

Points of View

Critical Questions for Community Informatics in Practice from an Ethical Perspective

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Preamble

Community Informatics (CI) in practice informs and equips individuals and groups in geographic communities to advance the agency of constituents¹. Information and communication technologies (ICT) are selected, designed, and implemented in ways that are consistent with constituents' own values and goals. This approach includes recognition that ICT nonuse may also be appropriate, particularly when the use of ICTs would contradict constituents' values and goals. Community Informatics practice seeks to make "effective use" of technology (Gurstein, 2003) to support community development projects in ways that advance a sustainable approach to community enrichment and power (Stoecker, 2005). CI practice integrates participatory design of information technology resources, popular education, and asset-based development to enhance quality of life (Campbell & Eubanks, 2004). However, without its own set of ethical guidelines and practice standards, CI remains underdeveloped as a field of practice (Stoecker, 2005).

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¹ Throughout this document, we use Stoecker's (2014) distinction between constituency (that is, "people who have important life experience in common") and community (that is, "a collectivity in a local setting whose members interact in many different ways that results in the mutual enhancement and sustainability of the collectivity and its constituents").

Collaboratively developed through three years of conference workshops, this set of guiding critical questions seeks to further promote ethical practice in CI. This document serves as a complement to the researcher-focused “Code of Ethics for Community Informatics Researchers” (Averweg & O’Donnell, 2007) and expands upon the “Ethics of Community Informatics Research and Practice” pattern card (Stoecker, n.d.). While there often is overlap between research and practice, community informatics is increasingly informing projects undertaken by those who do not primarily identify as academic or career researchers but who do important work at the intersection of information, technology, and society at the community level. Therefore, this document also serves as a complement to the codes of ethics and standards of practice for community-centered professions such as social work, urban planning, public health, and library, archival, and information science.

These guiding critical questions affirm the need to state social justice principles more explicitly in community informatics. Unequal power relations will always be a factor and CI practice can benefit from guidelines to ensure these relationships are more equitable. The groups that comprise communities are not homogeneous, nor singular (Young, 1997), and include nonhuman residents (Leopold, 1949; Kimmerer, 2013). On the other hand, individuals belong to multiple, intersecting communities (Young, 1997; Lugones, 2003); this includes those with leadership roles in CI projects. Power relations exist within and between communities, and they are ever changing. Further, knowledge of the world is socially constructed within specific historical and social contexts that are fundamentally mediated by power relations. Facts are always determined by some degree of ideological inscription (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). Power inequalities and other injustices in practices, relationships, and social systems can only be confronted by leveraging group difference as a resource for dialogue comprised of both shared action and reflection (Young, 1997).

While CI projects focus on effective use of technologies, we acknowledge technologies do not solve, revolutionize, transform, or otherwise serve as independent agents acting upon humans as objects. Rather, as sociotechnical artifacts, technologies are shaped by a diverse set of social, cultural, economic, political, and historical factors that become embedded within the artifacts themselves. These technological developments consequently influence the appropriation, use, and limitations of artifacts as well as their impact and eventual disposition or sustainability. In this way, technologies amplify the human forces involved in design, production, distribution, and consumption—forces for justice and oppression, forces for mutual benefit and greed.

CI practitioners must challenge themselves in ongoing and systematic ways to identify how they invite participation while withholding the truth—potentially from themselves, as well from their partners—with regard to how CI projects can sometimes be forced to fit within established governmental, educational, cultural, economic, and other social systems in ways that reify unjust aspects of such systems. Indeed, it is only through dialogue and the building of equitable relationships across group differences (Young, 1997) that our partnerships can expose the truth and create change to those portions of our engagement that are oppressive to others and ourselves.

These efforts to decolonize CI practice are not an end themselves, but a continuous process embedded within praxis. We stand with Freire (2000: 88), who states “to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a

problem and requires of them a new naming". As such, this reflective document serves as a waypoint to guide further dialogue toward a continuously evolving set of practices. The evolution of CI as praxis is intended to advance CI practitioners' abilities to work, whenever relevant, as allies in support of a community's own liberatory efforts. This evolution must be guided by deep and mutually respectful dialogue between the diverse constituencies involved in CI projects. Such dialogue should contribute to a popular education initiative in which all participants jointly and continually construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct understandings of core concepts, such as community, self-determination, engagement, social justice, power, and social change to increase awareness of the interlocking social systems within which CI practice happens.

In sum, then, this document seeks to outline a set of critical questions that not only guide ethical CI practice, but also guide the personal transformation of practitioners to embrace all as experts in their own right.

Method

Workshops held at the Community Informatics Research Network (CIRN) conferences in 2013, 2014, and 2015 were used to guide development of this framework. During the 2013 conference, the need for such a framework was affirmed and the work of a cohort from the Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group (2011) was identified as a model for establishing this statement.

At the 2014 workshop, a range of model principles were reviewed individually and discussed in small groups. During the first part of the workshop, participants reviewed posters and printouts of various model principles. Participants were provided with sticky notes and large blank sheets of paper on which to provide comments. Recommendations for alternative sets of principles were also solicited from participants. The second half of the workshop consisted of open small- and large-group discussion to further refine ideas. After the 2014 conference, a page was created on the community CIRN Wiki (Towards a CIRN Framework, 2014) listing the results of the 2014 process, with the goal of encouraging community informatics practitioners to discuss this framework with community partners and reflect on their practices in light of these guidelines.

At the 2015 CIRN conference, the preliminary version of this document was prominently posted throughout the conference, with sticky notes provided to enable ongoing feedback. A World Café approach (World Café Method, n.d.) was then used within a workshop to gather participant feedback on the proposed statement, while considering how the statement might be applicable to community informatics research, teaching, and practice. The authors gathered the feedback and created a new draft for publication as a means to widen the audience reviewing and commenting on this document.

It should be noted that as two white, cisgender, heterosexual male scholars working at higher education institutions in the United States, we recognize the ethical dilemmas involved in publishing this document. These dilemmas include privileging lineal written language as well as calling attention to imperialist, patriarchal, and racist ideologies embedded within Western academic culture and practices. We welcome further consideration of how to address this grand challenge to promote an active community practice in, and not just discussions about,

pluralism. We also recognize the following pressing questions are yet unaddressed in this document:

- Can these ethical guidelines even be carried out within a university research environment? When funding, tenure, and advancement dictate relatively narrow research, teaching, and service activities, other epistemologies, ontologies, and methods that embrace justice and mutual benefit are often set aside.
- Is CI a practice that requires an advanced degree within a Western academic culture or is it open to epistemological pluralism and alternative educational traditions?
- What other barriers prevent CI practitioners from embracing guidelines that promote ethics, diversity, and inclusion in CI practice? How can these obstacles be overcome?

Critical Questions

In order to guide the evolution of ethical community informatics in practice, as well as the personal transformation of CI practitioners who seek to embrace all as equals and experts, we put forward this initial set of critical questions to inform CI praxis. In addressing each question in ongoing and systematic ways, it is important to determine whether the right people are at the table to inform dialogue and negotiate decisions guiding action. Further, for each question, we should ask “How do we know?” so as to challenge our personal histories, cultures, and ways of knowing and what we value as truth.

Maximizing Benefit, Minimizing Harm

- What individual and social benefits will result through this CI project, and for whom? What individual and social harms will result through this project, and to whom? What will be the benefits and harm to nonhuman residents through this CI project? Is any one segment unfairly burdened with the costs of, or any harm resulting from, this CI project?
- In what ways do my racial and cultural heritage and historical background influence how I understand the potential benefits and harms that may result from this CI project? In what ways do the racial and cultural heritage and historical background of others engaged in the project influence how they understand benefits and harms?
- What are the objectives of the constituents, and how do they align with, or come in conflict with, the objectives of those initiating and/or informing the community informatics project?
- What methods and rules of conduct are appropriate (and inappropriate) in the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the CI project? Who has ownership of, and credit for, the created works and data, and who determines the means by which products may be disseminated and under what conditions?
- How can we use the CI project to move beyond addressing an immediate opportunity or need in order to foster agency and knowledge power on the part of the constituencies with which we ally? In what ways are we reducing the agency of others by doing that which others have the expertise and opportunity to do?

- Have checkpoints been built into project timelines to assess and compare anticipated versus actual benefits and harms and to allow for renegotiation of decisions guiding action?
- Are we bringing false assumptions and overgeneralizations into a project based on our experiences in past CI projects?
- Are we making promises that we cannot keep in CI projects by using language that translates differently within different contexts?

Participation and Pluralism

- What does it mean to be inclusive in this context? What does it mean to have self-determination?
- Which individuals and communities are engaged in the CI project, and why? Which individuals and communities are not engaged in the project, and why not?
- Are we taking all necessary steps to ensure that constituents are free to participate in CI projects and are informed about their roles in such projects? Are we allowing participants to freely choose the nature and length of the partnership as their right?
- Are we privileging the input, values, belief systems, and cultural expressions of those directly impacted by CI projects, especially those historically excluded from full participation in society?
- Are we seeking to understand the distinct situations, perspectives, lived experiences, and knowledge of those involved in CI projects, especially attending to group differences?
- Are we entering into engagement as allies in a spirit of mutual trust, respect, genuineness, and commitment? Are we appropriately ceding control as a symbol of trust and a component of trust building?
- Are we allotting sufficient time for relationship building at the start and throughout the CI project? What happens when funding and institutional timelines come into conflict with the time needed for effective dialogue and relationship building?

Philosophy of Technology

- What everyday technologies might be unseen and displaced because of an overly narrow definition of what should be considered an appropriate technology? Who are the local innovators whose technologies might be championed as part of a CI project?
- Are people with the needed skill sets engaged in the design and implementation of the CI project to maximize the likelihood that it is a community building project and not solely a technology-focused initiative?
- How can we seek to understand and leverage constituencies' everyday experiences with technology as an essential gateway for understanding (a) how oppressive systems in society reinforce existing inequalities and (b) the role that different technologies, as applied in context, play in amplifying these social processes?
- Have the impacts on all stakeholders—including future generations, nonhuman residents, those who intersect with the participants and beneficiaries of CI projects, and

those involved in the mining of minerals, in the production of technologies, and in end-of-life recycling—been considered in the selection and implementation of specific technologies?

- How might the voices of technology skeptics and traditionalists inform adoption, or non-adoption, of a CI project? What important insights regarding culture, values, and history are these perspectives bringing to the engagement?
- How do we balance considerations of ease of implementation, purchase costs, operational costs, human costs, sustainability, and end-of-life effects when choosing between different technologies?
- How should we proceed when there isn't alignment amongst various stakeholders regarding important aspects of technology implementation? Is this an opportunity to embrace difference as a resource for community building and the construction of new knowledge in CI projects?
- How do we proceed when ethical and legal aspects come into conflict, especially in the global context when the ethics and laws of one culture come into conflict with those of another? Do complex situations like these present opportunities to embrace group differences as resources for community building and the construction of new knowledge in CI projects?
- How do we balance our relationships with members of the community with the requirements of our places of employment and project funders when a constituency determines adoption or acquisition would be counter to their interests, values, belief systems, and/or cultural ways of being and doing?
- How can we develop new definitions of success in CI projects that do not require adoption of digital technologies or acquisition of data and artifacts?
- How do we introduce technology opportunities without encouraging technological utopianism?

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