# Editorial: Community Informatics and the World Summit on the Information Society

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This issue of the Journal is coming out just as the final sessions of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) are about to begin. Many of those concerned with Community Informatics whether as practitioners or as researchers have chosen to ignore WSIS, arguing that it has little or nothing to do with communities and ICTs as they are, on the ground. Others, and perhaps those with more of a policy orientation, have thought or worked at little else for months.

In a sense both positions are appropriate. Those who ignored WSIS have made a quite correct assessment of the process as being "top down", elitist, a display-case reflecting more on the desire for self-advertisement by funders and politicians than a realistic presentation of what might or might not be useful to those looking to become enabled, empowered or "developed" through the use of ICTs in communities around the world. That the selection of "representation" or participation in WSIS at every stage was either based on access to personal or institutional resources or, in a few instances, based on externally-determined definitions of appropriateness or representativeness (i.e., those participants the funders thought it best to invite), certainly reinforces this perspective. This was not about ICTs "doing with" but about others "doing to" communities and end users, wherever they might be.

And yet, the outcome of WSIS will be of as much significance to communities and community informatics folks as to others. The agreements, declarations, and statements that come out of WSIS will define and provide the language, and to a degree the concepts, for the broad institutional and other frameworks within which ICT for Development (ICT4D) will be deployed and managed over the period to come. It will determine how past efforts are assessed; what information, and most importantly what lessons, will be derived from this; and who will be in a position to move forward the national and global policies that will follow.

One other lesson that can be drawn from the most recent WSIS discussions, though, is the gap between those who present themselves as Civil Society in the context of the global discussions and, particularly, through the face-to-face discussions, and the reality of Civil Society outside of these narrow corridors. While WSIS-CS has been focused on issues of Internet Governance (and the arcane technical elements of which it is largely composed) most of the rest of the world, and certainly those who look to ICTs as sources of opportunities for social or economic advance, have been rather more concerned with issues arising from the evident pull-back in financial support for "bridging the digital divide" through the termination of funding for programs to support broad-based public access and applications in Canada, the US, and Australia, among others.

One could say that there is a pause in the broad sweep towards publicly funded support for community use of ICTs. A notable exception is the recently announced Mission 2007 program in India, and to a degree the New Zealand *Digital Strategy* whose current and future directions are presented in the Point of View from Andy Williamson in this issue. One hopes that this is a time to pause for reflection, a time to assess what has gone before and to use that as the basis to determine how to go forward.

Certainly this issue provides some useful bases for beginning that assessment. Williams, Sligo, and Wallace present results from their study of Computers in Homes and trace implications for policy

generally, and New Zealand's *Digital Strategy*, in particular. Grandqvist's field level observation of Lincos, a highly touted project in Latin America, gives a very useful assessment of how this ICT4D effort worked out in one of its most important areas of application. In his own Point of View, Steve Cisler provides a fanciful, yet disturbing, vignette of how ICT4D projects can go wrong, even when based on some good intentions and yielding some constructive outcomes. His scenario captures the experience of many with the range of ICT4D projects that have gone on in the past. Similarly, Cordell and Romanow cast a critical eye on the notion of Community Networking (and by implication all publicly supported community based technology applications) as "public goods" and come up with some surprising, and even controversial, conclusions.

But sprinkled throughout these articles, and figuring notably in the Note from the Field on a new community security application by Fujii and his colleagues, are seeds that suggest a possible stronger, firmer direction for community-based ICTs. And the domain of security and surveillance, of course, brings us full circle to the need for careful and informed Civil Society policy decisions. Proulx and Latzko-Toth provide us with a useful conceptual analysis of the notion of the "virtual" which must be seen in the context of the continuing tension (and possible long-term reconciliation) between "virtual communities" and "physical communities" as a direction of interest for Community Informatics, while Leaning moves us forward with his own analysis of specific approaches to how society (and communities) and technologies interact[1].

Those participating in WSIS would be well-advised to spend a few moments looking at this and earlier issues of JoCI. If they did so, they would see both the variety and the complexity of end/community use of ICTs. They would see how technology is enabling communities and how these processes are facing challenges in all directions equal at least to the opportunities. What they would surely also see is that community use of ICTs is at the core of how a *global Information Society for all* will be built.

And a final comment on "research" in and around WSIS and particularly Community Informatics Research. It is notable that virtually all of the "research" and here I include most of the evaluations of ICT4D activities undertaken in the context of WSIS (which includes most of the recent activities of the major donors) is notable for being top-down, closed access and "expert" driven. The notion of community-driven research or research done with a close collaboration between the researcher and the researched seems not to have figured in the preferred approaches or the plans and contracts of the researchers, or funding or sponsoring agencies. The result is that most if not all of this "research" and including areas such as "lessons learned" appear to be structured so as to inform funders rather than to support those actually doing (and presumably benefiting from) the activities on the ground. This of course, both reflects and reinforces the prevailing top-down project design and implementation approaches and from the community's perspective contribute to the creation of a closed and impenetrable loop.

One of the observations that probably won't be made at this second round of the World Summit is how little progress evidently seems to have been made in activities driven by these approaches and framed by these strategies since the first round in Geneva two years ago. In the absence of a firm and grounded participation by end users and end user communities, projects fail to take root and once the funders lose interest doors close, reports are filed, donors and consultants go on to something else and communities are left little better if not worse off than before…as Steve Cisler suggests, more cynical if not more "developed".

In this area, as in others there is a very significant role for Community Informatics research and researchers in helping to design and redesign research methods and strategies so as to be inclusive of community users as necessary elements in the research process--not simply as *subjects* of research, but as research *partners* helping to establish research directions, areas and priorities of research interest, and research methods among others. This is one way to realize "open research" and to have research (and evaluation) become quite directly a contributor to enabling (and "developing") communities.

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1 It should be noted that this paper was a prize winner at the Community Informatics Research Network 2005 conference in Cape Town http://www.cirn2005.org . The remaining two prize winning papers will appear in the next issue.