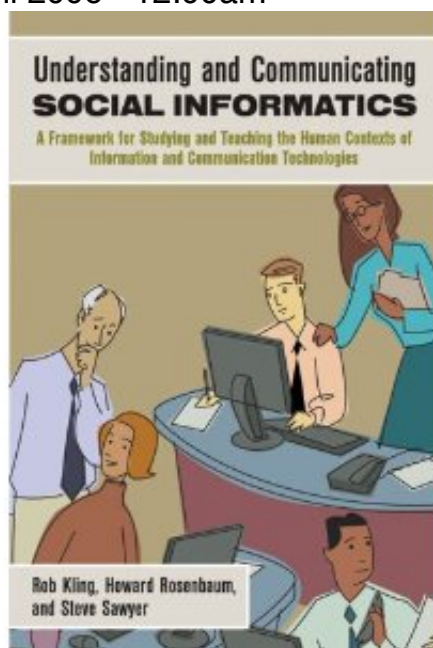




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Book Review: Understanding and Communicating Social Informatics

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Understanding and Communicating Social Informatics: A Framework for Studying and Teaching the Human Contexts of Information and Communication Technologies. By Rob Kling, Howard Rosenbaum and Steve Sawyer, Information Today, 2005, ISBN 978-1573872287, 216 pages.

Social Informatics (SI) is a relatively recently named field of research, which has evolved from earlier studies of the role of computers in society and the social impacts of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), which were often conducted as separate, unconnected discussions by computer scientists, information systems researchers, sociologists, educational researchers and others. Rob Kling, the lead author of this book, who died in 2003, is generally regarded as the prime mover and founder of this new domain. According to William Dutton's Foreword, Kling first coined the term in the early 1980s, but it was more than a decade later that

he began actively to promote it and also established the Center for Social Informatics in the School of Library and Information Science at Indiana University.

Variously referred to in the text as an inter-, multi- or trans-disciplinary field, SI is first defined as 'the systematic study of the social aspects of computerization' (p.3) and then later, more formally, as 'the interdisciplinary study of the design, uses, and consequences of ICTs that takes into account their interaction with institutional and cultural contexts' (p.6). A clear definition is essential as the term 'informatics' can be interpreted in several different ways, even within the information science community - though a common theme in the latter context tends to be a focus on information and how it is presented, which seems to be missing here [1]. The above definition of SI was agreed in 1997 at a groundbreaking workshop funded by the National Science Foundation to articulate this new research domain and define its research agenda. The book reviewed here was originally conceived as a means of capturing the intellectual substance and enthusiasm of that workshop while at the same time launching the new domain with its first monograph.

With the passage of time, the concept has inevitably evolved into something slightly different, with a broader intent. The Preface explains that the book is

'an overview, designed to be short, readable in pieces, and directed to our colleagues and those who wish to engage with the concepts and issues of computing from a social perspective' (p.xx).

The Introduction goes on to identify four particular audiences: those involved in developing educational curricula for courses examining ICTs and social change; those with teaching and/or research interests in the field; analysts of ICT policies; and funders of programmes of research about ICT and social behaviour. The authors also mention another 'important audience' for the results of SI research, to whom the book is *not* addressed, namely 'students of ICT and working ICT professionals', pointing to other, more accessible, books and articles directed at these groups [2].

The book is an introduction to the subject of SI research, but it is not a textbook; and it does not fit easily into any recognisable publication genre, as an outline of its contents indicates. Chapter 1 introduces the domain, discusses the disconnect between scholarly and popular journalistic treatments of the subject, and then explains three distinct approaches to SI research, *normative*, *analytical* and *critical orientations*, pointing out that they may be combined in a specific study. Chapter 2, entitled 'The consequences of ICTs for organizations and social life' contrasts the socio-technical model of SI research with direct effects theories, such as technological determinism. It then presents and discusses general findings from SI research. The next two chapters pursue this approach in more detail in relation to particular constituencies. Chapter 3 explains the value of SI research for designers, developers and implementers of ICT-based systems, providing a useful summary table contrasting 'social design' and 'designer-centric' (developer-centred engineering) approaches on 14 dimensions (p.42). Chapter 4 discusses how SI research can help ICT policy analysts, interested in issues such as the digital divide and e-business, by offering an illustrative case study and then reviewing ICT policy analysis activities in the US, UK and Europe over the last three decades.

The remaining two substantive chapters are considerably longer (at 40 pages each) and rather

different in character. Chapter 5 deals with the teaching of SI, particularly to computer science and information systems students - though it acknowledges the subject's relevance to other disciplines, such as information science. It highlights the core concepts, discusses why they should be taught and how, and concludes with a page of specific recommendations to guide curriculum design. Chapter 6 deals with communicating SI research to professional and research communities, identifying two main audiences for 'SI outreach efforts', namely ICT professionals (as previously mentioned) and other academic research communities with shared interests in the social contexts of computing, including computer science and information science. The section on ICT professionals is much longer (24 pages, against eight), but both parts finish with suggested strategies to improve communication with these groups.

Chapter 7 concludes the work with a brief review of the cumulative findings to date from SI research, followed by brief summaries of the key messages for ICT designers, ICT policy analysts and ICT-oriented academic teachers, and a round-up of other key points, ending with a section 'Taking Social Informatics seriously' which re-states the case for SI 'moving from being a useful but alternative approach to being one that is the core knowledge base for understanding computing' (p.153). In addition to an extensive list of 350+ references, the authors then provide a glossary of 60 key terms; an appendix of 19 reviews and anthologies of SI research, published mainly in the 1990s; two appendices related to the 1997 workshop; and name and subject indexes.

This book is clearly a landmark text for the domain. It fills a gap and follows on from older, shorter introductions to the subject [3][4]. The authors are well qualified to write on the subject, having been involved with the field from its inception. The text is clearly expressed and is easy to navigate, with chapters helpfully broken down into sections and sub-sections, which extend to three levels in the longer chapters and are also enumerated in the table of contents. The work is likely to be of most interest to people working in related areas and/or contemplating a move into the field, including early-career researchers, though it is not a 'how-to' guide, but a survey of the terrain.

The book is written from an insider's perspective, with an unconcealed mission to promote and re-position the domain. Chapters 5 and (particularly) 6 exemplify this and the latter, especially, seems aimed more at existing insiders than at new converts:

'In this chapter we ask Social Informatics (SI) researchers to shoulder the responsibility for communicating the core of Social Informatics (defined here as its assumptions, concepts, theories, insights, and findings) to ICT professionals and other academic research communities.' (pp.106-107)

At times, this political motive comes close to unbalancing the text. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are all longer than necessary to fulfil their purposes and in serious danger of over-stating their case. Chapter 4, in particular, goes into unnecessary detail in its examples of SI policy inputs. These sections can be contrasted with Chapters 2 and 3, which manage to provide overviews that are both informative and concise. However, the weaknesses identified should not deter potential readers from obtaining this volume. It is intended to be read in chunks and its organisation and layout facilitate its use as a reference tool. Anyone who wants to gain a fuller understanding of SI research, its approaches and applications, should start with this book.

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