Editorial

Who pays? Reflections on 20 years of The Journal of Community Informatics and the current state of Open Access publishing

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Introduction

In 2004, Open Access (OA) academic publishing was a comparably new concept. The Journal of Community Informatics was an early entrant in this online, OA model. It was exciting times, and from day one, JoCI has aimed to publish quality articles at no cost to author or reader and make this work available on the Internet (Gurstein, 2004). Though the barrier of requiring a computing device and Internet access remains, it is safe to say that the JoCI catalog is more available to academic and practitioner communities, as well as the general global population, than many other traditional forms of academic research output. This original commitment to open access, made 20 years ago, persists to this day, and is the current model of OA employed by JoCI.

Over the past 20 years, OA as a publishing mode has changed significantly, splitting into several different branches. These include hybrid OA, author-pays, institutional waivers, and several other approaches (Lasko et al., 2011). Many different varieties of OA have developed, notably the Article Processing Charge (APC) OA model now promoted by most of the traditional academic publishing houses, as well as other more recent online-only entrants, including MDPI, Cogitato, Frontiers In..., IGI Global, and others. The development of OA publishing options reflects ongoing societal and academic priorities to increase the availability of academic research, and these priorities should certainly be applauded, however unintended consequences have emerged (Frank et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2023). For example, many national scientific granting agencies have encouraged, and now even require researchers to make publications from their research available as open access (Puehringer, 2021). This has led to many researchers directing grant funding to pay for APCs, which can exceed thousands of dollars for those highly ranked journals. Institutions and national governments are striking deals with publishers to pay APCs on behalf of researchers or develop consortia to negotiate blanket fee waivers - somewhat reminiscent of the traditional library subscription model, but with open access as the goal. These developments in OA publishing have also created some perverse incentives, such as incentivizing journals to accept large numbers of papers to increase revenues, regardless of quality (Frank et al., 2023).

In contrast to these new developments in OA publishing, JoCI still follows essentially the same model from 20 years ago, loosely identified as a ‘diamond OA’ model (Borrego, 2023), or perhaps also termed the ‘labour of love’ model of publishing. With this approach, no APCs are levied to authors, no paywall or subscription is required to read the journal, and no editors, reviewers, or authors receive compensation for their efforts. Yet, with the JoCI model of OA, there are real, tangible costs that need to be covered. These include the IT costs of a server, human resources to support, maintain, and troubleshoot this server, valuable employees to train hapless editors in how to access the peer review backend, and the costs invested in the

development of the journal management software itself (Public Knowledge Project, 2024). In the instance of JoCI, the majority of these costs are borne by the University of Waterloo Library via the Open Journals Service. There is also the human labour aspect of publishing, including the time spent by editors managing the peer review process, copyediting, and assembling the journal for publication, and of course the essential contributions of peer reviewers to provide critical feedback to authors. Each person involved with JoCI then contributes their volunteer labour, facilitating an OA model with its own range of benefits and challenges.

Now that OA publishing is entering its mature 'era', and has become a desirable, if not essential, consideration in academic publishing, what does this mean for the OA publishing model that JoCI follows? It's possible that JoCI has missed an opportunity to capitalize on interest in OA journals by implementing a modest APC, which could create a revenue stream to support the journal in terms of facilitating professional copyediting, journal management, improvements to layout, design, and author services, such as marketing and promotion of the journal to increase impact and distribution of research. There are concrete benefits to this model for editors, authors, and the CI community at large. It is also possible that JoCI has remained true to its OA roots, in continuing to follow a community-focused approach, calling on volunteers with interest in CI to contribute as they are able. Similarly, there are benefits here in remaining a true 'diamond' OA publication, in that there is no APC to be paid, and in turn, no pressure for editors to accept articles to generate an APC to support the JoCI apparatus.

Moving forward with Open Access

The JoCI 'labour of love' OA model is a valid and important way of serving a specific academic community. But the challenges are real, as are the benefits. There are two ways forward - first is to remain true to OA principles and reject the pressure to commercialize academic publishing via APCs. The second would be to consider the potential for what could be done with a revenue stream to maintain and grow the journal. Either direction requires input and support from the JoCI community. If JoCI were to follow the first path, that of maintaining the original OA principles, the community needs to both broaden and deepen engagement with JoCI. From a breadth perspective, this could take the form of revisiting the scope of JoCI, encouraging submissions from the Information Sciences discipline as a whole. From a depth perspective, this can take the form of submitting articles, saying yes to that review request, or to consider taking up a role on the editorial board. All of these roles are incredibly valuable, and Colin and I welcome deeper engagement with the mechanics and leadership of JoCI.

There is also the possibility that the JoCI community and readership would be better served with a transition of JoCI towards a different view of OA publication, one with the support of a major publishing house to support the peer-review and copyediting process, as well as to enable better marketing and distribution of research published in JoCI. This type of approach would most likely be accompanied by the institution of some model of fee charged to authors.

Any change to the JoCI OA model would require substantial input and discussion from all JoCI stakeholders.

For the near future, no changes to the JoCI OA model are planned. However, this relies on the costs and labour of managing the journal to be borne by the community. A community-supported OA model. We encourage all readers to join us in this pursuit, to contribute your valuable time, effort, and interest in continuing to support and grow JoCI for the next 20 years.

Overview of Articles for the 20th Anniversary Issue

On October 1, 2004, the first issue of The Journal of Community Informatics was published. As we described above, the journal has since remained a free and open access, double-blind peer review journal featuring academic research and practitioner contributions at the intersection of community informatics (CI) research, practice, and policy. A wide range of submissions have been welcome, including research articles, notes from the field, points of view, reports, case studies, and more. As a way to celebrate the past 20 years of the journal, we invited authors to submit short paper submissions at the beginning of 2024 to reflect on the following topics: the past, present, and future of community informatics; the impact of their contributions to the journal; CI as a field of research and practice; critical reflections on and interrogations of the need for community informatics; the role of JoCI and other open access publications in the scholarly communication ecosystem; and other related topics.

In this special 20th anniversary issue, we feature nine essays from leaders in the field of community informatics, many of whom have developed the field since its inception. The articles are presented in an arc beginning with reflections on contributions to CI over the past twenty years (Schuler, 2023; Gomez, 2024; McMahon & Zaman, 2024, & Mehra, 2024), continuing with present-day insights building upon this history (Smith, 2024; Shade, & Clement, 2024; Nemer, 2024; Stoecker, 2024) and concluding with a vision statement and opportunities to imagine the future of community informatics (Markazi et. al, 2024; Foth, 2024).

At a moment when “Big Tech” (Whittaker, 2024) is growing even bigger and more powerful than ever, Schuler (2023) reminds us in his essay (reprinted with permission) that The Community Networking Movement of the 1990s existed outside of corporate control creating an online public sphere. Community networks existed to provide free services, including email, web space, and community forums, as well as training and hardware donations. Schuler’s paper looks at what went wrong and discusses what lessons can be learned from this movement to show how internet culture could be much different than it is today. Gomez (2024) continues this inquiry to look at the failed promises of CI as a direct result of the overwhelming corporatization of digital spaces, misinformation, and the role of artificial intelligence. Gomez concludes with a call for CI researchers and practitioners to take necessary steps to combat these challenges by promoting more equitable access to technology, digital literacy, and critical thinking.

Moving away from this dominance of large corporations in de-democratizing the internet and digital culture, McMahon and Zaman (2024) present another history of CI that draws upon their collective experiences working with Indigenous Peoples in Borneo and Canada. The authors show us what is possible when CI researchers and practitioners work together with local communities through collaborative, iterative, locally-grounded participatory action research projects. Next, Mehra (2024) reflects on the history and influence of CI on his own professional trajectory, including a discussion of the intersections between CI and social justice in the field of library and information science. Smith, Shade, and Clement (2024) revisit the "access rainbow" (Clement & Shade, 2000) which has served as a key conceptual framework within CI and a "public interest model of universal access" over the past twenty-four years. The authors' essay provides an effective transition between past and current issues in CI, including what the field might tell us about engaging in critical debates about AI and other emerging technologies. As one of CI's strengths, the authors remind us that "human rights must be foregrounded" in the development of sociotechnical infrastructures.

Incorporating concepts from Science and Technology Studies (STS), Nemer (2024) describes why the concept of "mundane technologies" offers an effective framework for community informatics projects. Drawing upon his work introduced in his (2022) book, "Technology of the Oppressed," Nemer broadens this notion, originally introduced in STS referring to those technologies that have become "seemingless integrated into daily routines," to emphasize the ways in which marginalized populations appropriate everyday technologies to counter oppression. This is important because, as Nemer reminds us, the value of CI is in its focus on meaningful technology integration that centers "local needs, knowledge, and lived experiences". Similarly, Stoecker (2024) argues for an approach to CI that embraces Luddism in response to the advance of alienation in society that has only increased through advances in AI and other automated technologies. Stoecker believes that if CI is to ultimately fulfill its potential as an approach to building community and democracy, then ICTs must remain "the supporting cast rather than the star of the show" in CI initiatives.

Continuing to look toward the future, Markazi et al. (2024) introduce a Community Informatics Research Network (CIRN) Vision Statement that builds on the essential role that CIRN has played in shaping the field's trajectory. The authors review the evolution of the field, which highlights the global and multidisciplinary nature of the field. Through a thorough examination of key literature, conference themes, and a CI declaration, the statement provides a roadmap for "navigating the complexities of society, technology, and global collaboration" with an ongoing dedication to global, inclusive, ethical, and culturally sensitive practices." Building on this forward looking statement, Foth (2024) describes how urban informatics was inspired by CI as a field similarly interested at the intersection of people, place, and technology in urban environments. Foth argues that "CI is uniquely positioned to advocate for ecological justice, amplify the voices of marginalised human and non-human communities, and foster collaboration between humans and the environment to create and protect resilient and sustainable habitat for life on this planet." Taken together, these papers offer opportunities to imagine the role of CI in building out a more just, equitable, and humane society during a time of growing global and environmental insecurity.

Conclusion

The papers in this special 20th anniversary issue highlight the global impact and importance of the community informatics field and the significance of this journal in this process. While CI remains an often-under-utilized domain of knowledge, its precision in showing the value of communities in the design, implementation, and evaluation of information and communication technology remains indispensable. The contributions found in this special issue offer both a reminder and a wake up call to those who care about freedom, self-determination, and the health of our planet, as we enter an age of increasingly automated, black-boxed technologies that emphasize surveillance and control over openness and democratic participation. In other words, while this special issue should certainly be considered a celebration of the journal's last twenty years, it might also be considered a rallying cry for anyone concerned about the undemocratic and anti-community processes that have imposed "distorted forms of knowledge and even wisdom upon us" (Stoecker, 2024) through technologies such as AI. As Alinsky (1971) reminds us, "the basic requirement for the understanding of the politics of change is to recognize the world as it is" (p. 12). We hope that this special issue presents a picture of the role of community informatics in this process and how we might work together to imagine a better world–one where communities control technology, rather than the other way around.

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