

# Report on the 4th Social Informatics SIG Research Symposium: People, Information and Technology: The Social Analysis of Computing

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Social informatics (SI) researchers are interested and engaged in work that assumes a critical stance towards the notion of mutual shaping – or, as the 2008 ASIS&T Annual Meeting theme might have asked: What is involved in people transforming information and information transforming people? A critical analysis is useful to “bring into question established social assumptions and values regarding information and communication technologies (ICTs) and established understandings of *information*, particularly as they play themselves out and are institutionalized in social and professional discourses and professional training” [1]. That said, it is inaccurate to suggest that social informatics is unified in content area, analytical framework or methodological approach. Indeed, the variety of research in social informatics reflects the pervasiveness of computing and information in individual, organizational and sociocultural contexts.

The panoply of approaches and subjects of interest was illustrated in the half-day Social Informatics Research Symposium, sponsored by SIG/SI and co-sponsored by SIG/USE, at the Annual Meeting. This event followed up on the extremely successful symposia held prior to the Annual Meetings in 2004, 2006 and 2007. The symposium was well suited to the ASIS&T 2008 Annual Meeting theme because it showcased research on the mutual shaping

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that occurs between people and information, mediated by technology, that has long been a fundamental assumption of social informatics [2].

For the first time, the symposium was co-sponsored by SIG/USE, with a networking lunch in the middle of the day before the SIG/USE Symposium. Co-sponsorship with the SIG/USE symposium afforded participants a full day of exploration of the transformative relationship between people and information from different but clearly related perspectives. The variety of papers (10 in total and two posters) in the SI symposium exemplified the importance of social informatics research in opening the “black box” of computing to reveal and critique interactions of power, mediation and sociality with information in use. Although the papers were not reviewed and selected for any harmony of theme or approach, a number of underlying problems and questions did emerge, which we explore in the rest of this article.

The role of information in the workplace has always been an important focus of information behavior research and social informatics; indeed, social informatics began as a set of lenses with which to understand how computerization has shaped and been shaped by work and the workplace [3]. Social informatics research has suggested that the very nature of work (and what counts as work and workers) has been reconfigured by the introduction of ICTs. Thus, while ICTs have automated numerous repetitive tasks and enabled asynchronous and geographically dispersed teams to work together, their design and subsequent uses continue to have numerous unintended consequences.

These consequences in the workplace can be marked at multiple levels

of analysis. For example, Theresa Anderson's qualitative study of information practices in scholarly work, "Research in Action: Taking an Articulation Approach to Examine the Roles of Information Technologies and Human Interaction in Academic Practice," went well beyond the traditional "information seeking of scholars" studies to argue that, as much as ICTs support the work practices and rhythms of academic research, their inextricable intertwining with academic life has changed the nature of academic work to make much of it opaque to the outsider, relegating it to what Star and Strauss called "invisible work" [4]. Several of the papers argued that ICTs are not always transformative in positive ways. Emilee Rader's paper, "Group Information Repositories as Social Systems," an analysis of the use of an open source collaborative project management system at the University of Michigan by project teams, provided the audience with examples of how the obduracy of work practices, power relationships between faculty and students and decisions around the management of files can profoundly shape the nature of a group's collaboration, with often maddening effects. Eric Meyer's paper "The Role of e-Infrastructures in the Transformation of Research Practices and Outcomes" extended this argument to a very large scale by using case studies of e-science infrastructure projects to show that while e-research has transformed some disciplines, significant research work is still being done outside of that under the rubric of e-research – another instantiation of the "invisible work" that became apparent by Meyer's analysis.

Other papers illustrated the importance of the social analysis of computing to other domain areas. Several papers focused on information and government where a critical and theoretically informed stance is essential to the integration of the two. Frank Lambert applied the social shaping of technology approach to exploring mycommunity.ca, a portal to access nonprofit and government information in municipalities around London, ON, in "The Social Shaping of an Online Community Information Provider." Lambert demonstrated concrete ways in which interactions among the layers of government that contributed to the project effectively influenced the ways in which users could access and use resources on the

portal. Like several other papers at the symposium, he illustrated ways in which theoretically informed social informatics research can and should contribute to the design of information resources and argued for an ongoing dialogue between research and practice.

Kathryn Clodfeldter's poster, "Innovation, ICTs and Inequality: The U. S. National Information Infrastructure (NII) and Community Networks" illustrated similar themes in understanding and developing community networks. Kristene Unsworth's paper explored information and government in a different vein: informers and terrorism. In "Information Use, Sharing and Surveillance: The Role of the Citizen-Informer in the War on Terror," Unsworth used three case studies, including historical ones such as Nazi Germany, to analyze language, power and control in information gathering and use and how information was co-opted to create the concept of the citizen-informer.

A third area of ongoing interest is the development of new analytical frameworks, methodologies and theories for understanding information and computing. While most social informatics research is informed by extant methods in the humanities and social sciences, some researchers are exploring computing with other approaches. For example, Ying Ding's paper, "Modeling Social Tagging: Upper Tag Ontology (UTO)" used statistical methods and web analytics, both unusual approaches for social informatics, to characterize the Web 2.0 space, which other papers engaged as well. The distributed nature of information networks and user-provided content in Web 2.0 and other environments of interest provide social informatics researchers with opportunities to apply existing theory to new problems and engage new methods as well.

Critical studies is an area of humanistic theory that has significant import for understanding information phenomena, an approach that several papers exemplified. Inna Kouper's paper, "The Composite Model of Critical Discourse Analysis: Examining Mutual Shaping of People, Information and Technology through Discourse" explored linguistic approaches to understanding ICTs while articulating the difficulties encountered in approaching the often intractable problems posed by those ICTs. Ken

Fleishman's paper, "Social Analysis of Transparency in Virtual Worlds: Ethical Imperatives for Simulation Design," also took a critical studies approach to social informatics by exploring virtual reality and simulation, an area of increasing interest for its applications to games, virtual organizations, e-commerce and other arenas, and explored the invisible work of ethics in these environments. Stephen Paling's paper explored the realm of cultural studies, the creation of the literary and ICTs to posit a framework for understanding *art informatics*. Michael Tyworth and Steve Sawyer, in "Social Informatics and the Social Analysis of Computing" also used the analysis of computing in a specialized domain, law enforcement, to explore and articulate an organizationally oriented approach to understanding technology, while harkening back to the themes of power, control and invisible work that characterized several other papers in this symposium.

Mark Ackerman of the University of Michigan Ann Arbor's School of Information provided the symposium with a keynote presentation, "Social Informatics and the Changing Computational Infrastructure," that illustrated new challenges in large-scale information environments, pervasive computing and new media-facilitated approaches to social life to articulate a "new social informatics" that went well beyond the analysis of computing on desktops, in offices and among knowledge workers. Drawing upon

historical analogies of intellectual engagement between critics of technology and their technologies, such as the railroad (critiqued in Frank Norris's *The Octopus*) and the modern factory (most famously analyzed by Karl Mark and Friedrich Engels), Ackerman challenged the audience to consider the current moment in time as a kind of transition point before the black box is put around new technology and where its design, uses and shaping are most evident. Ackerman's paper argued for the blurring of information user and designer and ongoing theoretical engagement with both. For the social informatics researcher, this call was a heartening one.

One of the questions that arose from the symposium was the very provocative one of whether *social informatics* as a term still has purchase, given that its going concerns have been so seamlessly and effectively integrated into other fields of inquiry (much as computing itself has done so well beyond the workplace): knowledge management, organizational studies, science/technology/society, to name a few. Indeed, the term *social informatics* has all but disappeared from most information-related conferences, except for ASIS&T. But Ackerman's paper argued for the ongoing utility and vitality of the term, and suggests enthusiasm for the social informatics pre-conference symposium in future years of ASIS&T Annual Meetings. ■

### Resources Mentioned in the Article

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