SI 645 / SI 745 - Information Use in Communities, Fall 2009

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<http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/78186>
http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/78186
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Community Networks
And FreeNets;
The Community Informatics
Framework

Week 8
Nov 9, 2009
Early CN Development Factors

- Computer Expertise & Organizational Expertise
- Convergence of common interests in increasing access to ICT & complementary skills
- Excess computing power at universities
- Collaboration among organizations
- Library as both Place & Community Resource
- Missionary Zeal
- Major Grant Funding external to community (ex. US Dept Commerce-NTIA, Canada Industry & Commerce; Foundations; Industry funding)
- Critical mass needed for conferences & a professional organization
Core Services for a Community Network (Doug Schuler of SCN)

- Conviviality & Culture
- Education
- Strong Democracy
- Health & Well-Being
- Economic Equity, Opportunity, & Sustainability
- Information & Communication
Schuler’s Core CN Services

Conviviality and Culture
- Forums for ethnic, religious, neighborhood interest groups
- Community Histories and Lore
- Recreation and parks information
- Arts events
- Community calendar

Education
- On-line homework help
- Forums for educators, students, and parents
- Q&A on major topics
- Distributed projects
- Pen pals
- On-line reading lists and syllabi for self-paced education
Schuler’s Core CN Services

Strong Democracy
- How to contact elected officials
- E-mail to elected officials
- E-mail to government agencies
- Forums on major issues
- On-line versions of legislation, regulations, and other government information
- Community action campaigns

Health and Well-Being
- Q&A on medical information
- Information on environmental hazards in the community
- Community policing information
- Tobacco and alcohol education
- Access to health-care information
- Self-help forums
Schuler’s Core CN Services

Economic Equity, Opportunity, and Sustainability
• Want ads
• Job listings
• Labor news
• Ethical investing
• Community-development projects
• Unemployed, laid-off, and striking worker discussion forums

Information and Communication
• Access to alternative news and opinion
• Media literacy campaigns
• E-mail to all Internet addresses
• Cooperation with community radio, etc.
• Access to library information and services
• Access to on-line databases
• On-line "Quick Information"
• Access to on-line periodicals, wire services
The Cleveland Free-Net
Pre-Web Community Computing

• Case Western U-1984 computing power-St Silicon’s –bulletin board
• Cleveland Free-Net-1986
• FN in a box: “National Public Telecomputing Netwk” 1989
• Key concepts: information & communication including free email accounts
Free-Net Menu: A Community Metaphor in Gopher (go-for)

- The Administration Building
- The Post Office (email)
- Public Square (communication-bulletin boards)
- The Courthouse & Government Center (national, state, local—varying strength)
- The Arts Building (bulletin boards)
- Science and Technology Center (text and bulletin boards)
- The Medical Arts Building (text & bulletin boards)
- The Schoolhouse (Academy One) (isame)
- The Community Center & Recreation Area (including games & gaming)
- The Business and Industrial Park
- The Library
- University Circle (Case Western)
- The Teleport (protocols)
- The Communications Center (similar to above PO & teleport)
- USA TODAY HEADLINE NEWS
Cleveland Free-Net

• [http://ofcn.org/whois/ben/Free-Nets/CFN/CFN_menus1.html#administration](http://ofcn.org/whois/ben/Free-Nets/CFN/CFN_menus1.html#administration)

• 1986-late 1990s
Other Early Community Network Adopters (not all survived)

- Santa Monica Public Electronic Network (city) start date: 1989
- Peoria (and other) Free-Nets Start date: early 1990s
- Seattle Community Network (1992-1994-)
- Blacksburg Community Village-Virginia Tech 1991-1993-
- National Capital FreeNet Ottawa 1992-
- Tallahassee Free Net 1993 (Collaborative-FSU Super Computing Center Tallahassee Public Library)
- La Plaza Telecommunity 1993 (NTIA, Kellogg)
- Champaign-Urbana PrairieNet (Univ of Illinois) 1993-
- Boulder Community Network (NTIA)1994
- Three Rivers Free Net 1994 (Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh)
Tallahassee FL Public Library

http://www.leoncountyfl.gov/LIBRARY/
Steve Cisler: Visionary Who Connected Libns, Techies, Activists Around Community Computing

• Mentor, visionary, activist, catalyst, funder
• Connected those with common interests and diverse backgrounds world wide
• Aim: bring power of computing to communities
• Apple Computer—Apple Library of Tomorrow
• First CN Conferences (1994, 1995) Ties that Bind
• Association for Community Networking (1995)
• Fostered international adoption of community computing especially in developing countries

This site is for community-serving organizations, funders, academics, and students who are using technology to improve their local communities.

Link: http://databases.si.umich.edu/cfdocs/community/index.cfm
2001 CN CASE STUDIES

- Three Rivers Free-Net (Pittsburgh)

- CascadeLink
  (Multnomah County)

- NorthStarNet
  (Chicago Suburbs—Survivor: SkokieNet)
CI Sought for Personal & Work-Related Situations

- Business
- Computer and Technical Info
- Education
- Employment Opportunities
- Financial Support
- Governmental and Civic
- Health
- Housing
- Library Services
- Local Events
- Local History & Genealogy
- Local Information
- Local News
- Organizations and Groups
- Other People
- Parenting
- Recreation and Hobbies
- Sale, Exchange, or Donation of Goods
- Social Services
- Volunteerism
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh
http://www.clpgh.org
Three Rivers FreeNet
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh
Selected TRFN Subject Guide

• Business
• Community
• Education
• Employment
• Environment
• Government

• Health
• Non-Profit Resources
• Social Services
• Volunteer Opportunities
Benefits of Using CN

• Easier, increased access to hard to get and higher quality information (more comprehensive, better organized, linked to relevant sites)

• Decreased transaction costs (time, money, energy)

• Increased ability to identify trusted info

• Confidentiality protection; comfort in asking sensitive questions

• Skill and confidence building

• Employment and educational gains

• Increased knowledge and participation in community
Non-Profits & Local Gov’ts Noted Increased Ability to Exploit Info

- Groups valued organized/standardized information
- They started to link to and from other relevant resources.
- They valued unbiased, neutral sources
- They indicated the value of current information (their own and others)
- Org. leaders begin to think like librarians
Increased Effectiveness of Community Service Providers by

• Saving them time and money
• Increasing the visibility and ability to reach an expanded audience
• Fostering communication
• Helping a non-profit or local government become more responsive
• Allowing non-profits to serve their clientele more effectively
Personal, Family, Neighborhood Outcomes

• Connections made to other people and groups
• Confidentiality protection; greater comfort in asking sensitive questions
• Skill and confidence building
• Employment and educational gains
• Increased knowledge of community
• Value for family, friends, and neighborhood
Community Benefits of CNs

• Bridges built and increased social interaction across age groups among previously unconnected people and groups

• Linkages, connections, and partnership opportunities increased

• Communication among organizations increased

• Increased information sharing

• Increased trust among organizations

• Limits of geography reduced
1st & 2nd Generation of Community Networks Mostly Displaced

• Certain functions no longer needed (email-gmail, hotmail; local sales and exchanges-Craigslist)
• Hosting websites
• Training
• Other functions not fully realized (community conversations)
Readings on CNs

• Cohill & Kavanaugh

• Kubicek & Wagner
Community Informatics Basic Definition

• Community Informatics is the design and application of information and communications technologies to enable community processes and the achievement of community objectives,

• CI is concerned with the application of an interdisciplinary theoretical and empirical knowledge base to community information & technology problems

• Michael Gurstein—is a key developer of the terminology & definitions
The Dark Ages: Before Community Informatics

- Researchers like me had challenges framing and communicating our work
  - To others like ourselves
  - To relevant audiences
- Community-focused researchers had difficulty finding each other—even within UM
- University researchers had few cross-disciplinary venues
- My own 1984 book on Citizen Activists information use
- Enter Rob Kling--Social Informatics
- Community Informatics builds on Social informatics
Social Informatics--The Forerunner of Community Informatics

1996—the coiners:
• Rob Kling
• Phil Agre
• Andrew Dillon
• Brenda Dervin
• Ben Schneiderman
• Leigh Star
• Barry Wellman
• And others

Scholars were from diverse fields, including:
• information systems,
• LIS,
• anthropology,
• computer science, (HCI)
• communications,
• sociology,
• political science,
• Sci tech studies (STS).
Kling’s Challenge to Researchers:

“Our job as researchers is not simply to document the various consequences of computerization, but also to theorize them.” (Kling & Lamb: p. 306)
Community Informatics

• Impetus came from the community
• Cities in crisis; Digital divide
• Initiatives designed to respond to urban problems
• Experimentation with technology to respond to problems
• Development of community networks
• Availability of funding
• Community informatics seen by diverse scholars as a unifying concept
• Journal of Community Informatics (JOCI) builds interdisciplinary scholarship
CI: Interdisciplinary Framework Links Scholars & Practitioners

- Computer Science/Engineering as well as Social sciences
- Both academic disciplines & professionals
- Conferences such as those organized by Doug Schuler and others
- Journals—Like JOCI led by Michael Gurstein & Ann Bishop serve to increase communication among scholars & between scholars & practitioners
- Books--e.g., Community Informatics: Enabling Communities with Information and Communications Technologies (Gurstein).
- Interdisciplinary funding opportunities
- CI Centers (University of Illinois a notable example)
- UM’s Kellogg Chair in Community Informatics and SI’s CI Specialization
SI Community Informatics Faculty

- Steve Jackson
- Paul Resnick
- Dan Atkins
- Tiffany Veinot
- Joan Durrance
Community Informatics Current & Former Doctoral Students

• Kate Williams (now at Illinois-ICT use)
• Erik Johnston (now at Arizona State)
• Maria Souden (has taught the CIC seminar; research now chronic illness info)
• Dana Walker (civic engagement-Fellow at Kettering)