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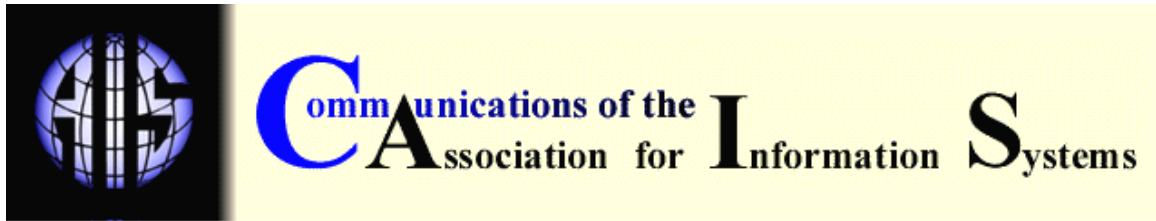
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IS RELEVANCE: ARE COMMUNITIES THE BUSINESS BEYOND BUSINESS?

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ABSTRACT

The advent of very low cost Personal Computing and Internet- based digital communication presents the opportunity and requirement for universally usable and community or end-user derived Information Systems. Community Informatics is both a theoretical and practical approach to this area and includes a response to the Digital Divide and ways of developing community based and universally accessible IS applications. In this way IS systems can be developed which are derived from internal models of community process and consensus, alongside Management Information Systems that incorporate models based on organizational hierarchy and command and control processes.

Others make the case that IS need not necessarily be concerned with Business Information Systems (BIS). The case may also be made that the apparent assumption that IS=MIS=BIS may be an artifact of the history of IS where initial research was concerned with very large and expensive systems which were only accessible to governments, the military, and large corporations and only cost justified by their contribution to "management". This link to large and largely centralized management structures and strategies seems to have carried over into the rather interesting (over)concern with, for example, ERP systems at the expense of research in the distributed processing models of the Internet and, for example, open source systems.

I have a feeling that some future historian of IS will look on the development first of Personal Computing which radically democratized access to computing power; and then the Internet which radically democratized access to computer communications and digitized information as the basis for what Thomas Kuhn would have called a "paradigm shift" from centralized computing to decentralized computing and from Management Information Systems to End User and Community Information Systems (CIS). The social/behavioural assumptions built into centralized systems as compared to decentralized or distributed ones represent significant differences in orientations toward organizational design and structuring, with centralized systems being much more amenable to command and control approaches and decentralized ones implicitly requiring consensus/collaborative decision making and structuring.

The combination of dramatic (Moore's law?) reductions in end user costs of information processing and information access opened up vast numbers of actual and potential users and the opportunity for applications vastly beyond the rather closed circles of Business or Management interest.

To my mind the discussions around the Digital Divide which tend to be "pooh-poohed" by IS folks are signs of the kind of demands/opportunities which are available for IS. There is in this the

implicit societal requirement that IS respond to an expectation that Information Systems are for everyone and that their use will be so ubiquitous that to be left aside from IS access/use is to be left out of the normal life of the citizen not only in developed societies but in all societies.

The challenge of "relevance for IS" thus is not simply of being relevant to a limited number of potential (business) systems developers but rather to be relevant to the overwhelming numbers of potential users--all the citizens on the planet. What this further suggests is that the paradigms/models/assumptions which underlie the MIS approach to IS may not be usable or useful in the new universalized world of Information Systems use and application.

It is within this context that a number of initiatives and developments are emerging under the overall rubric of Community Informatics (CI). Here rather than making assumptions of organizational management as the controlling model, attempts are being made to incorporate collaborative, consensus driven "community" models into the design of systems (with of course the obvious links to CSCW and related areas). Similar to conventional MIS approaches, CI or CIS looks to incorporate the requirements and structures of the host (community) as implicit to the design of (community) useable and useful systems as for example in Community Memories, Community Learning Systems, Community Based E-Health Systems, Geo-Local E-Commerce Strategies and so on. Notable in this context is the emergence of "community" as a central paradigm for E-Commerce and the re-emergence of the significance of the Geo-Local in E-Commerce and with the design of Broadband/Civic Fibre systems.

Today, several hundred IS professionals and practitioners would identify with CI or CIS and there is a quite active e-list (communityinformatics@vcn.bc.ca) with about equal representation from CI academics and practitioners. Interestingly, those involved range in discipline from Computing Science to the Social Sciences to Planning to Development Studies. Meetings have also been held in conjunction with the PDC and DIAC conferences. Panels on Community Informatics have held been at the two most recent ICIS meetings and at HICSS-34 and another is being organized for HICSS-35. For further information see Gurstein (2000)

The extension of the IS discipline to include community approaches and community concerns is an encouraging trend. Increasing attention to community approaches can be expected as interest and activity heightens around initiatives linked to national and global Digital Divides and to the UN Summit on the Information Society in 2003.

REFERENCE

Gurstein M. (Ed.) (2000) *Community Informatics: Enabling Communities with Information and Communications Technology*, Harrisburg, PA: Idea Group

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Gurstein is a Principal with Michael Gurstein & Associates, Vancouver BC, specializing in community based technology applications. He is on the Steering Committee for the Global Community Networking Partnership.

He completed a Ph.D. at the University of Cambridge and was a senior public servant in the Provinces of British Columbia and Saskatchewan. From 1992-95 Dr. Gurstein was a Management Advisor with the United Nations Secretariat in New York and during 1995-99 Dr. Gurstein was the ECBC/NSERC/SSHRC Associate Chair in the Management of Technological Change at the University College of Cape Breton and the Founder Director of the Centre for Community and Enterprise Networking. His publications include "Community Informatics:

Enabling Communities with Information and Communications Technologies" (Idea Group); "Burying Coal: Research and Development in a Marginal Community" (Collective Press, Vancouver) and "Community Innovation Systems: ICT and Development in a Rural and Remote Community" (UCCB Press, Spring 2001).

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