alto, 2000). The proposal called for a unified community "that is informed, involved, connected, secure, and empowered," and sought funding for 34 different projects.

Hewlett funded the proposal, and the Peninsula Community Foundation provided \$500,000 per year in matching funds, for a six-year, \$7.5 million plan (Beggs and Link, 2000).

In the first year of the grant, a 25-member One East Palo Alto (OEPA) advisory board with mandated ethnic, gender, and age balance, was selected by the partners with input from residents, and it hired an executive director after public interviews. Additional central staff were hired, and execution of the project began in early 2001. The project list was revised into 39 annual projects, and responsibility for them was allocated among the Community Building Institute (which houses OEPA staff) and 9 working groups (Economics, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing, Recreation and Culture, Seniors, Technology and Communications, Youth and Young Adults, and Neighborhood Revitalization). The board meets publicly once per month, and working groups are open to all residents. General membership meetings are held quarterly, and anyone can join.

By the spring of 2002, OEPA could count a number of accomplishments in the community, including the formation of new block clubs for neighborhood cleanup and safety, improved relations between residents and the police, and training sessions in health services, family support, and preparation for home ownership. It had also contributed to important new computer resources for residents (see "East Palo Alto Digital Village" subsection below). A free summer youth program, a tool lending library, and a system of local currency ("OEPA dollars") were all in the works, and the community seemed energized. But the Hewlett Foundation, reportedly in late April, informed the OEPA partners, board, and staff that the community would need to substantially modify its plan to obtain the next year's funding beginning in July. The new

plan would need to focus on 2-3 "signature projects" that would get most of the funding, and there would need to be clearer criteria for evaluation.

New community planning meetings were held, but after consulting with the partners, the OEPA board determined that the few weeks remaining to submit a revised plan were not enough time to arrive at a community-supported plan that would permanently cut or eliminate money for most of the existing projects. The board requested and received a "no-cost" extension to submit a revised plan, and now hopes to have renewed project funding by January. Many residents have reacted with dismay and even anger, and some are unconvinced that the funding will ever be renewed. The shift in Hewlett's stance, and the abrupt timing, were surprising to many given the foundation's earlier statements indicating that residents could expect "a multiyear financial commitment and the promise that residents truly have the power to decide what goes into the plan," and its earlier-evidenced belief that the process of community decision making around big projects takes many months (Beggs and Link, 2000). Hewlett's program representative explained that the foundation's shrinking pie and a shift in its general priorities led to this action, and that other funded projects had been given similar mandates. Hewlett's evaluation consultant TEAMWORKS, which was responsible for monitoring the progress of the initiative, was reported at a May meeting of the OEPA board to have recommended the restructuring requirement, and it is generally consistent with recent thinking in "venture philanthropy" (<http://www.svpbay.org/engage41.html>) concerning the need for clearer goals and a more directed, business-like approach to social investing (see The Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2002; and Synergos/World Economic Forum, 2002). This approach appears to be more top-down than earlier ones that emphasized grassroots, recipient-led decision making and community-building.

The change from Hewlett may also reflect waning enthusiasm among funders for comprehensive community initiatives. The report on CCIs issued this summer by the Aspen Roundtable (Kubisch *et al.*, 2002), to which Hewlett contributed, draws mixed conclusions about CCIs' effectiveness thus far, and questions whether social change can occur through an exclusive focus on communities that ignores the external factors affecting them (e.g. government policies and conditions, such as institutional racism, that exist at regional, national, and global levels). Even before this report, Hewlett's own literature on the NII expressed concern that it was being undermined by the Bay Area real estate boom and gentrification (Beggs and Link, 2000). On one hand, if the neighborhoods improve, it could be that most of the improvement would have happened anyway due to an influx of newcomers who are gradually displacing poorer residents, and a foundation grant is a weak defense against displacement. On the other hand, East Palo Alto is still a poor community, and OEPA has been widely regarded as a vital ingredient for self-determination. Tax money may be coming in, but the community needs strong organizations and the ability of less-well-off residents to be involved if they are to benefit. Assessing the effectiveness of such an initiative may require that the specific recipients of intervention be tracked, rather than just looking at what happens to the

neighborhood as a whole. Whether the new phase of OEPA will materialize and fulfill this promise remains to be seen.

### ***East Palo Alto Digital Village (2000-present)***

Closely following on the heels of Hewlett's NII, the Hewlett Packard Company (HP) announced East Palo Alto's selection as its first "Digital Village" (<http://grants.hp.com/us/digitalvillage/index.html>). The Digital Village Program represented, over the last two years, HP's philanthropic efforts addressed at bridging the "digital divide" and bring the benefits of technology to poor and under-served communities.

Three Digital Village sites were established in the U.S.: the greater East Palo Alto area (including East Menlo Park), the Southern California Tribal Community, and the East Baltimore Empowerment Zone. In the last year, the concept has been extended to Africa and Europe, with Digital Village sites in Kumasi, Ghana; Gauteng, South Africa; and Seine-Saint Denis, France. The grants provide equipment and personnel to improve information technology access in each targeted community, and could be seen as sector-specific examples of comprehensive community initiatives (Kubisch *et al.*). HP has recently adopted the term "i-Community" rather than "Digital Village" to describe its next-generation efforts, beginning with a project in Houston, Texas. The change in wording reflects a shift to a more directed, emerging-market investment approach that is consistent with the changing undercurrents of venture philanthropy discussed above.

As with the Neighborhood Improvement Initiative, funds for the Digital Village were offered before a proposal had been submitted by the community. HP's president, Carly Fiorina, appeared with Bill Clinton and Jesse Jackson at the April 17, 2000, event at the temporary building occupied by Plugged In, an East Palo Alto community technology center, addressing the digital divide. She used the occasion to announce a gift of \$5 million for technology in East Palo Alto, including \$1 million toward a new building for Plugged In, which had been displaced months before due to redevelopment, and \$4 million over three years to establish the Digital Village. Many saw this as a good public relations move by HP, which had come under fire from local labor activists over the work environment of its temporary workers (Jayadev, 2001), and in a time when which Silicon Valley companies generally were being criticized for not addressing the digital divide adequately.<sup>3</sup> But Ms. Fiorina had a previous relationship with the government working on digital divide issues, and HP personnel have followed up on the company's commitment to East Palo Alto, and remained involved in the implementation of the initiative. HP recently won the World Information Technology and Services Alliance (WITSA) Information Technology Excellence Award in the Digital Opportunity category (WITSA, 2002).

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<sup>3</sup> This period, including both Jayadev's dispute and the HP gift announcement at Plugged In, are recorded in the Alan Smitow and Deborah Kaufman documentary film *Secrets of Silicon Valley* (2001).

An advisory board for the East Palo Alto Digital Village was formed, with Plugged In as the lead agency, and the board approved a general budget in April 2001, allocating the \$4 million in remaining funds to six signature projects: the Community Network (including development of a community web portal and computer access hubs), the Community Grants program for providing HP technology to local organizations that apply, the 1-to-1 e-Learning project to provide new laptops for all fourth-to-eighth graders at Belle Haven Middle School, the Community Academy for adult job training, the Homestretch program placing community teenagers in high technology internships, and the Small Business Development Initiative. Each project was administered by one organization or staff member. Coordination between groups and staff has been a primary function of the Technology Collaborative (TechCollab), which meets monthly and maintains a listserv.

Our work has focused on the Community Network project, which aims to establish 10 Technology Access Points (TAPs), consisting of around 10 computers each, open to the public in locations around the city, and a web portal, EPA.Net II.<sup>4</sup> Three TAPs were opened recently, and more are planned. The community web site was launched this summer (<http://www.epa.net>), and already serves as a kind of online newspaper for the city. In addition to the \$1.3 million that was allocated to the Community Network from HP funds, a U.S. Department of Commerce Technology Opportunities grant of \$850,000 was obtained to keep the project going through September 2004, and additional resources have been obtained from various organizations and individuals.

A public review of the East Palo Alto Digital Village in April 2002, two years after Mr. Clinton's visit, showed significant accomplishments under the initiative. Organizations and school children were using their new computers, teenagers reported good experiences in their first technology jobs, the community web site was nearly ready and would feature a new, award-winning City Government website (<http://www.ci.east-palo-alto.ca.us/>), funded partly with Digital Village funds -- which for the first time made information about meetings (agendas, minutes, calendars, etc.) available online; and the event brought notable visitors, including a return engagement by Jesse Jackson, who had established a branch of Rainbow/PUSH in East Palo Alto, and representatives from other HP Digital Village communities in the U.S. HP representatives made it clear that the grant would end as scheduled in April of 2003, and put forward an expectation that the projects would be ready to sustain themselves on other funds by then.

Leaders of Digital Village projects will be seeking to document their accomplishments and secure new funding in the months ahead. Although the Community Network project has funding for more than a year beyond HP's cutoff, its staff must face the sustainability issue as well, which has been a bugbear of similar projects around the country. And the advisory board has suffered in recent months from a rift over funds allocation among some of its member groups. With some key staff members taking other jobs, staff

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<sup>4</sup> An earlier U.S. Dept. of Commerce grant in 1995-'97 led to the development of EPA.Net in its first incarnation, but the site ceased to be updated when that round of funding ran out.

retention has become a major issue as well. As with OEPA, it remains an open question whether the investment in the Digital Village will permanently alter residents' access to information and technology.

## **Internet Usage, Community Networks and Online Deliberation: The Challenge of Participation**

Before describing our projects and findings during the first year of our collaboration with the East Palo Alto Community Network, in this section we attempt to situate our work within the already vast literatures to which it connects. These include the effect of Internet usage on social and political involvement; the experiences of community networks, worldwide; the emerging theories and practices that join deliberative approaches to democracy with computer-mediated communication; and a theme that is common to all three areas: the barriers to participation in social decisions, on the part of those who are affected by them, and the ways people are overcoming those barriers.

### ***Effects of the Internet***

Much of the social science research on the effects of Internet usage has attempted to determine whether it is good or bad for various desiderata: e.g. personal happiness, social connectedness and political participation.<sup>5</sup> A number of studies (e.g. Harwood and Lay, 2001; Kraut *et al.*, 1998; Nie and Erbring, 2002) have found that the Internet is not necessarily a good medium for promoting "real-world" social and political participation in general, if one simply looks at the effects of amount of usage, for example. More positive conclusions have come from studies of Internet users in community networks (e.g. Borgida *et al.*, 1999; Hampton, 2001; Kavanaugh and Patterson, 2001), indicating that geographically compact networks can increase residents' social ties and make some users (e.g. those less well off) more likely to get online than they would otherwise be. The early result by Kraut *et al.* suggesting that Internet usage induces depression was reversed in a study by LaRose *et al.* (2001) for users who had stronger interactions with other users through email -- their Internet use made them *less* depressed. They suggest that the original effect may be limited to novice users who have few friends online. In general, more crafted efforts to improve online experience are being shown to have significant benefits for political and social engagement (e.g. Price. and Cappella, 2002).

Recently, some authors have been arguing that an important question to ask is what effect the Internet is having on society as a whole as more people adopt it and incorporate it into their daily routines, and as more users gain broadband access (Horrigan and Rainie, 2002a; 2002b; Haase *et al.*, 2002). The findings regarding changes in usage (e.g. that broadband users are much more likely to become producers rather than viewers, and that

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<sup>5</sup> For several papers related to this topic, see the first issue of *IT and Society* (Summer, 2002).

calendar time spent using the Internet leads to richer email messages), provide reasons for optimism about the Internet's pro-social and democratizing potential.

### *Community Electronic Networks*

Such hopes often lie behind the establishment of a community network such as East Palo Alto's. Electronic community networking is a global phenomenon that now constitutes a distinct political movement within civil society. If we restrict attention to geographically-defined community networks (as opposed to "online communities" which are more global), the most successful community networks so far have been those, either in large urban areas with many already-connected users (such as craigslist.org and the Seattle Community Network scn.org) that become well-established through a core of unpaid users; or "wired communities": densely connected, and usually well funded, testbed networks in small communities (.e.g. Blacksburg Electronic Village -- Cohill *et al.*, 1997; Camfield Estates-MIT Creating Community Connections Project -- Pinkett, 2002; and the Lagrange Public Internet Initiative -- Shapira *et al.*, 2002). While these projects are of great academic interest, their reliance either on nonreplicable amounts of research funding or a more well-off community make them not necessarily the best laboratory for seeing how the introduction of community networks will affect poorer communities at the level at which they are first likely to be introduced.

The East Palo Alto Community Network project represents an attempt to jumpstart a self-sustaining network in an under-served city, using technology access points to target users who have never been on the Internet. We cannot compare it yet to other "Digital Village" sites, since East Palo Alto's is the first to be developed, but it may be similar enough to other nonprofit community networks in somewhat wealthier areas, such as the Boulder Community Network (<http://www.bcn.boulder.co.us>), to draw some lessons from them.

The East Palo Alto Community Network might eventually become a for-profit network, focusing on supporting local businesses. But so far the potential for web portals to make a profit has been negligible. A Boston Consulting Group study commissioned for the Digital Village Project found that of all the major portals on the Web, as of April 2001 only Yahoo! was profitable, and it was only marginally so. The nonprofit model relies on serving community needs. Among nonprofit community networks, the main challenges are economic sustainability (obviously), lack of adoption by the community (leading the website to become a "ghost town"), and staff retention and volunteer burnout.

A study by Stanford students in a course this spring (Dimson *et al.*, 2002) found that there are a number of different successful financing strategies that have kept nonprofit networks going (e.g. membership fees, partnering with an ISP, city government funding, special events, local advertising and webhosting, and grant writing). The keys to success vary by community, but common lessons are that engagement requires education and outreach and that the network should not be web-bound but have a real presence in the community (e.g. real-life events). A significant threat to community networks currently

is the pressure to protect the interests of commercial providers (Lessig, 2001; Benner, 2002). Some have called this a new "enclosure" movement. But community networks may be a bulwark against the loss of the public sphere on the Internet, and might therefore thrive through public funding and community memberships as more people see the need for them to exist as public access space, that communities might have to negotiate for with broadband providers, as they have for cable television's public access channels.

### ***Online Deliberation***

For theorists of deliberative democracy, a key question is whether online political participation can actually improve democratic outcomes. After all, if many new users are brought online, even if they have a socially satisfying and politically engaged experience, the hopes for Internet democracy will not be realized if outcomes remain unchanged. Some obvious desiderata include making online dialogue more civil and pleasant, and informing participants. Excellent efforts have focused on these goals, e.g. in small group discussions at Web Lab (<http://www.weblab.org>) and the Search for Common Ground (<http://www.sfcg.org>), and at the Public Knowledge Project (<http://pkp.ubc.ca>). In contrast to "deliberative polling" (Fishkin, Luskin, and Jowell, 2000), however, self-selected participation in structured online discussions may not have much impact on attitudes (Smith 2002). We see it as a challenge to demonstrate that, by some measure, online democracy can lead to better decisions in a community. A recent study by Muhlberger and Shane indicates that the American public shares this goal. Several thoughtful proposals for improving deliberation outcomes through technology have been put forward and are waiting to be implemented (e.g. Coleman and Goetze; Goleman, 2002).

### ***If We Build It, Will They Come?***

Even if community democracy can truly be fostered for Internet users, this still leaves the crucial questions of participation and adoption, which we feel may be the biggest issues facing any effort to use the Community Network in East Palo Alto to improve the community.

An obvious issue for East Palo Alto concerns the digital divide(s). Recent study reaffirms the reality of a racial divide even when incomes are equated (Cooper, 2000; NTIA, 2002), and shows that the problem is more pronounced for Latino users than for African American users (Zaslavsky *et al.* 2002). Some lessons that have emerged from the literature include the value of exposure through employment, ease of use (e.g. for non-English speakers), and educational outreach (Shulman *et al.*, 2002). In online dialogue, a way of compensating for lack of participation is to have structured reminders of who is not present, e.g. the Native American practice of asking, "Who speaks for Wolf?" (Thomas *et al.* 2002). But we hope to apply the wisdom of others to this problem.

Outreach and community building are important for all types of users if they are to become participants. In East Palo Alto, we face the challenge of trying to foster Internet adoption by people who have not used it before and do not have the resources to own their own computer. If this can be accomplished, however, it may bode well for efforts in other parts of the U.S. and around the world where access is likely to come at the community level long before it reaches every home.

### **Collaboration Between Stanford Researchers and the Community Network Project (July 2001-present)**

The Symbolic Systems Program at Stanford University was approached by the Haas Center for Public Service at Stanford in the spring of 2001 to see if there was interest in faculty and student involvement in technology projects in East Palo Alto. After a summer of discussions and meetings with representatives of the Digital Village initiative, a proposal was put together and funded under the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education's Public Scholarship grants in the fall of 2001. Students were hired in January, and two teams were formed: one focused on online dialogue and the other on serving different language communities within East Palo Alto.

The collaboration follows a service/community-based learning model, in which students/faculty try to work with those who are leading a community project to contribute something useful to it, while drawing lessons for further research. The collaboration teams were introduced to the community through Haas Center orientations, meetings and a guided tour of the town, and each team met weekly through June. The language communities team met with leaders in non-English speaking communities, collected data on the demographics of East Palo Alto, and researched technologies for non-English language functionality. It also did a questionnaire survey of residents. The findings were written up and shared.

The online dialogue team attended community meetings and joined email lists to observe decision making in East Palo Alto. It also created an online forum for discussing a proposal to allow Ikea to build a store, which was on the March primary ballot, and streamed video from two community forums on the issue. A forum is currently being created for discussion of a text and picture version of *Dreams of a City*, a documentary film about the history of East Palo Alto. During the summer, a number of "insiders" involved in the East Palo Alto Digital Village initiative and the Community Network project were interviewed to get a clearer picture of the needs and future prospects for online democracy in the city.

### **Preliminary Observations and Findings**

In the subsections below, we summarize what we have learned in five study areas: language functionality and community demographics, face-to-face community meetings, online community experience, a community survey regarding computer usage, and

insider interviews. Such reporting involves issues of research ethics that are especially important to consider in participant-observer research, of which our work is an instance. We therefore promised those with whom we have interacted that we would not include identifying information in this report, about anything that could violate the normal expectations of confidentiality that such interactions entail, and even for the surveys and interviews, in which formal consent procedures were used. We have tried to characterize the general conditions under which observations were made and data collected, as much as is relevant and ethical under the circumstances.

### *Language Functionality and Community Demographics*

We conducted a preliminary inquiry into serving the needs of non-English speaking language communities in East Palo Alto in February and March of 2002. This consisted of gathering data from the Census and other sources (agencies, newspaper stories, and the data bank of the Haas Center for Public Service); testing translation systems for effectiveness; and, most importantly, meeting with representatives from various organizations representing these communities. Ben Sywulka focused on meetings with the Spanish-speaking and Latino community, and Roma Jhaveri focused on meetings with the Pacific Islander community. More data became available later, and have been added below as<sup>6</sup> appropriate.

Some of the demographic data were presented above in the "Community of East Palo Alto" section. Of particular note from the 2000 Census is that 65% of city residents speak a language other than English at home, of whom 63% (41% of the total population) speak English less than "very well". The Census figures reveal, specifically, that 54% of residents speak Spanish (of whom 68% do not speak English "very well"); 7.5% speak an Asian or Pacific Islander language (of whom 43% do not speak English "very well"); and 2.4% speak other Indo-European languages (of whom 19% do not speak English "very well"). There are especially many Spanish speakers among those under 18. A school official revealed that 70% of students in her school speak Spanish, and California Department of Education figures show that 92% of non-English speaking students in the district speak Spanish, while 6% speak Tongan. Other language groups accounting for about 1% each are Hindi and Samoan (<http://cde.ca.gov>).

So the largest language community in East Palo Alto is Spanish speaking, and there is also a significant group of Pacific Islander language speakers (many of the Hindi speakers appear to be from Fijian families). We felt it would be important for the success of the Community Network to learn more about the two cultural communities within which these language groups are found: Latinos and Pacific Islanders, but to pay particular attention to language issues. Meetings with organization representatives from the two communities led to some tentative conclusions about the characteristics of each community and the best strategies for encouraging online engagement within them. Both

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<sup>6</sup> All demographic figures are from the U.S. Census (2000) unless otherwise noted.

communities contain around 63% foreign-born residents (interpolating from Census data), and the ties to their native country among these residents are described by community representatives as especially strong.

Around 84% of Latinos in East Palo Alto and nearby East Menlo Park and Redwood City list their ethnicity as Mexican, and a many of these families came from Aguililla, Michoacan (Garcia, 1995). Both the Latino and Pacific Islander communities have nonprofit and unofficial organizations that serve and represent them, as well as church services conducted in their native languages. Both groups also tend to live in crowded conditions. It is not uncommon for two or three families to live in one house. But there are significant differences between each different group, and specific knowledge regarding these differences is important for the Community Network project. For example, Tongans are often concerned with immigration issues, whereas Samoans, under the U.S. flag, are not.

Meetings with representatives of the Latino and Pacific Islander communities led to the identification of several strategies for promoting online engagement of community members with the community web portal and access points. These strategies include:

- *Translation and software support for each language.* For Spanish, a number of web-based translation tools were found that were rated as "definitely usable" by a native speaker (Ben Sywulka, one of the authors of this paper). These tools, such as the Google translator, are easy to learn how to use and readily available. Translation tools for Tongan are available but cost \$50 or more, and automated translation is difficult because of the significance of different wording. Gist translators may be looked into, as Stanford is one of the centers for machine translation.
- *Voice technology.* Both voice-to-text and read-aloud (text-to-voice) capability could be a useful tool for those who do not read and write. In addition, just storing content in audio format may be popular with users from all communities.
- *Motivating applications.* It is clear that few novices in these communities are likely to see political discussion forums as sufficiently motivating for them to get on line. Applications that were mentioned as motivating included job and housing search tools, native country and neighborhood news (East Palo Alto does not have its own newspaper), immigration information, English courses for adults, and school information (e.g. the ability of parents to monitor their childrens' attendance and scores). Leaders from the Pacific Islander community are particularly interested in health information being made more available.
- *Culturally appropriate outreach.* Each community has its preferred means of communication, and tapping into these real-world networks could be very important. For example, El Concilio, a Latino organization, approaches community members in Latino hangouts and offers to host a meeting for receiving health information in the resident's home, to which they can invite their friends. This might be a good approach for Community Network outreach. One Latino leader suggested that EPA.Net issue a print edition with some of its best content, and make it easily

available in the community so that residents would get exposed to the community network. This could work especially well if this "newspaper" were issued in Spanish and Tongan editions, or bi- or multilingual ones.

- *Personally relevant content.* Some community sites carry a great deal of information about individual residents. Photographs can be taken at events, with notice that digitized versions will be visible on the web.
- *Streamlining of content.* Users at the city library are limited to 30 minute online at a time, and so must be able to find what they want easily and not have to read too much.
- *Address/alleviate fears.* Members of immigrant communities often fear that their name or identifying information is being captured. In addition, second language speakers may be embarrassed about their English skills, or be shy about having their writing publicly linked to them. This makes the possibilities of anonymity, easy unsubscribing, and/or deletion of postings important, with good publicity given to these options if they are available.

The study of language communities generally provided encouragement that residents of non-English speaking communities could be engaged and contribute to the Community Network on a large scale, but made it clear that this could not be taken for granted. Little existing data was found to be available regarding computer usage among East Palo Alto communities in particular, so we did a separate questionnaire study to investigate online access, which appears later in this report.

### ***Face-to-Face Community Meetings***

From our first exposure to the recent community-wide initiatives in East Palo Alto in April of 2001 to the present, we have attended many meetings and public forums in the community. The observations below are primarily based on the experience of Todd Davies (the first author) at 18 face-to-face community meetings, most of which entailed at least some element of decision making, with a few that were just community forums, between April of 2001 and July of 2002. Ten of these meetings related to the totality of the One East Palo Alto - Neighborhood Improvement Initiative, six concerned the East Palo Alto Digital Village initiative and related technology projects within OEPA, one was a residents group meeting, and one was a City Government meeting.

Many interesting observations and common themes emerge from the notes from these meetings, and our interview subjects have suggested some that are reported in the "Stakeholder Interviews" subsection. Below are some observations, with multiple instances to support each, that especially speak to the potential uses of online tools for communication to support deliberative decision making, in the context of community-based planning. As will be readily seen, these phenomena are generally not unique to East Palo Alto, but persist nonetheless. It is also worth saying in advance that, to the

extent that these observations are critical, they are meant to be critical of processes, not individuals, who are often doing the best that *can* be done under the circumstances.

1. *An emphasis on face-to-face meetings for making important decisions in East Palo Alto disenfranchizes residents and biases outcomes.* On many occasions, both observed directly and reported by others, residents have been disturbed to learn that an important decision was made, with which they disagree, at a meeting which they could not attend. In one dramatic case, an important vote on prioritizing which projects would be cut or retained was held at the same time as one of the interested groups had previously scheduled a major public meeting, and so their interests failed to be reflected in the outcome, with potentially permanent effects. Members of the Latino community, known for working long hours, frequently complain that meetings are scheduled during the day when the only people who can go are nonprofit professionals who are paid to be there. The high stakes encourages those who benefit from disenfranchisement to insist that the decision stand, and in one case this led to a serious split in an important committee that has not met for several months. One of our stakeholder interviewees reports that when the very important Redevelopment Agency meetings are held after each City Council meeting, there are few observers left in the room because the meeting occurs late and after public comment. East Palo Alto suffers from a dearth of representative opinion polling and other techniques designed to assess broad opinion, and this tends to concentrate power in the hands of a relative few who show up to most of the meetings and serve on multiple committees.
2. *Insufficiently frequent communication hampers the ability of volunteer (or near-volunteer) committee members, and the public, to participate in key decisions.* Governance of the community-wide initiatives has been put in the hands of residents who often do not have email. The proportion of OEPA board members who have email is reportedly only about 50%, which makes communication between meetings, and even notification about when and where meetings will occur, quite difficult. As a result, committee members are often asked to approve decisions that professional staff recommend, without a realistic alternative being available and without having had sufficient advance notice. Some feel that this means volunteer committees must defer to staff as a matter of routine, but this is sometimes not the intention of the process and tends to concentrate power over budgets in the hands of a few professionals.
3. *Lack of information about relevant external events leaves meeting participants unprepared for change.* If, as is often the case for residents groups in East Palo Alto, members are not keyed into events such as looming changes in the state budget that could affect the city, they are often unable to prepare for them in time. The fact that the Hewlett Foundation's change in approach toward funding did not become apparent to those involved in OEPA until very late before the board was officially informed provides one example of this. Better communication on all sides, including between Neighborhood Improvement Initiatives in different communities for example, might have helped residents anticipate what would happen. Many board members were reportedly still confused about the available options, what a "no-cost" extension

meant, and other issues when they made crucial decisions. The reliance on face to face meetings may have contributed to this problem.

4. *Self-selection leads to biased decision making groups.* At a number of meetings and community forums devoted to controversial topics (e.g. the Ikea ballot proposition), those present were observed mostly to represent one side. Even when the opposing side is represented, it is often underrepresented or unable to be as vocal as more powerful residents, often because the meeting is facilitated or controlled by those sympathetic to one side. This can lead to important conflicts not surfacing that perhaps ought to. For example, a major issue in the underlying politics of the city concerns which vision for residential development should be emphasized: a "new urbanist" model with high density housing along improved transit corridors (which would benefit renters and those who are concerned about the cost of housing), or a more suburban model based on limiting residences to single family dwellings on large lots. This can clearly be a divisive issue, but it is possible that civil discourse could help homeowners, for example, to see and support the concerns of renters for more affordable housing, and that renters could understand and support homeowners' desire for a cleaner, safer city.
5. *The use of streamlined procedures for making important decisions can lead to ineffective decisions and disillusionment.* On several occasions, a decision was observed or reported to have been made in a way that emphasized simple procedures. In one group, the officers of the group all continued by acclamation, even though some group members expressed dissatisfaction afterward with the way this happened. Face to face meetings make conflict especially stressful, and they call for quick thinking if one is to oppose the way that things are set up. Since people are often not taught to think about the importance of process, they may underestimate its consequences and underreact. An important prioritizing decision was made in one planning meeting with virtually no time for structured deliberation beforehand, and although the procedure was clever (attaching dot stickers to butcher paper to vote for an area) and transparent, it may not have reflected the carefully considered will of the community. In this case, most of the blame can be pinned on the fact that the decision had to be made very quickly, but sometimes a more representative process is possible. Grants were given to projects at one point, reportedly, based on one amount for projects with lots of votes, and a lesser amount for low vote-getters. Although this may have been appropriate given that the purpose was just to get people involved in the initiative through these small projects, the process clearly would not work well for long-term resource allocation.
6. *Face to face meetings put decisions in a setting that may be information-poor relative to what is needed.* In almost no cases were observed meetings held in a place that had a computer with Internet access nearby. In such cases, when important information relevant to decision ought to be brought in, it often does not enter the discussion. In one case, a committee was deciding whether to pursue a given technology option, but the only source of information present was a salesperson from the company that was offering the option. This is clearly a more general problem with face to face meetings, but it often seems to be underestimated. Government bodies can navigate

through this problem with lots of staff research, carefully prepared guest lists, and other resources, but small volunteer groups do not have this luxury, even though they may be making decisions with stakes in the millions.

7. *Face to face meetings are often accompanied by a lack of transparency.* This can take several forms, as when hidden agendas are not made public. One important governing board failed to release an annual financial statement to the public, and because it was not required to do so by law, potentially important facts remained hidden to stakeholders. But the main observation here is that face to face meetings inherently lack transparency because they occur in limited spaces, where many stakeholders cannot be present. One very important meeting occurred without notice to many who would be affected by it, because there was insufficient time and communication resources to give such notice.

The above list is offered not to emphasize what is negative but to name problems that could be addressed through the use of communication technology. Broadcasting, for example, has long been used as an antidote to problem 7, but East Palo Alto's City Council meetings (unlike Palo Alto's) are not broadcast on radio. This is a simple example of how technology could make a difference.

### ***Online Community Experience***

In this subsection we reflect on lessons we have taken away from the limited experience in online dialogue we have had in East Palo Alto. There is much to be said about practices for avoiding flame wars and the like (Smith, 2002), but we will restrict these observations to what our East Palo Alto experience can teach us so far.

1. In a community with substantially below average Internet access, the lack of such access on the part of many people hurts everyone. For example, if many OEPA board members are not online at all, no email list can serve as a general communication medium for the board because it would cut some people out. This is a lesson that folks who have mostly inhabited "wired" worlds for a while now may otherwise be forgetting, even if they once experienced it. The problem is more acute in disadvantaged communities because the rest of the world is surging ahead. This is one of the primary digital divide issues, and we have observed it clearly in East Palo Alto. Only a few high access groups have been able to use email lists in the way that more affluent groups do, as a tool to augment decision making and a constant channel for group communication. The few who have used it this way (technology-specific working groups, mostly) have used it effectively, however (e.g. the TechCollab did an online survey of its list members using Zoomerang (<http://www.zoomerang.com>) to determine when to hold its meetings), and the technology for forums being used in EPA.Net proved useful for its development team's interaction.
2. One community member has proven how much a single committed citizen can make a difference in online democracy, simply by attending many community meetings and posting his notes from them to an email list. The list has grown as people discover its

value, and even decision makers who were present at meetings report that they find the notes very useful. This has been a major force for getting people to see the benefits of Internet communication for learning about the community and local political issues. This resident's success should be seen as an antidote to naysaying about the potential for online tools to improve democracy in East Palo Alto.

3. The official launch party for EPA.Net will not happen until September 2002, so it is difficult to judge participation rates in its forums. However, so far, there has been very little participation in the many forums that were established. This was also our earlier experience with the Ikea forum we experimented with in February and March, on the beta version of EPA.Net. Very little outreach was done, as has so far been the case for forums on the new EPA.Net, so all this tells us is that forums do not automatically attract posters, even though the site is getting traffic for its very useful news stories.
4. Our experiments in videotaping community meetings and announcing that they would be streamed on the web was somewhat encouraging. People at the meetings showed interest in how they could watch the videos, and no one objected to being taped, which was one concern we had. That concern could come up again under the right circumstances, however.
5. Although it did not actually go forward, we received a positive response from a city official regarding whether she would be willing to respond to questions in an online forum format, regarding decisions over which she had authority. We think this may be a "killer app" for community networks, insofar as it gives the public an exclusive type of access to city officials. The reluctance of governments to move in this direction on their own is now well-documented (Chadwick and May, 2001), but the hope is that if a few officials can be persuaded to make themselves available in this way, others will have to follow in order to stay in office as the public comes to expect this more. For now, this remains just a hope in the case of East Palo Alto. One important player in the technology scene in East Palo Alto has said that it is difficult to get people to see the potential for the new technology, which may be both a good thing and a bad thing for the prospects for electronic democracy.

### ***Community Survey Related to Computer Use***

Our preliminary study of language communities found that there was a dearth of reliable data about computer usage in East Palo Alto, and we decided it would be useful to obtain baseline data in this regard just prior to the launch of the community network this summer. The survey was administered in both written and oral form, in English and Spanish, and for Pacific Islanders, by staff at Pacific Islander Outreach, a nonprofit service organization.

Excluding a few Pacific Islander surveys that have yet to be tabulated, 137 surveys were completed by East Palo Alto/East Menlo Park residents (only) in various settings around the city: at an OEPA board meeting, at a meeting at the Senior Center, at the Juneteenth Festival, at City Hall, at a taqueria, at a clinic, outside of the Senior Center, at a mostly

Latino Catholic church, and at a laundromat. Of the tabulated surveys, respondents were 34% African American, 50% Latino, 6% Pacific Islander, and 1.5% Anglo, which is close to being representative given that most of the respondents were adults.

The survey asked (a) whether the respondent uses a computer, if not why not and if so, where, how often, and for what purposes; (b) whether the respondent has heard of the Internet, whether they have access to the Internet and/or email from home, and if so what they use it for; (c) whether the respondent uses the web, if not would they like to, and if so what they use it for; (d) whether the respondent is aware of computer/Internet classes in East Palo Alto, if yes, where they heard and have they gone, and would they be interested in going to the library and/or Plugged In for classes; (e) how the respondent gets news about the community, whether they keep with community issues and which issues specifically; (f) whether the respondent is interested in getting information about community issues through the Internet, or interacting with city officials online; (g) what information the respondent wishes he/she could have, and whether they would be willing to go to a community access center to use the Internet if the information could be easily accessed; and (h) the respondent's age, gender, ethnicity, and languages spoken generally and in the home.

We are still analyzing the data and awaiting the final tabulations, but results with the 137 tabulated so far exhibit the following highlights:

- Fewer Latinos than respondents generally report using a computer (42% versus 66%) or having home Internet access (33% versus 53%), but the proportions were higher than expected among Latinos.
- This largely appears to reflect an age gap, with 64% of Latinos under 25 using computers, and only 30% of those over 25 doing so.
- Respondents generally expressed very high willingness to use library or community access hubs (91% said they would be willing to do so if it were near them). This is good news for the Community Network if more Technology Access Points can be brought online.
- About equal numbers (40%) said they do not keep up with community issues and get most of their news from television, respectively. Nearly 34% said they get community news by word of mouth. This is a good baseline for future comparison. If more people keep up with community issues and say they get information from EPA.Net in the future, the network will have been a success. This illustrates how different local communities may have different niches that a community web site could fill. In many neighborhoods in the Bay Area, there are plenty of local newspapers, but not in East Palo Alto.
- The data challenge the notion that getting computer and Internet access at home requires using or having access to computers at work. Small percentages of residents generally and Latinos in particular use a computer in their workplace (26% and 16% respectively), but much higher percentages use computers at home (51% and 42%),

indicating that other factors (proximity to Silicon Valley, access to community hubs, or the "free laptops for 4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders" program) are giving people home access.

We feel these results provide a solid foundation for believing that the community network can have an impact, as well as baselines for comparison once the network is well-publicized.

### *Insider Interviews*

As a final study in this first phase of our work in East Palo Alto, we conducted 12 one-on-one interviews with insiders who are involved with or have a strong stake in the Community Network project. These were all conducted by Todd Davies in July and August of 2002. They were intended to fill in gaps in our picture of East Palo Alto and the community initiatives, and to serve as dialogues regarding future collaborative projects between Stanford and the Community Network.

A list of questions, read to each participant at the beginning of the interview, set the stage for the dialogue, but did not constrain it. The initial list of questions was:

- Where do you live, and how long have you lived there?
- What is your involvement with the Digital Village and East Palo Alto, and how long have you been involved?
- Why did you become involved? What were your interests?
- What were your goals and hopes for Digital Village and East Palo Alto when you became involved, and what are they now?
- What do you see as the main opportunities and challenges facing East Palo Alto, the Digital Village, you and your work?
- Do you have ideas to offer relating to East Palo Alto and Digital Village?
- What role can the Internet play in East Palo Alto?
- What role do you think online group communication can play in East Palo Alto?
- What is your interest in online meeting spaces? What do you see as the opportunities, challenges, and any ideas you have about them?
- What is your interest in collaboration with Stanford? Opportunities, challenges, ideas?
- Are there any other topics you would like to discuss?

Of the 12 interviewees, 5 were women and 7 were men. Seven were African American, 2 were Latino, 2 were Anglo, and 1 was Asian/Pacific Islander. Five were residents of East Palo Alto, and 7 were not.

As with our other experiences, many ideas and much information emerged from this exercise. Below, we report just on how the interviewed altered our understanding of community decision making in East Palo Alto and the potential role of technology for making it more democratic.

1. A few of the interviewees somewhat changed our understanding of the difficulties in getting residents to attend meetings, which our observations had taught us might be due to the difficulty in fitting them into people's schedules. The problem has often been even more severe -- that it is just very difficult for people to find out when and where meetings are going to be held, even those who have been a part of the process. We have experienced this ourselves, so perhaps we should not have been surprised by this observation. This has suggested to us that perhaps we should focus on how publicity about meeting times and locations could be promoted by EPA.Net, as a practical step before trying to introduce new technology to allow online deliberation.
2. A striking theme to come from the interviews was that the defects in the process of decision making noted in the "Face to Face Community Meetings" subsection above are more damaging in a disadvantaged community like East Palo Alto than they would be elsewhere, as well as being harder to protect against. Lack of transparency (e.g. deals being done under the table or in private side meetings), lack of fair process (e.g. favoritism, fiefdoms), malfunctioning processes (e.g. making most of the substantive decisions before procedures are in place), and lack of communication (e.g. people not finding out about meetings) all have the effect of amplifying distrust and despair, which is quite high in a community where many residents already feel betrayed by systems of power. This means that anyone trying to do a community-wide initiative, for example, needs to pay more attention, not less, to process issues than would be the case in an affluent community. "You need to be overly rigorous," said one interviewee.
3. There emerged a sentiment that we need to move beyond debates about whether technology is a good or bad thing for communities, and recognize it as necessary infrastructure, much as we don't argue about the usefulness of roads. To be sure, our sample was biased toward those who have a high opinion of the potential for technology, but their convergence on this opinion is worth noting.
4. Going a step further, there were some suggestions in the interviews that communication technology should be viewed as the foundation of community change, not just one among ten pieces. This is a view toward which we are sympathetic, but the interviewees and we are generally in agreement that the effects of technology cannot be taken for granted.
5. While poor implementations of technology can fail spectacularly, most of our interviewees emerge as practical optimists, who feel that there are many paths to having a successful community network, that we mostly know what they are and they work if you implement them. One interviewee cited a web portal widely regarded as a failure and pointed out obvious sources of problems, such as the fact that it did not link discussion to its own content. The view that emerges is that a successful community network requires smart implementation, but not brilliance. As another interview put it, organizations in East Palo Alto create flyers using document software all the time, yet almost never put them on the web. With EPA.Net, they can now do so at virtually no cost, and this would be a good way to create web content, but most are not doing this yet.

6. At the same time, most of these insiders, especially those who have been around town for a while, have a realistic view of what is possible and understand that there are deep structural causes for things like the apathy of most East Palo Alto residents and the competitiveness among some of its organizations. Having an understanding of these difficulties may mean the difference between staying with the change process or abandoning it.

### **Preliminary Conclusions**

Online community democracy has finally arrived in East Palo Alto in a limited but significant way. The City Government's new website, and others for community organizations, are already making it much easier to get information about them than it was when we began this project last January. The Technology Access Points are reportedly already busy, just after they opened, and each one will have one computer in it this fall devoted to those who want to explore election issues. Like other East Palo Alto residents, we relied on word of mouth to tell us about many of the meetings we have attended, and were given paper documents by people only after we had gotten to know them a bit. It is exciting to be present at the birth of a more open community, but there is also the feeling that there is little to report that has not happened elsewhere, long ago, and we feel sadness at the current breakdown in OEPA and the losses in personnel connected to the community-wide initiatives that are now being added to daily.

Future plans for the collaboration can be divided into the short-term and the long-term focused. In the short term, some practical strategies for promoting democracy using the community network include (a) getting more information on the calendar of EPA.Net concerning community meetings, and publicizing it as a resource for the city, and (b) attempting to sign up local officials to host or answer questions on online forums, and again doing appropriate outreach, in the hope that this will create a bandwagon.

Our long-term focus is on the development of a prototype tool for online, asynchronous meetings, which would combine some of the structured dialogue properties of systems like Web Lab's (<http://www.weblab.org>), with online polling/voting systems like Zoomerang (<http://www.zoomerang.com>). Our hope is that a tool like this could address many of the problems we observed with face to face community meetings, by enabling people to participate who could not otherwise do so, and by promoting the sharing of information between meetings and with the community.

In our insider interviews, the dreams of East Palo Alto were laid in stark contrast to one another. The city has too often experienced nightmares, one of the saddest reminders of which was pointed out by an interviewee who said that a nearby mortuary is one of the town's most successful businesses, having become profitable when the city was losing so many residents due to HIV/AIDS and murder. The joyful dream is reflected in the comment of another of our interviewees, who said that she joined OEPA because she was "excited about being involved with people who had very high aspirations, in a diverse

city which could show America where cities could go." For OEPA, the dream has been deferred. We hope that it will not be denied for much longer.

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