

## **The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rete Civica de Milano**

### **CONGRATULATIONS**

The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of RCM is a milestone in experimenting with information technologies for social progress and social change. It is of course a commonplace to say that the development of society is closely related to advances in science and technology. However, it is often forgotten that the gains of scientific and technological progress are very unevenly distributed, globally between countries and regions and locally within countries, or cities.

But even if this problem is recognized, it is often not clear what strategies could be deployed to realize a more equal distribution of the benefits of the advancement of science and technology. It is often presupposed that the new technologies in the beginning are profitable for the more developed countries, but that after a while use and benefits will 'trickle down' to the less advantaged social groups, countries and regions. However, this idea of 'trickling down' does not seem to work very well, as reality shows increasing inequality on a global scale, but also within the developed world.

The community networking movement is a very practical effort to find ways of using new technologies for social and community development, with broad aims such as improving social equality, democracy, participation and quality of life. In the 1990s, a large number of initiatives have been undertaken to create local community networks, civic networks, or digital cities – to mention some of the terms used for them. Rete Civica de Milano is one of the well known and more successful examples within this broader movement.

Within this international movement of social experiments with information technology for local development, we have witnessed debates about how community networks should be designed, how they should be embedded in their local environment, how they best can be organized, and made sustainable. Without claiming that this debate has provided definitive answers, it is good to see how Rete Civica de Milano has flourished over the years, and that it has been able to maintain and renew itself and that it continuously played a role in the Milano environment. It has become one of the better examples of how civic networks can function. Consequently, it has become a model for initiatives elsewhere.

Apart from this, I would like to take the opportunity to emphasize a few specific things that make the RCM experience even more important.

- First of all, RCM is a great example of how community networks can play also a role in developing appropriate technologies for community (or civic) networks. I mention here the ongoing work in developing open source technical platforms for community networking: the VIRTUOSE project. In this project the designers try to implement communication facilities as the core of the system, which is vitally important for community networks.
- A second example is the work done in RCM on e-voting and e-democracy technologies, which may in the future add important functionalities to community networks – especially to increase civic participation in the network and in the local environment.

This research and development work indicates to me that the collaboration of community networks and university based research groups may result at the same time in *production* new scientific and technological knowledge, and in *applying* the knowledge for community networking and development. It is a great example of how the university can play a role as an important community resource. This type of long term, intensive and dedicated collaboration between universities and communities may be the key to sustainable community development in the knowledge society.

Let me finish with some personal words.

I think I met Fiorella de Cindio for the first time in 1997 at the first European Community Networking Conference she had organized in Milano, and after that many more times in different conferences, workshops, and research meetings. I have always enjoyed and learned from the collaboration with her and later also with Davide Ferrazzi - especially in the TruE-vote project, in which we have done interesting studies and experiments in deploying e-voting technologies, among others within community networks.

I very much congratulate RCM with its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and I hope that RCM and the people behind it will also in the future contribute to the development of the civic networking agenda, and to the deployment of information technologies for social progress.

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