Chapter VI
Community Informatics

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers and practitioners use a wide range of terms when they discuss community involvement with information and communications technologies (ICTs). Common (English-language) terms include 'community networks,' 'community computing,' 'community information networks,' 'civic networking,' 'community technology,' 'community computer networks,' 'online neighborhood network,' 'virtual community,' 'online community,' 'community e-business,' and most recently, 'community informatics.'

Since the late 1990s, the term 'community informatics' has come into use amongst many academic researchers as an overarching label for the academic study of projects and initiatives which deliberately engage community groups and organizations with ICTs. Evidence of the term's acceptance in academic and research circles is found in the titles of at least one academic journal and the language of its articles (the *Journal of Community Informatics*), as well as in community informatics conferences and workshops held in a number of countries, university research centres, moves towards an ethics statement, and an entry in Wikipedia developed collaboratively by researchers and practitioners in the field. While many still use the term 'community technology' or its variants when referring to *practice* activity, community informatics has definitely become embedded as an *academic* reference point.

However, community informatics has not yet achieved a stable set of findings or core questions which are commonly used to conduct research. Some practitioners even consider it a form of social movement. Others see it as little more than a convenient label for pragmatic funding and policy purposes (Graham, 2005). Another sympathetic critic regards it as a 'woefully underdeveloped' field 'driven more by anecdotal reports and storytelling' than effective theory (Stoecker, 2005a).

BACKGROUND

The community informatics 'movement' can be traced to the United States and Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, when local communities began establishing tele-centers and local dial-up bulletin board networks. The scene exploded in the 90s with the development of the World Wide Web (Milio, 1996; Morino, 1994) and the development of virtual community networks, particularly in the United States, that no longer had a local geographic base. And as if by osmosis, in countries like Australia,

Italy, or New Zealand, enthusiastic individuals or people engaged in the public information services copied models which led to the establishment of public internet service provider services as well as public online services with community content.

There is no authoritative history of how the international 'movement' arose, but David Wilcox's documentation of linkages and tensions between technically-focused academics and community-oriented practitioners in the United Kingdom and North America in the late 1990s gives some idea of the mix of social visionaries, academics and others who serendipitously met face-to-face and online and formed something of an shared early vision of what might be (Wilcox, 2001). In the decade from the mid-1990s, governments in countries such as Australia, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, the European Community, and Latin America began experimenting with new ICT opportunities as a way of enhancing ideas about 'e-society,' 'e-government,' or e-democracy.' Interest in ICTs for development is emerging in many third world countries. At the highest policy level, the UN's World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) (www.itu.int/wsis) reflects many governments' attempts to develop visions for particular uses of ICTs for economic and social development. However, long-term sustainability and investment for projects in many countries continues to be a problem.

ISSUES IN COMMUNITY INFORMATICS

Defining Community Informatics

Academic information systems and management systems professionals have popularized the term community informatics, where it has been seen as akin to other forms of informatics such as health informatics, and thus potentially providing an overarching conceptual and theoretical base for social and community interventions with technology. The use of such a term has also enabled them to carve out a particular niche in academia. Thus:

> *Community informatics pays attention to physical communities and the design and implementation of technologies and applications, which enhance and promote their objectives. CI begins with ICT, as providing resources and tools that communities and their members can use for local economic, cultural and civic development, and community health and environmental initiatives among others.* (Gurstein, 2000, p. 2)[1]

Much writing reflects reporting about social interventions beginning with technology, rather than more reflective or critical abstraction and research about the relationship between communities and technology or social and economic structures that underpin such relationships. The former form of research reflects the location of many researchers in the information sciences, rather than social or community services and development disciplines in which there is a more robust theoretical base from which to consider issues such as human agency, its relationship to technology, the very nature of community practice, and the nature of social change. Thus, disciplinary differences about how such key concepts as community, human agency, or very concept of technology can only be resolved or at least explored through much more interdisciplinary dialogue (Pigg, 2005).

The Digital Divide

The notion of digital divide—between individuals and communities that have access to skills, knowledge and technological infrastructure and those who do not—was a prominent policy in many countries in the 1990s.

The divide was seen as an impediment to democratic participation and social or economic development. Funds were poured into a variety of policy initiatives in many Western countries, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, though substantial public funding has by and large been ended for such programs. At the highest international level, the World Summit on the Information Society reflects the United Nation's attempt to develop an international dialogue about connectivity for citizens in all countries.