

Research Report

Visions of Community: Community Informatics and the Contested Nature of a Polysemic Term for a Progressive Discipline

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Abstract¹

Community Informatics (CI) is an academic field of study that seeks to examine how information and communication technologies (ICT) such as Web 2.0 social media and mobile technologies can be deployed for the benefit of communities. Community is, however, a problematic and polysemic term, meaning different things to different people, and it has inherently political overtones. This article aims to bring to the attention of practitioners in the field of CI the contested nature of the term community, and to examine the historical origin of the term and the multiple ways in which it has been and can be used. In exploring this term, we make use of more literary, historical, and sociological approaches. Such approaches can offer new insights on the topic for audiences from more technical academic disciplines. With such discussion to assist practitioners of CI of the problematic ways in which community has been and can be used, we offer the following recommendations: (1) Use of the term community remains largely unproblematized, and we ought to be more mindful of its history; (2) community should be recognized as a locally contingent position; (3) as a term of reference, its use should be carefully considered within specific contexts; (4) a fuller exploration of the term in the CI discipline is needed; and (5) practitioners in the field of CI will require greater reflection on the term community when addressing ICT practice issues. We hope that these recommendations may lead to more reflexive practice in the progressive discipline of CI.

1. Introduction

Community Informatics (CI) offers a coherent, persuasive, useful, and interesting model for understanding, analyzing, and facilitating the use of ICT for particular purposes. While it is primarily a practitioner field, attention has been paid to how particular terms of reference are conceptualized, with some explored in depth (Goodwin, 2008). However, the core concept of community presents a range of problems. While concepts such as ICT may be regarded as “fixed” (and to a degree, easily definable), *community* is a more problematic term. How community is understood and conceptualized in CI is of key interest, since, in many other disciplines, community has been a widely disputed and contested area.

The study of *community* has a long history with an accompanying

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 3rd International IDIA Development Informatics Conference, Berg-en-Dal, Kruger National Park, South Africa, October 23–30, 2009.

body of literature. Community is possibly one of the most used and polysemic terms in popular discourse. Indeed, as Miller, Coleman, Connolly et al. (1991, p. 8) note, community has a “high level of use but a low level of meaning.” Inherently nebulous, community is nevertheless one of the key means by which we experience and understand the social world. It is a category through which we can interpret events, discerning their meaningfulness to us by their effect upon our *community*. In short, community is a tool, a means by which we can understand and “live” in the world. However, despite its importance, community remains a term that has suffered widespread misuse—or at least a laxness in specificity of use.

The term *community*, like numerous other concepts taken from commonsense usage, has been used with an abandon reminiscent of poetic license (Wirth, 1964). Community is polysemic; it signifies different things in different contexts and means different things to different people at different times (Crow & Allan, 1994, pp. 3–7). It is a “contested concept” (Tovey, 2009), used descriptively to depict, portray, or illustrate a particular set of relations, but also normatively to describe how a set of relations should be, or, as will be noted below, to align a political or economic project with a positive moral value. While, as Williams (1976) notes, it is nearly always a positive idea, something to be preserved or sought, it has been found in some rather shady linguistic company, and it has been used to support very unprogressive and dangerous ideas. Indeed, community has been used by, and has served as a rallying point for, projects from all parts of the political spectrum. Community has been deployed by both overtly progressive and deeply conservative political missions, and it has been used to bolster the interests of a wide variety of factions, political parties, and pressure groups.

This article is concerned with bringing to the attention of academics and practitioners in the field of CI some of the different and contested ways in which community has been understood. Our intention is to encourage a more measured understanding of the term, and to recognize the multiple ways in which it has been and can be used. In exploring this term, we contrast a model of understanding of community used in a number of “progressive disciplines” (academic fields of study that seek to address social problems and improve conditions)

with one drawn from a more analytic tradition (wherein there is a greater claim to objectivity from the interests of the subject/s of study). With this second approach, we explore the ways in which *community* has been understood in certain social theories and political narratives, and we make use of a more qualitative literary, historical, and sociological approach than is usually deployed within information studies or computer science disciplines. It is hoped that the ideas raised here may offer new avenues of interest to more positivist and quantitative researchers in the progressive CI discipline.

We commence with a brief discussion of CI and its history, and specifically of its construction as an academic and practitioner field concerning the deployment of ICT for the benefit of communities. We then move to a critical examination of the term *community*, looking at its historical origin and a number of key interpretations and readings that have been made of the term. We conclude with a number of cautionary recommendations concerning the use of the term *community*.

2. Community Informatics

2.1 The Construction of the Academic and Practitioner Field of Community Informatics (CI)

CI is generally understood as an academic discipline or field of study concerned with the application of ICT for community benefit. We identify ICT in a broad sense to include the technical infrastructure of network communication—the hardware and software that make communication possible, the multiplicity of software applications, and the systems of social appropriation of software for localized use—for example, the instances in which Web 2.0 social media and mobile applications have been used, adapted, and woven into complex and often pre-existing social networks of political activism. Regarding ICT in this manner allows us to see it not only as a “neutral” system with solely technical properties, but as a value-laden component of human communication. As such, CI is distinguishable in its use of ICT from those academic and practitioner fields where the focus is on the use of ICT for primarily commercial and enterprise success (Stillman & Linger, 2009).

While CI is a fairly recent or “emergent” academic field of inquiry (Goodwin, 2007; Stillman &

Linger, 2009), it has a longer history as a field of practice. There is some contention as to its origins: Day (2005, 2006) notes that computers have been used to facilitate community activists since at least the early 1980s. Williams and Durrance (2009) argue that certain practical aspects of CI can be traced back further, at least in the United States, to two precursors: various projects in public libraries in the 1970s, and the actions of social informatics activists. The early instances of the “civil” appropriation of ICT through libraries have been documented several times (Childers, 1984; Durrance, 1984; Kochen & Donohue, 1976). Similarly, social informatics also has a considerable body of publications (Kling, 2000; Kling, Rosenbaum, & Sawyer, 2005; Sawyer & Rosenbaum, 2000). However, Loader and Keeble (2004) see a slightly different origin for CI, identifying community networking initiatives in the United States and Scandinavian tele-house experiments as ancestors. It is probably the case that many activities, projects, and initiatives were occurring at around the same time, and that they have fed into the broad initiative of practice-based CI.

CI as an academic field of inquiry has drawn heavily on these practitioner traditions, but it has also developed an academic focus. Goodwin (2007) proposes that CI has been defined and articulated in a number of key texts. These texts have appeared as chapters in edited collections (Day, 2004; Gurstein, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2008; Keeble & Loader 2001; Loader, Hague, & Eagle, 2000; Taylor, 2004), as journal articles (Erwin & Taylor, 2004, 2006; Gurstein, 2003, 2004), a white paper (Bieber, Cville, Gurstein et al., 2002), and books (Gurstein, 2008; Loader & Keeble, 2004; Schuler, 1996). A specialized journal—the *Journal of Community Informatics*—was launched in 2004, and a dedicated and active mailing list exists.

A review of the above texts indicates a general agreement that CI is the study and practice of the use of ICT for community benefit. In the first issue of the *Journal of Community Informatics*, Gurstein (2004) defines CI as a development in the academic world for “enabling communities with Information and Communications Technologies.” Beyond this, CI is seen to offer a multi-disciplinary research platform for the study of the use of ICT in community development (Loader & Keeble, 2004). Goodwin (2007) contends that CI has four distinct foci: First, CI incorporates a recognition that ICTs impact pre-

existing geographical communities—ICTs not only offer forms of connection between previously unknown people, but they may also facilitate social practices in existing communities that are in physical proximity (Loader, Hague, & Eagle, 2000). CI examines how communities can use ICT for their own ends. Second, CI advocates a community-oriented approach to the design implementation and use of ICT. CI prioritizes the “social requirements” of ICT use in communities—the training, social, and cultural capital aspects of ICT. It acknowledges a bias reflected in valuing “public goods” and the potential for human growth and development (Bieber, Cville, Gurstein et al., 2002). De Moor (2006) contends that CI “concerns (among many other things) the building of the sociotechnical infrastructure (in terms of enabling technologies as well as organizations) which is a necessary condition for communities to thrive.” Third, CI has an overt political stance and a desire to understand social change in relation to ICT. CI undoubtedly has an inherent progressive slant, and ICT is considered a tool that can be deployed for social benefit (Loader, Hague, & Eagle, 2000). This distinguishes CI from the parallel discipline of business or management informatics, in which the prime goal is the furtherance of profit and of the economic success of the organization (Gurstein, 2000b). In CI, the intention is to deploy ICT for the benefit of specific communities. CI recognizes that the application of ICT in a social or community sense is different from that which occurs in a bureaucratic state or commercial organizational setting (Erwin & Taylor, 2004). As Cooley (2008) notes, technology is viewed as a tool to be designed, used, and shaped by humans, for human purposes. Within a CI framework, such purposes are envisaged in a beneficent, progressive manner to further generally humanitarian and specifically community-oriented intents. Related to this one particularly strong theme in CI is the use of ICT to empower communities that have been marginalized or disenfranchised (Goodwin, 2007) within larger social frameworks (Taylor, 2004). Fourth, CI incorporates a critical reading of contemporary social life and positions itself as an oppositional discourse to the more harmful aspects of globalization (Castells, 1996). CI draws on a critical interpretation of social change, development, and transformation. From this perspective, globalization has had a negative impact on many social formations, as traditional structures

have been damaged, existing social practices have been transformed, and communities have been “hollowed out” by new economic forces (Gurstein, 2001). CI advocates a re-empowerment of these communities that makes use of or appropriates ICT, a key component of the very phenomena that have endangered and damaged the communities in question.

2.2 Definition of Community in CI

As noted above, CI has an explicit focus on the use of ICT by geographically based communities (Gurstein, 2000b, 2004; Keeble & Loader, 2001; Loader, Hague, & Eagle, 2000; Loader & Keeble, 2004; Schackman, 2010; Taylor, 2004). In line with the general ambiguity surrounding the term and similar to texts from other academic disciplines, community is often defined in a limited manner in CI texts. Indeed, the problem of arriving at an agreed meaning of the term within CI is an accepted research problem in the discipline (de Moor, 2009; Loader, Hague, & Eagle, 2000; Schackman, 2010). However, many case studies and CI initiatives explicitly identify geographically based communities as the subject of their study. For example, articles in the *Journal of Community Informatics* have focused on communities in Ontario, Canada (Budka, Bell, & Fiser, 2009); rural Australia (Eley & Hossain, 2010); and Abraka, Nigeria (Adomi, 2007).

Goodwin (2008) notes that this focus on geographic locality distinguishes CI from accounts that examine how ICTs weaken the importance of place in community. Instead, CI considers how ICT can be used to support “territorial” communities (Goodwin, 2008) and integrate online communication with local community needs (Loader, Hague, & Eagle, 2000). However, this focus on the process of facilitation of community interests through ICT does mask a need within CI to better understand the nature of “local community” (Goodwin, 2008), and even the category of community. As Tambini (1999) and Goodwin (2008) note, there is an inclination in CI to consider communities in a singularly positive light, as well as to overlook some of the problems of communities, including their internal power struggles and other problematic areas.

As with Goodwin (2008), it is not our intention to undermine the actions or rationale of CI. Furthermore, the authors firmly concur with the progressive intentions of CI and its championing of disadvan-

tagged groups, and we are both active members of the CI academic network. Instead, our intention is to assist in the development of a more critical and self-reflective approach by CI practitioners and researchers relating to the ways in which community can be understood.

3. Community: An Evolving and Evasive Concept

3.1 The Study of Community

Community has long been a topic of mainstream political interest, and there has been a large amount of popular comment on the issue. Furthermore, the study of community has a long history, and it has been a major topic for many academic disciplines—indeed, there is a veritable cottage industry in producing books, articles, and conference papers on issues of community. In brief, it is a field with considerable history and a significant body of publications.

As with other terms and concepts, interest in *community* is by no means constant, and there are discernable periods in which interest is high. Currently, *community* is undoubtedly a key political value, and the term is widely used in a range of popular and academic debates. While we could not possibly begin to do justice to the wide variety of perspectives used to study community (or those that have made use of the concept in the study of other areas), we can discern a broad schema in how the term is understood. Little (2002) argues that much current interest stems from a debate between liberals and communitarians following the emergence of Rawls’ (1999) theory of justice. Crudely put, this debate concerned the way in which communitarians such as Etzioni (1995, 1997) rejected the Rawlsian abstracted, individualized, or atomized concept of the self (Sandel, 1998), and instead, argued for an account wherein “human association” is privileged as the focus of understanding. It is important to note, however, that Rawls’ notion was distinct from the neoliberalism of Friedman (1962) and Nozick (1974). While initially losing out to neoliberal models, the Rawlsian concept eventually achieved widespread acceptance. It has become significantly influential in many spheres, and it is widely used in parliamentary political discourse in both the United States and the United Kingdom. However, in recent years, we have arguably been witnessing a resur-

gence in the more communitarian-oriented approach.

Emerging from this debate was a renewed interest in community and the way in which it is understood in political debate. One popular approach, advocated by authors such as Willmott (1989), Lee and Newby (1983), Crow (1997), and Crow and Allan (1994, 1995), recognizes three distinct interpretations of *community*:

- Community is conceptualized as a “locality.” Here the “commonality” or the essence of community between people is the physical space in which they reside. This approach to the study of community has examined a number of topics such as the impact of architecture and geography upon community;
- Community among people emerges from a shared interest or experience. This category provides a means by which many forms of association that emerge from a shared set of practices or interests may be conceptualized as a community. As is noted below, this has proven to be a particularly useful tool for examining the way in which ICT has facilitated communities.
- Community is used to understand the feeling of commonality that occurs among people around certain topics, beliefs, or spiritual values. Thus, we can talk of a feeling of community, or of a link among people in a heightened spiritual or emotional state, such as experiencing a religious event or being part of a crowd at an exciting football match or music concert.

This tripartite approach has become useful as an analytic device for examining social problems, as it is often deployed in the academic disciplines developed to understand and address such problems. Thus, the approach and its derivations feature in many texts on community studies, criminology, and social administration (Hoggett, 1997).

In this text, we adopt a slightly different perspective, critically examining a limited number of instances in which the term *community* has been used within differing discursive political frameworks. In doing so, we make reference to the study of community from within a broadly sociological tradition, both in terms of how it has been understood historically by sociologists and political theorists, and

of how a sociologically critical approach can be deployed in the study of the idea of community.

3.2 Derivation of the Term Community

The term *community* arrived in its current use, via Old French and Middle English, from the Latin words *communitas*, meaning fellowship, and *communis*, meaning common, public, or shared (Harper, 2001). It is no linguistic accident that “community” and “communication” share the Latin root *communis* (Webber, 1964). In the most reportive (how it is used) and prescriptive (the ordinarily used interpretation that appears in dictionaries and normal parlance) senses, communities are simply conglomerations of people with common interests who communicate with each other. However, it is when community is contrasted with other, similar-meaning terms that the nuances of its meaning become apparent.

3.3 Community, State, and Society

Community's refinement as a term with political importance arises not simply because of its meaning, but also because of its use in opposition to other forms of association. As noted by Williams (1976), community is always a positive form of association, and it is categorically different from other forms of collectivity, such as society or association. This distinction of community from other terms may be argued to be an inheritance from the emerging philosophic and social scientific discourse of the (especially German) Enlightenment and “Modern” *weltanschauung* (worldview) during the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Europe. The German philosopher George Hegel's differentiation of *Staat* (state) and *Gesellschaft* (society) fundamentally influenced much European, and particularly embryonic social scientific thought of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Schulte-Tenckhoff, 2001). Moreover, it draws on a Romantic strand of Enlightenment thought in which the “primordial nature of the communal bond was the widely held premise” (Schulte-Tenckhoff, 2001). Society was regarded as a somewhat “artificial” form of association; it did not capture the true “essence” of “natural” human association. As will be indicated below, this interpretation was quite distinct from the British Utilitarian models of political economy popularized by the political philosophers toward the middle of the 19th century, such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, as well as from the late 18th-century

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Rousseauian and French revolutionary-inspired idea of “contract” political models.

3.4 Bonds

Perhaps the most influential early thinker on the topic was Ferdinand Tönnies. Tönnies’ most significant work on this area, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Community and Society*, published in 1887), continues Hegel’s concept of distinguishing among forms of association (Freund, 1979). Tönnies worked from the contention that people can have two “types” of “will” or thought: the *Wesenwille*, the natural or essential will, which is an instinctive, organic, or spontaneous type of thought—the kind of thoughts and ideas that occur without intention, the idea of free-flowing consciousness; and the *Kürwille*—the reasoned or arbitrary will—those ideas and thoughts that are instrumental, deliberative, purposive, and goal-oriented.

Tönnies considered the associations based upon essential “will,” *Gemeinschaft* (or community), as more valuable than those based upon arbitrary “will” *Gesellschaft* (or society). Behavior and associations that occur without planning or having an end reason are valued more highly than those that are the result of specific rational intention. Thus, community meets the requirements of “real and organic life,” while society serves “artificial and mechanical representation” (Tönnies, 1955, p. 54). *Gemeinschaft* (community) should be understood as a living organism, while *Gesellschaft* (society) should be understood as a mechanical aggregate and artifact. Thus, preference is established for a more natural interpretation of forms of association: the more unthinking, emotional, and deep the links or bonds among individuals in an association, the more valid that association. Conceptions of association that are built on overtly rational, end-orientated, and instrumental intentions, such as society, are regarded in some way as not as genuine. Therefore, those associations that emerge from rational, purposive, or instrumental “will”—the *Kürwille*, are intrinsically less valuable than those that emerge from the emotive “will”—the *Wesenwille*.

In the model of community derived from this approach, membership in the community is not an actively sought pursuit; membership is derived from being born into, raised as a member of, or achieving a particular status in a community. Members of a community in this interpretation are not members

because they have a particular set of interests; rather, their interests are determined by their membership of a community. The community determines their interests, but membership of the community is determined by something far more essential—perhaps location, family, kinship, or status.

This is an extremely influential idea, and it is central in the work of many social thinkers of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Giddens, 1971). Cohen (1985) argues that this idealized interpretation of community has led to, has influenced, and continues to influence numerous political ideologies and philosophies. The intention to recover the lost, pre-modern community—the “fictionalized memories of a golden past” (Mayo, 2000, p. 39)—underpins many of the dominant ideologies of the 20th century. Conservatism, nationalism, and socialism all call on both this sense of loss and the desire to recover a deeper sense of association (Delanty, 2002). Indeed, the recovery of community against a “faceless” society has become so normal that it is a virtually unchallenged “good” that no political party could seriously contest. It is deployed to “soften” or add a positive aura to numerous terms that, without the addition of community, would be far less “attractive” (Day, 2006, p. 14). It is widely used in anti-systemic movements (Heelas, 1996) as well as mainstream ones, and it is a potent rallying point. This interpretation of community has been the 20th century’s most potent challenge to modern society (Delanty, 2002). However, the romanticism and romanticization of community are not trouble-free. The concept often becomes tied to not only inward-facing and deeply conservative positions, but as Rocher (1968, p. 58) notes, this model of community leads eventually to a fascist, racist worldview, and it perhaps legitimated or contributed to the rise of nationalism and Nazism in Germany.

The use of the distinction between the desired *Gemeinschaft* (community) and the undesired *Gesellschaft* (society) is found in political movements in many parts of the world. For example, Marx (2002) notes the resonance of this “lost” community conception with *ubuntu* as a political narrative in the post-Reconciliation and Truth Commission era in South Africa. However, we must be wary, as Spivak (1990) warns, of simply viewing all cultural behavior through a Eurocentric critical theoretical framework; thus, it is important to remember that this understanding of community emerged during,

and reflects certain political fears of early to middle modernity.

3.5 *Communities of Interest*

A second strand of thought on the idea of *community* can also be detected. Here, the emphasis, while still very idealistic, contends that community should be, or is, based around the interests of members. This tradition stems from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's question of how best to achieve and safeguard personal interests, our "particular will"—the *volonté particulière*. Writing in the politically turbulent second half of the 18th century, Rousseau proposed that our best strategy lay in aligning ourselves with common interests or sublimating our *volonté particulière* to the "general will"—the *volonté générale* (Rousseau, 1968). Only in society can we be free; to enter society, then, is to enter a social contract. Perhaps the best-known exponent of this idea is Robert MacIver, in his 1917 text, *Community: A Sociological Study Being an Attempt to Set Out the Fundamental Laws of Social Life* (MacIver, 1970/1917). MacIver argues that community should stem from the "communality of interests" that community offers, that our interests are best served by being in a group, an extension of the Rousseauian idea. MacIver challenges the Tönniesian contention that communities cannot (and should not) be created by "will" or common interest. Communities can come into being through the recognition of shared interests and "common will." However, this will must be of a certain type—it must be a will to bind people together; a will must be for the "common good" (though how this is determined is a more tricky question). MacIver and Page (1961/1937, p. 8) note that we "may live in a metropolis and yet be members of a very small community because our interests are circumscribed within a narrow area."

Moreover, it is important to distinguish this from the simple idea that community is just a collection of people with like interests. In MacIver's model, community is more than aggregated interests; drawing heavily from the Functionalist ethos that predominated in American sociology of the period, community becomes a social entity in its own right. Community becomes the vehicle through which interests are not only expressed, but made possible. MacIver and Page (1961/1937) contend that economic and "increasingly . . . political interdepen-

dence is a major characteristic of our great modern communities." While MacIver's (1970/1917) conception of community predates more recent political ideas of community found in much center-left discourse, it certainly contributes to the current model in which community and the attendant model of citizenship is understood to be something that confers both rights and responsibilities on its members (see, for example, Etzioni, 1995, 1997).

3.6 *Postmodern Communities*

Both of the above-noted models have their roots in the period of early Modernity and the attempts to understand the changes that were taking place in those societies. The philosophical works, as well as the classical sociological theories developed from them, that sought to understand the changes taking place at the time, played a considerable part in narrating the events and actually structuring how we understand the modern world. The social theory of the age of Modernity was concerned with explaining that period of time and the gradual transitions taking place. Postmodernity; its attendant cultural aesthetic, postmodernism; and interpretation in theory have also made use of the idea of community. However, this interpretation is decidedly different from earlier sociological notions. In this interpretation, community is stripped of its link to a lost or primordial past. Instead, postmodern communities are organized around three key features, which we now discuss. First, there are the twin problems of identity and negotiating "difference." Negotiating difference refers to the recognition that living in cosmopolitan environments throws innumerable cultural groups together, and that, with a few exceptions, such groups must live together (Bauman, 2001). Our traditional categories of social demarcation, such as race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, culture, or other "markers," are often not as clear-cut as we once thought them to be. New categories, new inflections, and new fracture points must continually be dealt with in postmodern times. While primordial certainties and pasts are attempted on occasion by political activists and certain new social movements (Heelas, 1996), the lived experience of most people cannot be understood in this way; they simply have to get on with living, negotiating, and coping with difference in ways that could not have been imagined in "modern" times. Identity, here, is no longer

the certainty it used to be; it is in “flux” (Lyon, 2001). Giddens (2002, pp. 32–33) describes how the processes of modernity, particularly the greater reflexivity or constant emphasis on the “self” as a project, bear on the individual to such a degree that individuals are no longer grounded in the virtually unchanging systems of tradition. Giddens notes that identity becomes an activity itself, a quest to find who we “really” are—“the self becomes a *reflexive project*” (ibid.). As categories collapse, it becomes harder and harder to maintain the certainties of the “fixed” traditional national, gender, class, or racial identities of previous periods. Moreover, this challenge to the centered subject, the core of modern thinking, also damages the modernist trend of individualization, the gradual demarcation of the self from society. Second, with such challenges to the certainties (if there ever were any) of the modern world, postmodernity must also be understood in terms of the fluidity of signs, images, and markers. Signs lose their fixity; they become unmoored and are used in new, dynamic ways. The process by which signs acquire meaning, semiosis, is greatly accelerated, and signs now shift in a complex web of borrowing, montage, and ironic play. In this postmodern world, “image” can no longer be contrasted with “reality”; image is reality. Third is the development of ICT and the emergence of what has been termed the “mode of information” (Poster, 1990). Here, it is argued that the underlying economic mode has shifted toward one in which information becomes the primary commodity, and its production, manipulation, and usage becomes the focus of labor. Such a transformation in particular economies contributes to increased “time-space compression” (Harvey, 1989) or “time-space distanciation” (Giddens, 1990, 2002). Authors such as Castells (1996) and van Dijk (2006) note the emergence of the term “the network society,” wherein the multiplicity of electronic systems of communication affords new means of association across previously unsurpassable physical and temporal boundaries. Against this backdrop, a number of authors have argued that we are witnessing the rebirth of community. However, this community does not make use of the ideas of either the “non-society” or “community of interests” models. Rather, postmodern communities tend to be anti-essentialist, fluid, open-ended entities. Maffesoli (1996) argues that, in postmodern times, we live in

temporary networks and groupings, referred to as tribes or “emotional communities.” Such communities are temporary and have no long-term focus. Rather, they are built on the consumption and manifestation of lifestyle choices, images, and fashions. While they have been predominantly metropolitan phenomena, such temporary communities are versatile and flexible. They seek not to constrain members, but to offer a sense of belonging, however fleeting. For authors such as Jean-Luc Nancy, the postmodern communities also offer a shelter from the decline of society and forms of mass collectivity, as well as from the rise of individualization (Nancy, 1991). Furthermore, many advances in ICT are as a result of postmodernism (Wells, 1996).

4. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and Communities

Numerous instances of the application of this postmodern theorization of community to online communication by individuals using a variety of Web-based social media exist. In the early years of Internet research, much emphasis was placed on the creation of long-term “virtual communities” (Baym, 1998; Dawson, 2004; Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004). More recently, this term has fallen into decline, but research into the use of a variety of Web 2.0 applications to facilitate, enable, and create communities has grown significantly (Burgess, Green, Jenkins et al., 2009; Rice, 2009; Rettberg, 2008). However, while it has been widely pointed out that online communication is simply one further modality of communication (Leaning, 2009; Slevin, 2000), all current communities that exist beyond face-to-face contact and use media to communicate are, to some degree, imagined or virtual (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004). It is not the intention here to demarcate between pre-existing communities that now use ICT (such as Web 2.0 social media and mobile technologies) and communities that have come into being through ICT, or to pass judgment on the validity of using the term *community*. Rather, our intention is to highlight the different ways in which community has been understood.

While ICT makes various types of communities possible, understanding of the *community* category remains fluid. It is important to recognize, however, that community is often deployed in a political man-

ner to justify actions. Moreover, considering the history of the term, use of the term must be recognized as being political. Activities such as the deployment of ICT resources, gaining access to ICT equipment, and gaining access to training for and maintenance of ICT infrastructure are all deeply political issues (Selwyn, 2004). Asserting that a *community* will benefit is a way of associating moral benefits with such actions and thus increasing the likelihood of their continuation in times of budget restriction. In such instances, community seems to be used in a manner that is unmindful of its history and blind to the connotations of the term and its consequences.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

With such different interpretations of community currently in use, we wish to offer the following cautionary recommendations to practitioners of CI. While we fully support the activities of CI, we do argue that use of the term community has “costs,” and that its use should be measured.

We offer the following recommendations in conclusion:

- It should be recognized that the term *community* is, for the most part, used in an unproblematized manner that is unmindful of its history. Consequently, we argue that it should be recognized as a politically emotive term, as it has been used in a variety of political projects, and its use is politically charged. We advocate that practitioners of CI and related disciplines note that using community has attendant political overtones above and beyond the simple addition of a positive aura (Day, 2006).
- *Community* should be recognized not as a universal good, but as a *locally contingent position* in possibly much wider debates taking place in a society. Invoking community in the practice of a particular activity will situate that activity in opposition to activities that are not *community-oriented*. This positioning is often locally and politically determined—as noted above, to be procommunity is a not an absolute value, but one tied to a position in a conflict or debate.

- As a term of reference, its use should be carefully considered within specific contexts so its differing historic interpretations may be regarded as important in its use within the discipline of CI. Local context and political history play a significant part in determining what *community* is and is not. CI projects must be aware of such political activity, and of the privileging of certain positions.
- A fuller exploration of the term in the CI discipline is needed. In arguing for this, we hope to engender a critical engagement and reflexive approach to the practice and multidisciplinary field of academic study of CI.
- For practitioners in the field of CI, greater reflection on the term *community* will be required. Such practitioners will need to combine reflection and practice when addressing ICT practice issues in CI projects and initiatives.

We hope that these recommendations may lead to more reflexive practice in the progressive discipline of CI, and to a more critical engagement with one of its central terms of reference. We feel that the problems noted here relating to the understanding of community pose very real problems for the legitimacy of the academic and practitioner fields of CI. It is our hope that this article raises awareness of such issues, and that doing so makes a positive contribution to these fields. ■

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