Introduction:
CIRN Prato Conference 2016 Special Issue

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Introduction

This special issue features a selection of papers from the 13th Prato Community Informatics Research Network (CIRN) Conference, 2-4 November 2016 at the Monash Centre in Prato, Italy. The conference was organized by the Center for Community Networking Research of Monash University, Australia.

The conference theme was "Engaging with Participation, Activism, and Technologies." The papers in this issue highlight the conference's overarching theme, which focused on advancing theory and practice in the development of Participatory Action Research (PAR) with a particular focus on helping to ensure that marginalized groups have a strong voice in their communities in the face of structural and cultural challenges. In doing so, the conference sought to help promote "a stronger focus on more meaningful

and equal partnerships with community, civil society, and NGO organisations around the world." [1]

The papers chosen for this issue are representative of more traditional Community Informatics (CI) and Development Informatics (DI) approaches, whereas the other papers presented at the conference featured perspectives from Community Archiving (CA). The intersection of these three areas at the conference together, however, made for a rich set of panels and discussions. Three peer-reviewed articles and one "notes from the field" paper, which was not peer-reviewed but received extensive feedback from the editors, were selected out of several articles that were considered for the special issue. The final four articles chosen for this issue feature what we believe to be representative of the breadth and depth of CI and DI perspectives featured at CIRN conferences over the years.

Our special issue begins with one of the conference keynote speeches, which was delivered by Meghna Guhathakurta of Research Initiatives, Bangladesh, who is an internationally recognised expert in PAR. Bangladesh has a long history of PAR, as part of its struggle for liberation and equality, going back to the earliest days of this methodology. In her keynote, Guhathakurta provides key insights into the history of participatory movements in Bangladesh, including the role of PAR in promoting self-confidence to help ensure that "political processes remain people-centric" and to make sure that "our technologies allow for the creative criticality of thinking that movements like these may need" (Guhathakurta, this special issue).

Research Papers

In the first peer-reviewed article, titled "Critical Incidents Analysis: mismatching expectations and reconciling visions in intercultural encounters," authors Sara Vannini, David Nemer, Ammar Halabi, Amalia Sabiescu, and Salomao David celebrate the inspiring work developed by Paolo Brunello, a colleague and a friend, and apply the Critical Incidents Analysis (CIA) framework in their own different fieldworks. The CIA framework "is primarily designed as a tool for detecting critical incidents- mismatches of expectations among projects' stakeholders, while they are happening – so as to approach them in a reflexive way and resist the first reaction that leads the researcher to frustration, blaming, subjectifying, resistance, submission, or to attributing the causes of incident to others" (Vannini et al., this special issue). In this article, the authors expand the CIA approach by applying it a posteriori- after fieldwork is over, after an incident has happened, which enabled them to reflect on mismatched expectations to better understand incidents and critical moments, and report their work more richly, potentially enabling deeper reflection and transfer of experiences to future projects. Halabi reflects on his work with VOCI (an acronym for Voluntary Community), a local learning community of (mostly) student volunteers in Damascus, Syria, and Nemer brings his research in the favelas, urban slums in Brazil, where he looks at the appropriation of information communication technologies (ICTs) by favela residents.

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[1]   https://cirn.wikispaces.com/Conference+2016

In the next article, titled "CommunitySensor: towards a participatory community network mapping methodology," Aldo de Moor elaborates on his work developing "CommunitySensor," which he describes as a "participatory community network mapping methodology." The approach involves two mapping cycles, which include a Community Network Development Cycle and the Community Network Sensemaking Cycle. These two cycles together highlight the participatory approach embodied in the conference theme, as well as elaborate on the usefulness of the methodology in using mapping and visualization to make sense within and across communities. The article presents four observations on the ways in which the methodology allows for further exploration of communal sense making activities, including "linking maps across communities; meta-communication matters; tweaking the typologies; and sharing community network patterns." The author describes the benefits and future potential of this approach for CI by stating the methodology's contribution to building a larger commons is "essential in overcoming fragmentation and increasing collective impact" (de Moor, this special issue).

In the last of the three peer-reviewed articles, titled "A sustainability framework for mobile technology integration in schools: The case of resource-constrained environments in South Africa," the authors present a participatory framework indicating how feedback from teachers and district officials was used to inform the development of a sustainability framework for mobile technology integration in schools. After reviewing the literature, the authors developed the following research question, "How does the feedback from teachers and district officials inform the development of a literature-based sustainability framework for mobile technology integration in schools in resource-constrained areas of South Africa?" Using design science research methodology, the authors found that teachers and district officials confirmed findings from previous studies, as well as showed that institutional challenges presented significant barriers from the policies, procedures, and practices on macro, meso, and micro levels. In addition, the authors highlighted, "financial and technical support mechanisms required for the sustainable deployment of ICTs" (Mabila, Van Biljon, Herselman, this special issue).

Notes from the Field

In this special issue's notes from the field, Francesco Botto and Maurizio Teli present the PIE (Poverty, lack of Income, and unEmployment) News project, which "foresees the adoption of information technologies as a way to help people facing their economic problems" (Botto & Teli, this special issue). The project's goal is to promote the commonfare, a new collaborative form of welfare provision based on equitable governance and grassroots democracy, as a collaborative economic model, connecting the new poor and relevant stakeholders like public administrations, advocacy organizations, and ethical financing organizations. The authors describe the technologies and methodologies adopted in order to involve the new poor in participatory methods and establish the commonfare, as well as, early results of three on going pilots in three different countries: Italy, Croatia, and the Netherlands.

Summary

The keynote, journal articles, and notes from the field in this special issue provide a rich snapshot of the depth and breadth of CI and DI perspectives featured during the CIRN Prato conferences. Together with the Community Archiving (CA) presentations at the conference, these contributions represent a unique intersection of some of the key interests and areas of concerns helping to shape and expand the boundaries of the field. The work in this issue provides an opportunity to consider both the richness of the CIRN Prato conference presentations as well as the progression and further development of the field of Community Informatics.