



## From the Editors

### *Exploring Facets of Community*

François Bar, Michael L. Best  
Editors-in-Chief

The current issue of ITID was planned as a general issue, one that would follow on the publication of several special issues over the past year. But while the four articles we bring you here came to us independently, they present nicely complementary approaches to a common theme—community. They analyze the impact of Mexico’s Digital Community Centers, explore the visions of community underlying much of the community informatics literature, report on Australian institutions’ efforts to empower Indigenous communities through knowledge systems, and review two recent books on African communities’ uses of mobile phones. Together, they remind us that community is an important concept articulating much of our work on information technology and development, and they challenge us to give critical attention to its multi-faceted meanings.

Mariscal, Gil-Garcia, and Aldama-Nalda’s research article analyzes “Policies on Access to Information Technologies: The Case of e-Mexico,” an ambitious government program started in the early 2000s that created more than 7,200 Digital Community Centers (DCCs) throughout Mexico. Based on the sample of community centers they surveyed, the DCCs have had a positive, but limited, impact on the population they serve. Because many of the DCCs are located in schools, their most salient benefits have been for youth, who represent over two-thirds of users and take advantage of the centers to complete their schoolwork and for recreation. To compensate, the authors recommend that the design of future digital centers rely more extensively on participation from other community members, by contrast with the top-down approach the e-Mexico program followed. They also advocate for better infrastructure—in particular, for faster Internet connections to the centers. We might add that it would be interesting to explore the broader benefits the existing centers have on the local community, beyond the youth who are their primary users. For example, these youth may also act as intermediaries, helping their extended families to access information.

In “Visions of Community: Community Informatics and the Contested Nature of a Polysemic Term for a Progressive Discipline,” Averweg and Leaning take to task the very concept of community, which anchors many programs using ICTs to promote development. Their review focuses on the community informatics literature, but we believe their analysis and conclusions have broader applicability to the ICT for development field. Reviewing the construction of the term and highlighting three distinct meanings of community—locality, shared interests or experience, and shared beliefs or spiritual values—they observe that, throughout the community informatics literature, the term is seldom examined critically. Community is almost always assumed to be a universally positive and self-evident value. However, their careful examination of its uses in literature including sociology and philosophy reveals more complex and layered meanings. Our work would greatly gain, they argue, from more careful

## EXPLORING FACETS OF COMMUNITY

attention to the concept's history, its locally contingent position, and its specific contexts. Such critical engagement with the meanings of "community" would yield better analysis and more effective programs.

In their Notes from the Field, McClellan and Tanner examine "Knowledge Discovery Empowering Australian Indigenous Communities." Their case studies review the information systems established by eight Australian institutions to collect, curate, and make broadly available the artifacts of Australia's Indigenous cultures. These museums, libraries, archives, and galleries play an important role as institutions of memory for Indigenous communities. However, the authors lament the fact that these communities have had relatively limited involvement in the constitution and care of this collective memory. These institutional projects would have much to gain, they argue, from greater interaction with community members, including the training of Indigenous people so they could become eligible to work in the institutions themselves.

Finally, in this issue's Book Review section, Walton presents two related books exploring the rapid growth of mobile phone use in Africa. The first, "SMS Uprising: Mobile Phone Activism in Africa," reports on the many African activist projects that make use of basic SMS service for mobile campaigns. The rich diversity of applications built on top of the simple texting service is a testament to the possibilities that open when a universal and easily accessible platform becomes available. The second, "Mobile Phones: The New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa," offers a variety of ethnographic accounts documenting how Africans appropriate mobile technologies and make them relevant to their daily lives. Together, these two books remind us that applications and uses that first emerge within specific user communities can lead to more widely applicable approaches that are useful for broader situations. Ushahidi, born to address the violence that followed Kenya's recent elections and now widely used to coordinate crisis response around the world, offers a spectacular example of how one particular community's effort can have broad relevance for all.