

Preface

This book is both very new and somewhat old. It is new in that it represents the most current thinking/research/practise in applying Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) to community needs. It is old in that many of the theories and approaches which have gone into the writing of most of these papers represents continuities and extensions of existing activities and efforts.

What is particularly striking however, is the degree of convergence which can be seen in these papers around questions of community use of ICTs. This book includes the work of information scientists, computer scientists, political scientists, sociologists, community planners, social and regional development specialists, urban planners, and practitioners of rural development, journalists, environmentalists, political activists and odd hybrids of many of the above categories.

ICTs are becoming ever more pervasive in reshaping the economic and social landscape and in shifting our attention to the virtual and the “cyber.” However, at the same time our interests and engagements are continuously being drawn back to our most basic of connections—to our own bodies, to our families, and to our communities.

The term “informatics” is a slightly exotic one for North Americans who are more used to the narrower terminology of “computer” or “information scientists.” But the term “informatics” implies something that is lost in the terminology of science, that is the capacity to act on and through the technology with which one is working. Where computer “science” suggests the dispassionate gaze and the formal engagement of the scientist, “informatics” looks towards the applications of the technology, towards its use in and on the world in which we are living.

Equally, some prefer to use the term “community networking” as in Doug Schuler’s seminal book *New Community Networks: Wired for Change* (Addison Wesley, 1996), making the direct link between the technology and how it is being used in a community context. For some, the community networking terminology is sufficient. However, as one can readily see from this book, the diversity of applications and areas of application for technology enabling communities perhaps is too broad to be encompassed by the language of “networking,” however suggestive the term is of “process” as well as “product.”

There seems now, moreover, to be somewhat of a convergence around the term “community informatics.” This perhaps is an extension of the broad-based acceptance of the terminology of “health informatics” among practitioners and academics alike in the study and application of how ICTs are being used in the sphere of health practise.

In a sphere of activity as individualized or single-user oriented as “personal” computing, it may seem anomalous to be developing approaches and strategies supportive of “community” computing applications. However, as will be seen below, this shouldn’t be surprising when it is realized that for most, and even in the most advanced societies, communities are still at the centre of the human systems which provide us and our families with many of the basic components from which construct our physical, social and cultural well-being.

Communities provide us with the opportunity to mature and educate our children and increasingly to train and retrain ourselves as adults. They give us the means for sharing the burdens and opportunities of our physical well-being with our neighbours and allow us to participate in the shaping of the immediate components of our daily lives. They are the means through which we participate in our culture as producers and not simply as consumers. Communities for many are the essential framework through which they can be productive participants in society.

Increasingly communities are the contexts within which we can find ways of intervening in and responding to some of our modern dilemmas and critical problems in the environment, in the bridging of social and economic divides, in maintaining the kind of physical surroundings in which we wish to live. Thus while the computer and the “virtual” seem to be ever more pervasive, the role of the “community” as the crucible in which we can create a shared and meaningful future is, if anything, increasing in importance. And along with this goes the need and opportunity to enable those processes with whatever technical or human means that are available.

I have chosen to order the chapters into several sections. The “Introduction” is meant to provide a broad overview of Community Informatics (CI) as it might currently be understood and to suggest some terminology that might be useful in discussing CI research and practise.

The section on “Background and Issues” presents papers which give an introduction to certain of the issue areas with which CI is engaged, “access” (Clement and Shade), “environment and sustainable development” (Beale), and “community development” (Loader, Eagle and Hague). The next section presents various approaches to understanding and theoretically framing CI including from the perspective of sociological theory (Pigg), political theory (Baker), regional development (Simpson and Cawood) and empirically (Bruce). The section which follows presents the variety of experiences and approaches to community or civic networking from the U.S. perspective (Schuler), the perspective of the Community Technology Center Movement (Miller), Milan which is Europe’s oldest civic network (de Cindio), a civic networking project in Argentina (Finquelevitch), a civic democracy networking project in Antwerp (Pierson) and a review of the experiences with telecentres in Europe and Africa (Falch).

The next section presents a variety of CI application areas including cybercafes (Stewart), cultural survival for Australian Aborigines (Turk and Trees), local government policy discussions (Ranerup), local tourism support (Agostini et al.), and

university-community relations (Collins). The following section presents experiences in using CI approaches to support social and economic development in developing countries (Colle), a critique of recent efforts in this area (Fortier), the use by the United Nations and related non-governmental organizations (Lawrence and Brodman), in Los Angeles neighborhoods (Pitkin, Richman and Krouk), and in a severely disadvantaged outer suburb of Edinburgh, Scotland (Slack). The concluding section presents a number of more in-depth CI case studies including in a school management process in the USA (Halaska), in community-based planning efforts in Germany (Pipek), in creating an on-line news source in the former Yugoslavia (Hamman), and by national not-for-profit Internet service providers globally.

Acknowledgments

The chapters in this book draw from a wide variety of disciplines and reflect the academic and professional interests of a singular range of very talented people. I'd like to thank all of them for contributing to this volume and in this way helping to define Community Informatics as an area of research and of practise. On behalf of these authors and myself, I'll thank the range of research and other sources of funding of which the work in this volume is a product.

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Michael Gurstein
Technical University of British Columbia
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