

# Editorial: Welcome to the Journal of Community Informatics

Welcome to the first issue of the Journal of Community Informatics!

Community Informatics (CI) – enabling communities with Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) – is a very new development in the academic world, but in reality a very old one in the daily life of communities.

It is very new in that only since the arrival of the Internet and low-cost personal computing could those without a direct professional or financial interest begin to engage with and *appropriate* Information Technology. It is very old, in the sense that *information* and *communications*, and using *technologies* to support these, are as old as communities themselves.

Equally new, of course, are the range of opportunities (and risks) which communities confront for technology-enabled change, development, and ultimately for empowerment (or for the loss of power and an increase in dependency). And these opportunities (and risks) arise in relation to both the community's immediate political and social environment and to their larger national and global context.

The technology, for better or worse, binds, links and *networks* communities into a larger world, and as the larger world is transformed with ICT, so communities must evolve and adapt in response. In this there are choices, and communities can either anticipate and through *effective use* realize their goals and objectives by means of these immensely powerful tools or they can adapt and adjust themselves as best they can to a technology-enabled future imposed on them by others.

CI is concerned with these processes of communities adapting and transforming, networking and binding, responding to and becoming the authors in the unending and increasingly rapid flow of information within and among communities and between communities and the larger society. CI addresses this process of adaptation and transformation through a systematic concern with the “how” — the infrastructure, the devices, the connectivity of enabling and empowering; the “how to” — the training, the community and organizational development; the “necessary conditions” — the funding, regulatory environment, the policy frameworks; and finally and perhaps most importantly the “why” — the goals and objectives of enabling and empowering communities.

CI represents a confluence between theory, practice and policy — between those who research and those who implement; between the theory and findings, and the policy and funding frameworks that in large part determine the available strategies for supporting ICT in communities as elements of development and innovation; and between the practice and policy of enabling communities and others to feed-back and feed-forward into strategies for sustainability and supportive regulatory regimes. Equally, CI is a disciplinary hybrid — linking hardware, software and telecommunications as infrastructure (and superstructure); with the social sciences, social and community development; and the professional activities of law, politics, accounting and administration.

Communities are the bedrock of human development. They ensure the transmission of language and culture. They provide for human security through knowing one's neighbours. They are the crucible for effective democracy through inculcating values of civic responsibility and active and effective citizenship.

As the technology supports an aggressive, even manic globalization, so *community* and *communities* become of even greater importance. And in this, social and community development becomes the practice through which communities become enabled, self-organized and self-transformed, with research and self-understanding as necessary resources in this process.

The Journal of Community Informatics (JoCI) has as its mission to present the work of those concerned with enabling communities with ICT, to provide a forum for the creation of a professional and critical discourse on the strategies and impacts of this enterprise; to help create a framework and a legitimation for those who choose this as the focus of their professional efforts; and to act as one hub among many for linking the various networks of those with interests related to community-based technologies. The Journal will include an identified section for professional peer-reviewed papers as a means to create and carry-forward a tradition of the highest quality and broadest base of systematic research. It will also include an opportunity for discussion and feedback from practitioners and policy analysts as to the application and significance of this research for practice and policy. The Journal finally, will look to act as a focal point for the broader range of professional but non-academic research with a concern for CI.

Much of the most interesting and valuable materials in this area (as in other areas where there is a confluence of the researcher and the practitioner) are produced not by academic researchers but by practitioners working for and through agencies and enterprises directly engaged in the practice of enabling communities. Our intention is to provide a means for making this available to the academic and practitioner communities and a structured opportunity to comment on and critique this work as appropriate.

In the definition of *community*, the Journal will not be restrictive. We consider the issue of how *virtual* or *electronic communities* can or do function as *communities* to be one which is open and an object of research including in and through this forum. In the larger frame, it is my personal belief that there is a necessary convergence between enabling physical and virtual communities through ICT and that the ultimate power of the technology for communities arises when the use of the technology as between the physical and the virtual becomes seamless and invisible... But more of this in later issues...

Also, as we go forward with this most exciting undertaking, I am reminded of a speech I gave a couple of years ago introducing Community Informatics to a technical audience. A young academic came up to me afterwards and was extremely critical of an approach which gave communities additional power through technology. As we discussed further, it emerged that he was from a minority community in Europe which had experienced and was currently experiencing significant discrimination at the hands of the dominant community particularly at the local level. The last thing that he wanted was to see that majority community have access to additional power to identify and create obstacles to the social development of his ethnic minority. I pointed out to him that the technology equally could empower him and his compatriots but that issue has remained with me and does, I think, reinforce the significance of the continued awareness of the ethical dimensions of our work.

This Inaugural Issue of JoCI is special in that all of the articles are a response by the Editorial Group to an invitation to give a context to our enterprise through position papers, scholarly papers and other materials. And this I believe it does. In the issue that follows we have from our editors:

- A pointer and introduction (in part through video) to the work of K-Net, an aboriginal group in Northern Canada which is innovating in the use of ICT for education, for administration, for health and perhaps most importantly, is demonstrating the way in which ICT truly can enable AND empower communities to move beyond traditional barriers and impediments to find a new and more equitable role in the Information Society. (Beaton)
- A description of an ambitious current research project examining the impacts and outcomes of government support for community technology with an overall objective of providing insight toward the future of such programs and their impact on the larger society (Clement, Gurstein, Longford, Luke, Moll, and Shade)
- A presentation of a most important rural ICT initiative whose current success is transforming large areas of rural India (Jhunjhunwala, Ramachandran, and Bandyopadhyay)
- An analysis and plan for using a major university in a Less Developed Country as a base for a highly innovative program of CI for community transformation (Erwin and Taylor)
- A highly significant analysis of the current state of the art with respect to Telecentre development in Latin America and where it might go from here (Menou, Delgadillo and Stoll)

- A fine paper examining the theoretical background to community use of ICT and giving most useful directions for future research as well as community practice towards this end. (Pigg and Crank)
- A most original and insightful critique of current thinking and approaches to ICT for Development (Robinson)
- A path breaking approach to applying an analysis drawn from the methods and insights of Social Anthropology to ICT design and development as a response to rural poverty (Salvador)
- A brave and insightful analysis of the opportunities and risks that are attendant to ICT in a most important but largely unknown part of the world. (Stafeev) and
- A document presenting the current “state of play” for a leader in supporting ICT use by women in local communities (Webb and Jones)

Overall we see JoCI as a “Knowledge” enterprise and it will be our intention as the journal evolves to integrate “Knowledge “ techniques and technologies as might be appropriate to support our collective CI efforts.

It should also be noted, that the JoCI is using the Public Knowledge software produced by the Public Knowledge Project at the University of British Columbia. Our intention is that the Journal have the widest possible reader (and user) ship and it was felt that an on-line and Open Source journal would most closely achieve this. Equally, we see the Journal as an element and a resource for the evolving CI community of researchers and practitioners and as such we welcome feedback and suggestions as to how the journal may be more useful and useable by this community.

To conclude, thanks should be given to David Ley, without whose steady and effective work this enterprise would not have reached the current level of maturity; to John Willinsky (of PKP) for giving us support and encouragement beyond the call of duty; to the Canadian Research Alliance for Community Innovation and Networking for providing financial support when it was most needed; to Sergei Stafeev for the layout and design; to the other members of the Editorial team for their feedback and support; and finally to you for having given us your time and attention as we move forward with this collective effort.

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