In Praise of Community Informatics

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My professional and academic life has been concerned with Community Informatics (CI) which in turn is concerned with identifying and implementing the means to enable and empower communities through the use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs).

For me CI is more of a "practice" than an academic "discipline" since it is concerned with the "how to" and the "what for" of things having to do with communities and ICTs and much less concerned with the "what", or the "why".

The CI community has now, by consensus, issued a "Declaration"--a normative statement meant to externally "badge" our activities and internally to articulate the normative framework that is meant to guide and discipline our work going forward. Note that this is not a traditional statement of research ethics, although I believe that such an ethical statement could (and has been) derived from this (general) normative position.

Also, note that in this context "research" as traditionally understood as attempting to determine the "what", the "how", and the "why" of phenomena in the real world is of relatively less interest but rather research is understood as being in the service of and to the degree possible guided by the real efforts and initiatives of communities to enable and empower themselves through the use of ICTs.

What this means is that CI is by its very nature engaged with the object of it's "study"--this is not something that one chooses as one among several potential research methods, rather it is of the very essence of CI that the object of the study is to be treated and understood as a "subject" with their full subjectivity and even more important as a full partner in the "research" enterprise. Of course, not all CI activities attain that degree of completeness in the relationship with its community partners--old habits on both sides are often too entrenched--researchers feel the need to respond to their research/academic peers and communities are often ill-prepare to act as full partners in determining the activities, objectives and methods for the conduct of their collaborative activities.

A further defining element of CI which distinguishes it from more conventional areas of research is that CI is undertaken with a continuing and unavoidable understanding of the nature and significance of power in its various social and economic dimensions. CI is concerned, as already noted, with empowering communities and this does not take place in a vacuum. There already are existing fields and structures of power into which communities enabled by ICTs find themselves inserted. These interactions, and not infrequently conflicts, to a degree are linked into utopian but very practical visions of the use of ICTs as social dis-intermediators and potential levellers (although much of this early utopian vision is fading in the face of various types of information monopolization and re-mediation resulting from such activities as mass surveillance, information aggregation and profiling in support of various types of corporate business (and other) models).

Nevertheless CI has as an essential element the need to engage with manifestations of power and conflicts that arise from contestation over power, and this is not done in the abstract nor as a potentially interesting object of study but rather as part of the day to day activity of doing CI as a practice.

CI further is rather more about process and processes, about the most effective way to implement and use systems, of linking ICTs into on-going processes of governance, of supporting the realization of rights and their linkages to attendant responsibilities. In this sense CI is always dynamic--looking at/engaging with social behaviour and particularly community behaviour and action as it is manifesting itself in outcomes but always paying most attention to the journeys rather than the terminals and always recognizing that it is the communities themselves that determine the destinations of those journeys.

The Snowden revelations have ended forever our collective innocence (or perhaps better, our "naivety" around the Internet. We can now see what the Internet has become in reality (and no longer science fiction) a huge machine for surveillance and ultimately for individual and social control. Perhaps this kind of evolution was inevitable--an interesting subject for an academic event to consider--but whether or not it was inevitable, that is what it has become and the issue now is whether, or how, to engage with this reality and attempt to change it--to wrest back control of this marvellous phenomenon for social and community well-being.

To do this will involve committed action by many--including researchers to document what is and to explore what could be, but also by activists/practitioners to build alternative technical realities. From my observation given the degree to which current corporate and "technically" administered Internet platforms have quite so visibly become compromised; the opportunity, indeed the necessity of building new and "commons" secured platforms built on the base of local and virtual communities presents itself to us in a dramatic fashion. It was the intention I believe of the CI

Declaration to begin that process of reconstruction of the Internet based on principles of the "common good" and I for one welcome all those willing and interested in joining in common cause in support of these efforts.