

## **Case Study**

# **The Role and Impact of Community Newsletters in Fostering Social Cohesion and Community Development**

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### **Abstract**

Traditional forms of communication - printed newspapers and newsletters, personal conversation, and much more - are often forgotten in the rush to embrace new forms of information and communication technologies. In small rural communities these more traditional forms have been important tools for facilitating community development while fostering a sense of belonging and attachment to the community. This paper assesses the impact of the creation of a community newsletter by volunteers in the small rural unincorporated community of Lot 16, Prince Edward Island in March 2004. The results of a household survey and key informant interviews reveal that the newsletter is widely read, has contributed to a greater sense of awareness about community activities and people, and a greater sense of interest in the community as a whole. Furthermore, the newsletter is thought to be building some potential or capacity in the community for other activities in the future.

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### **Introduction**

Historically, much rural development has taken place through communication, typically through university extension programs, radio and other traditional media, and perhaps most importantly, through the communal ties which are created and fostered by face-to-face communication. It would not be going too far to say that communication lies at the root of all human interactions that make up the concept of society, including those which create community.

A monthly community newsletter was begun by a small group of residents of Lot 16, Prince Edward Island (PEI) in March 2004. Their hope was to build a stronger sense of community through improved communication and information sharing. This paper is a case study of the effects of the Lot 16 newsletter as a tool for developing communication and interaction within the community.

Lot 16 is an unincorporated area located in western Prince Edward Island approximately 40 km from the Confederation Bridge. The nearest city, Summerside, is 10 km to the south east. Three distinct areas comprise Lot 16: Belmont Lot 16, Central Lot 16; and Southwest Lot 16. There is no local government in Lot 16, no commercial areas, and, by extension, no distinct 'centre' of the community. The dominant economic base in Lot 16 is agriculture and to a lesser extent fishing, many people commute to Summerside for work. Most homes are located on large plots of land with few close neighbours. The majority of homes are concentrated in the northeastern end of the community. Since 1996 the population has increased by 7% from 643 to 688 (2001 Census) and the number of households increased from 220 to 247. Most of these new households were the result of people moving into the community from other parts of the province.

Lot 16 is part of a larger study known as the New Rural Economy (NRE) Project and is one of 32 communities in the project's "rural observatory" selected to reflect the diverse characteristics of rural areas across the country (Reimer 2002).

### **Importance of communication in rural areas**

Communication is a multi-faceted aspect of community life. It can act as a glue to bind people together, as oil to lubricate social and economic relations, and as a web to mark lines of influence and interaction. Communication is important for the transmission and interaction among community members, as well as for its role in creating society and culture. As John Dewey stated, "Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication...men [sic] live in a community in virtue of the things they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common" (1915, p.4). The existence of commonality among members of a community can have an important impact on achieving shared goals and [something about rural areas]

It is evident that communication is an inherent part of rural capacity building. This should come as no surprise, for, as noted above, communication could be said to be the basis upon which society in all of its facets is built. Capacity building can be defined as activities that increase an individual's, a population's or a community's ability for growth, development, or accomplishment. In much of the literature, it is defined much more specifically as "Activities, resources and support that strengthen the skills and abilities of people and community groups to take effective action and leading roles in the development of their communities" (Community Safety Advisory Service, www, n.d.). Westcott (2002) particularly stresses the importance of grass roots communication ("bottom up") to the capacity development process. This is echoed by Rothenbuhler (2001), who suggests that capacity building must come from within a community, rather than through the outside intervention of "experts," and that this can only happen through discourse between and among community members.

Equally important is the role that communication plays in fostering social cohesion and social capital. Ken'idi (2002), for example, notes that it is the day-to-day interactions that form the bulk of our social networks, so the role of communication is vital to social capital development: "Our daily communication takes place in interpersonal informal situations, more often than in intermediate organizations. Thus, the focus is on the role of daily interpersonal situations in

terms of network capital” (p.4). Kearns and Forrest (2000, in Beauvais & Jenson, 2002) identify five constituent elements of social cohesion, including common values and civic culture, social order and social control, social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities, social networks and social capital, and territorial belonging and identity, while Putnam defines social capital as “social networks and the trust and reciprocity that arise from them” (p.19). However, often social cohesion and social capital are seen as complementary, if not identical, concepts. Indeed, many commentators (e.g., Kawachi & Berkman, 1999; Schuller, 2001; Stone, 2000; van Kemenade, 2003, etc.) suggest that without social capital, social cohesion, which tends to look more at economic well-being, cannot exist. In particular, McCracken (1999) and Helliwell (2001b) both point to a growing body of evidence that there is a strong causal linkage from social cohesion to macroeconomic performance.

The ease and efficiency with which information can be circulated using the internet has increased the importance of email and web pages as modes of communication. However, in communities which have little or no access to internet services, Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) become somewhat irrelevant; the digital divide does not exist just between rich and poor nations, but is firmly entrenched within even the richest countries. The literature suggests clearly that simply adding ICTs to the mix of community development will not necessarily create a strong and vibrant community. Preece (2002), although exploring the role that ICTs may have for social cohesion in a post-9/11 world, stresses that off-line communication is equally important in creating strong communities. Emke (2001; 2003) has conducted extensive research into the role of community newspapers in creating community identity in rural Canada (see also Emke, Bruce, and Wilkinson, forthcoming). McLeod et al (1996) also show strong empirical evidence for the hypothesis that greater use of local media leads to higher levels of community integration. In short, the literature suggests that ICTs are indeed useful for sustainable development, but only as one tool among many, and only useful where culturally and economically appropriate.

Stamm, Emig and Hess (1997) found that local media, especially newspapers and interpersonal channels have the strongest correlation with community involvement: “Communication scholars since Robert Park have argued that in addition to interpersonal channels, local media, such as newspapers, are essential to community.”(pg. 97) They consider four mechanisms by which local media use might contribute to community involvement: identifying a problem and letting people know about it; helping to identify groups within a community through which collective action can be taken; helping individuals understand and think about problems within a community, allowing them to form their own views; and emphasizing that actions such as reading the local paper or listening to the local radio station is time spent thinking or learning about local issues.

### **Assessing the Impact of the Community Newsletter**

The Lot 16 newsletter was introduced in March 2004 for the purpose of opening the lines of communication, encouraging active participation, and increasing awareness about important issues in the community. The newsletter is prepared each month (with the exception of July and August) by a team of two volunteers who gather the information from a variety of sources, use their personal computer

for creating the newsletter, printing it, and getting it copied. It is mailed bulk 3rd class to all households. The modest monthly expenses are recovered by donations from some local businesses, and by occasional “in-kind” contributions from others who print and mail the newsletter and do not ask for their costs to be covered. The newsletter format is simple, a single sheet of legal size paper with printing on both sides.

A household survey was conducted in June 2005 to assess the impact that the newsletter had in the area. The surveys were mailed bulk 3rd class to all households and a reminder notice was placed in the newsletter. The completed self-administered surveys were returned to designated mailboxes in the community, with no identification markers on them. A total of 38 surveys were completed, representing 38 households and 120 residents of Lot 16. Of the completed surveys, 7 (18.4%) were from households in Southwest Lot 16, 14 (36.8%) were from Central Lot 16 households, and 17 (44.7%) were from Belmont.

In addition, interviews were conducted with six key informants, some of whom were involved in the initial startup of the newsletter, and some of who are actively involved in its production today.. The interviews were designed to gather perceptions about whether or not the newsletter was meeting its original objectives, and what impact, if any, it might be having in the community.

### **Readership**

According to the interviewees, the newsletter is widely read by community members. The survey results found that when the newsletter arrives, 86.5% of respondents read it sometime that day, 13.5% save it to read it another day, and nobody throws it away without reading it. It is also being read by people outside Lot 16; 53% share it with family and 34% share it with friends who do not live in the community. While the newsletter is primarily distributed in Lot 16, several of the interviewees noted that people outside of the community were aware of its publication and that seniors who had moved away often received it second-hand as a way of keeping in touch with their family and friends.

After reading the newsletter 16 (42%) save it, 14 (37%) throw it away, and 6 (16%) post it somewhere handy for reference. When analysed with household status, households with seniors, two adults only and households with children were the most frequent to save the newsletter, and households with only one adult were the most frequent to throw it away. Of the 6 respondents which posted the newsletter for reference, 5 of them were from households with family status.

Table 1 examines readers of the newsletter by age and gender. All seniors, regardless of gender, read the newsletter, while in the adult categories 20% more females than males read it. Children have the lowest readership rate with slightly more than 1/3 between the ages of 5 and 17 who read it. Based on these figures, 63% of the total population sample read the newsletter; this percentage increases to 84%, however, when children are excluded from the sample.

**Table 1: Age and Gender of Newsletter Readers**

<b>Age and Gender Category</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Total who read the newsletter</b>	<b>Percent who read the newsletter</b>
Females 65+	3	3	100
Males 65+	3	3	100
Females 18-64	27	25	93
Males 18-64	30	22	73
Children 5-17	24	9	37.5
Children 0-4	11	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Total excluding children under 5</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Total excluding children under 17</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>84</b>

Note: The numbers for this table are taken from 31 of the 38 surveys. 7 surveys did not provide information on the age and gender of those who read the newsletter and were therefore excluded from all parts of the above analysis, bringing the total people represented down from 120 to 98.

### Newsletter Content

Table 2 reports the popularity of each subject within the newsletter based on current readership and support for its continuation in the future based on the results of the survey. The most popular subjects are the General News and Notice of Events, followed by Special News and Community History. While all of the subject categories received positive responses, Kiddie Corner has the lowest percentages in both the 'usually read' and the 'would like to see continued' sections. This may be a reflection of the overwhelming majority of readers being over the age of 17 as outlined in Table 1. While only 58% of total respondents usually read the Kiddie Corner, those who would like to see it continue are nearly 5 percentage points higher. Overall, the readership responses for each type of content are very positive.

**Table 2: Readership and Interest in Newsletter Sections**

<b>Newsletter category</b>	<b>Percent who usually read the category</b>	<b>Percent of valid responses who want it continued</b>
General / Social News	97.4	96.9
Notice of Events	100	96.9
Special News	92.1	87.5
Community History	86.8	87.5
Notice of Meetings	97.4	84.4
Dates to Remember	89.5	84.4
Birthday Announcements	92.1	75.0
Church Services / News	81.6	71.9
Sponsors / Advertisers	81.6	71.9
Kiddie Corner	57.9	62.5

There is little variation in reading patterns based on the number of years lived in the community. There is some variation based on length of residence in the community; for example, people who have lived in the community for 5-14 years were less likely to read some specific newsletter categories and less likely to want some of them to be continued. Those who lived in the community for fewer than 5 years, or 15 or more years were more likely to have read most of the newsletter categories. Having said this, the number of respondents indicating that they did not

read particular categories or did not want them continued is small within each “length of time in the community” category.

Reading patterns among those living in different parts of the community showed those in Central Lot 16 to have a lower readership for some newsletter categories. Only 57% of respondents from Central Lot 16 read the Church News, compared to 86% of those from Southwest, and 100% of those from Belmont (this result is statistically significant at .009 based on a Pearson Chi-square test). Following this trend, only 42% of Central Lot 16 respondents wanted the Church News continued, compared to 86% of those from Southwest, and 92% of those from Belmont (significant at .012 based on a Pearson Chi-square test). Central Lot 16 respondents also had the lowest frequency of reading the advertisements at 64%, compared to 86% from Southwest, and 94% of those from Belmont.

Of the total responses, 7 had suggestions for additional content. Their ideas included farming and fishing news, classified ads, yard sale announcements, tried and tested recipes, feature articles on a resident of the community, welcome to new residents of the community, easy or quick puzzles, jokes, or riddles, and word or quote of the month. It was also suggested that events and important dates be placed on a small piece or corner of the newsletter that could readily be clipped off and put on the fridge.

Some of the key informant interviewees believed that the newsletter had become overwhelmingly orientated towards social events and that more than just birthdays, events, and announcements were desired to make the newsletter more meaningful. One person who helped start the newsletter felt that it should develop “more backbone” meaning that there should be more content about economic development, government programs and opportunities, community issues, and related items. Nonetheless, the majority of the interviewees felt that the newsletter was delivering the information it set out to provide at its inception.

### **Print and Mail vs. Electronic**

Among the survey respondents, only 5 identified that they would like to see the newsletter distributed electronically. Internet access is relatively low in the Lot 16; there is no broadband service and there is no public access site. Among the survey respondents, 32% do not have Internet access, and almost 37% do not have e-mail accounts. These factors in part explain the extremely low interest in either a web-based or e-mail version of the newsletter. Interestingly, all 5 of the survey respondents who were interested in electronic distribution were from households with family status (at least one adult and one child at home).

Five of the six interviewees were not in favour of an electronic distribution of the newsletter, remarking that many elderly people do not have access to computers or the internet. They noted that print copy distribution would have to continue even with a web-based or email newsletter. Some said that more people would read the hard copy than an electronic version. These results are somewhat reflected in the literature; while there is growing emphasis on making use of the internet for community development, traditional forms of media remain very important, especially in more rural communities where access to the internet may be limited.

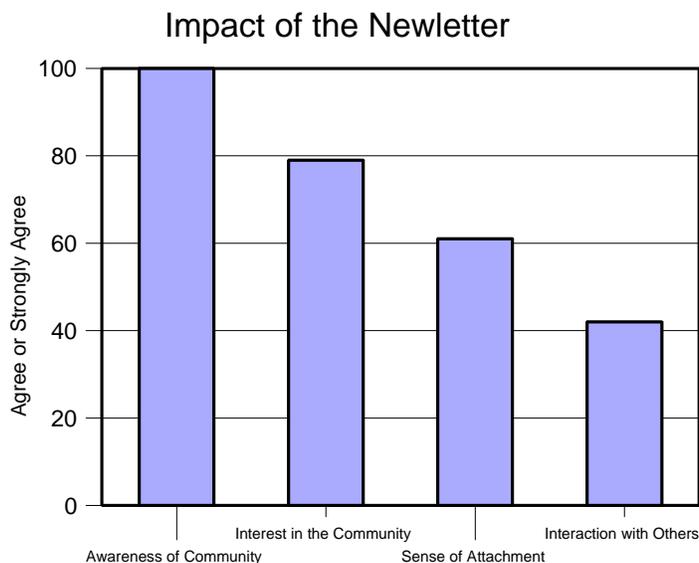
## Use and Impact

After examining the level of readership, the next step was to assess the degree of impact the newsletter has on the community. The interviewees were unanimous that the newsletter has had an overall positive effect on Lot 16, serving to improve and increase communication in the community. However, when asked how the vision of the newsletter has changed, one interviewee expressed concern that it had not done what it set out to do.

The survey participants were asked to rate the perceived impact of the newsletter in four areas: awareness about life in Lot 16; interest in what is going on in Lot 16; interaction with neighbours and friends in Lot 16; and sense of attachment or belonging to Lot 16. Except for the interaction category, the majority of respondents reported that the newsletter has increased impact either "somewhat more," or "much more." There were no responses that indicated the newsletter caused a decrease in any of the four categories. Figure 1 shows the combined percentage of "somewhat more" and "much more" responses for each of the impact areas. The impact on awareness of Lot 16 life had a 100% positive response with everyone feeling that the newsletter has made members of their households more aware or informed about what is happening in the community.

One of the people who helped to start the newsletter felt that it served to fill an information gap that existed in the community and that since its distribution, attendance has increased at community events. One of the current volunteer editors similarly remarked that the newsletter has served as a unified way of informing the community; however, she also noted that one organization in the community saw a decrease in attendance after exclusively using the newsletter to advertize meetings or events. Impact on interaction between neighbours or community members was the only category with over half of the respondents indicating "no change;" however, one interviewee felt that the newsletter had served to bring people closer.

**Figure 1**



There are a few variations when comparing results of the impact questions with household types and the number of years lived in the community. For “increase in awareness about the community”, there was no variation among the results; everyone reported that the newsletter increased the level of awareness. Households with only 2 adults were the most frequent to answer “much more” when asked if the newsletter had increased their interest in the community. This was also the case for people who had lived in Lot 16 for either 1-4 years, or 15-45 years. There was very little variation among types of respondents when asked if the newsletter contributed to a stronger sense of attachment to the community. However, there was an interesting comment provided by one survey respondent: “The community paper can bring the community together but only if we have a reason to get together... Maybe play dates for moms/kids/family days, BBQs, potluck etc....softball games - Belmont vs SWLot 16, walk/bike trails.” A self-reported increase in one’s level of interaction as a result of the newsletter was found to be least frequent among households with children and people who have lived in Lot 16 between 5-15 years.

### **Limitations on Impacts**

The current volunteer editors of the newsletter commented that there is some lack of participation and engagement by members of the community when it comes to supporting the newsletter content and production. While all survey respondents reported to know to whom information should be submitted, the key informant interviews revealed that often the volunteer editors had to call groups or individuals themselves to obtain contributions. They also indicated that there were some technological difficulties that continued to pose problems for the easy publication of the newsletter. These included an unfamiliarity with computer software programs, inadequate computers (their personal computers were older and slower) and the lack of printing equipment and facilities in the community. Part of the challenge over the coming months and years for those producing the newsletter will be to increase participation among residents in submitting information and content, and to improve access to and use of computers and related production equipment.

### **Conclusion**

The newsletter received an overwhelmingly positive response in the household survey, showing that Lot 16 residents would like to see the newsletter continue. People in the community read, enjoy, and are informed by its distribution, indicating that the newsletter is an important part of Lot 16 social life. As mentioned in the quote in the ‘sense of attachment’ category above, the newsletter may be a good medium to facilitate dialogue on reasons for the community to get together. With at least one person from every household reading it, information in the newsletter spreads across the entire community making it an excellent mode of communication and a potential unifying force in Lot 16.

Thus, communication can be a powerful tool in helping to build strong communities. The study of the Lot 16 newsletter is an illustration of how the introduction of a local newsletter can act as the “glue, oil, and web” that brings a community together. In fact, one indicated that it has served to gel the community a little, while another similarly remarked that it had served to show residents they

are part of a community that they can make their own. Yet another interviewee said that it has made people closer by letting the community know what was going on, thereby breaking barriers to getting information shared and bringing people together to surmount divisions in the community. These comments are reflected in the literature on the linkages among communication, social cohesion, and capacity building. Clearly the Lot 16 Community Newsletter has shown the importance of traditional communication tools in the development of social capital, social cohesion, and capacity building in rural areas, in the context of an ever-increasing reliance on various forms of communication technology.

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