

Black Feminist Thought as a Contribution to Community Informatics

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Abstract: Over the past 20 years, from 1989 to 2009, researchers and community members at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign have been consistently involved in exploring and applying technology usage in the local community, specifically in African-American communities in Illinois. This effort was, in part, an attempt to understand the benefits, obstacles and constraints of informaticizing community activities and preserving and digitizing culture among technologically under-served (and often “redlined”) communities. This paper highlights specific initiatives and collaborations that have been a part of the development and institutionalization of a Community Informatics Initiative in the Graduate School of Library & Information Science at Illinois through the lens of Black feminism. Building on the assorted and emerging definitions of Community Informatics (CI) by researchers who have been at the forefront of grassroots and localized technology programs, this paper will attempt to identify two major theoretical and philosophical approaches to merging community-based interests with technological application and integration and posits a third. By examining two contrasting CI projects from Illinois from a Black Feminist perspective, I attempt to learn how to improve sustainability and model CI projects that affect African-Americans.

Keywords: African-American, Community Informatics, ICT, Black feminism

How Community Informatics and Black Feminism Work Together

The work of community informatics is emerging at an unprecedented historical moment in ICT development that necessitates a deeper look at how communities are being engaged. In this paper, I examine the details of the work of CI researchers at Illinois from a Black feminist perspective to understand the implications and social contexts of community informatics projects. I do this for two key reasons: 1) to understand the context of engaging with non-profits and organizations that are often under-funded and under-served, and 2) to better understand whether a Black Feminist approach to the development of community informatics would be relevant in work focused on African-Americans in the United States.

Gurstein’s definition of Community Informatics (CI) is helpful to analyze projects at Illinois. Gurstein defines CI as going beyond issue of the “digital divide” in the following way:

...CI also goes beyond discussions of the “Digital Divide” to examine how and under what conditions ICT access can be made usable and useful to a range of excluded populations and communities and particularly to support local economic development, social justice and political empowerment using the Internet. (Gurstein, 2000)ⁱ

Black feminismⁱⁱ speaks to the power of women as agents in creating knowledge, and the importance of knowledge in empowering people who are oppressed. According to Patricia Hill Collins:

One distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought is its insistence that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change. New knowledge is important for both dimensions of change. (Collins, 1990).ⁱⁱⁱ

Using a Black feminist perspective to look at a project that focuses on Black women might seem too obvious. Applying a Black feminist perspective to a project focused on organizations might seem a stretch. But there is value in examining the ways that ICT can often distance women (and marginalized people) from their own knowledge if not implemented in ways that reflect the wisdom of the audience. Black feminism also affords us an opportunity to examine domination and power in institutional relationships, and to resist allowing institutional or grant funding guidelines to prescribe the terms or priorities of community-based projects.

The CyberChurch Model: If We Build It, They Will Come

The socio-historical structural divide between communities who are and are not participating in digital society is studied by Alkalimat and Williams' research on community technology centers.^{iv} Their work offers a perspective on cyberorganizing and digital inclusion. They stress the need for public computing centers to fill the gap between individual computing and social computing. In their assessment, Community Technology Centers and public computing play a central role in providing Internet access and essential and task-driven computing such as checking email, preparing resumes, creating flyers for community organizing, etc. Cyberorganizing asserts that *community* based access should not be underestimated and emphasizes the social nature of computing. While their work focuses less on hardware and network access and more on the value and importance of social capital as it related to CTCs and their effectiveness, it provides groundwork that justifies location and investment in cyberinfrastructures in underserved communities. It is within this view that positive community outcomes are associated with access to computing.

By examining the relationship between power and community, community informatics is a basis for resolving surmounting obstacles because the public can harness their "cyberpower" to organize and generate solutions. Alkalimat and Williams call for a "Black counterpublic by means of a community technology center," and promote the idea that the proliferation of technology at the individual level is not as important as the use of networks to support "social organizations rooted in the legitimate social capital of the community." They argue for information access as a means of promoting democracy, and to support creating more social capital for the most disenfranchised and poor in the African-American community.

Alkalimat's latest effort is organizing the CyberChurch^v project, which is the building of an online community of Black churches by the University. This project was not initiated or organized by the faith-based organizations. It is a CI project that is about meeting an anticipated need, and being prepared for future community organizing. Alkalimat argues that "community" is located spatially and geographically, and is not purely a matter of ethnic or cultural identity. So, in this project an online directory of Black churches is being built as part of a spatial and geographic infrastructure on the web for the community. CyberChurch is about mapping the community assets of the physical world (faith based organizations in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois) onto the web. This is consistent with his Cyberorganizing theory, which focuses on assisting the community in organizing its digital life online (cyberpower). As a CI project, it is designed to 1) build online community within the most powerful and prominent African-American organizations

– churches, 2) map online activity with its offline activities, and 3) help proliferate community organizing through the establishment of church networks. These goals are a means of mapping the social networks and social capital in the offline world to the digital world. Alkalimat's efforts are a model that illustrates he and Williams' cyberpower and cyberorganizing framework.

To better prepare students for their participation in his research, Alkalimat's students learn Black intellectual history as the frame of reference for community informatics projects, of which CyberChurch is only one. They collect data, upload images, songs, hymns, and sermons to help build the online directory and occasionally interview church leaders and members to secure information. The CyberChurch project is also an opportunity to examine how Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are solidifying online African-American networks. In this framework, community informatics uses ICT to mirror and enhance offline community needs by helping it to be more connected, and potentially, more creative. Furthermore, the University, through Alkalimat and his research team, is largely studying faith-based organizations without adversely impacting them. For the most part, organizations are not directly involved in the cultural production of the information about their organizations for upload into the Cyber-Church database at this time. This is a key distinction between the work of CyberChurch and the work of SisterNet.

What Black feminism affords as a complement to Alkalimat and Williams' cyberpower concept is the prioritization of community knowledge. Alkalimat is focused on enhancing the power of community organizations, much in the way that Collins focuses on the agency of oppressed people. Both approaches stress the importance of the framing, promotion and preservation of knowledge from the perspective of the oppressed, not from the institutions (e.g., academia) and their needs. Specifically, Collins promotes the concept of personal power that is grounded in the real, lived experiences of Black women. Alkalimat's work at organizing faith-based organizations, specifically African-American churches, is grounded in the historical relevance and importance that the church has played in the social, political and economic life of the community.

The Cyber-Church.us site is a work in progress. It is evolving toward faith-based organizations taking ownership of the site. While there is online representation, that is not a substitute for online participation. Building institutional repositories of knowledge as a community informatics project is important, which leads to a look at another community-building project at Illinois, SisterNet.

SisterNet: Grassroots Community Informatics

SisterNet is a Black feminist project in its progressive approach to prioritizing health and healing among Black women in Central Illinois. It locates Black women's experiences, ways of being and ways of knowing as the priority in its approach to a variety of activities and programs. SisterNet was an effort identified by Ann Bishop, Ph.D. at the University of Illinois as a participatory action research project. Bishop and SisterNet Founder, Imani Bazzell, co-authored research and secured grants to study the organic grassroots organizing efforts of African-American women around the issues of health and wellness. At the height of its activities in 2002, SisterNet was an all volunteer organization producing health salons and boutique learning environments, providing computer training to assist Black women in gaining access to health information online, holding events at local hair salons, churches and in community organizations that Black women frequent; all in an effort to reach women in their everyday life activities with timely and relevant health information. At the same time, SisterNet nurtures Black women's "interest, proficiency, access, and participation related to information technology and the Internet."^{vi}

SisterNet was funded to work in partnership with the University of Illinois through a grant to study grassroots online participation and peer to peer technology education. The University provided the technological infrastructure to keep their website updated, while the women wrote Black-woman-friendly and accessible content for the site. SisterNet's effort was to bridge the health care divide through technology, but they were not primarily focused on technological literacy. In many ways, the funding imperatives of the grant required more focus on online participation and technology literacy even though the women were much more focused on health and wellness strategies and events. In the partnership with the University, institutional policy mandates kept approximately half of the funds for overhead. Of the remaining funds, most were paid to graduate students and programmers to build functional web pages for the organization. A portion of the funding went for the health fair and collateral materials, as well as "salons" for educating Black women on health issues and digital literacy in beauty shops, churches and boutiques.

There were considerable tensions in the power relations between the University and the women in the community who did the actual community organizing and cultural production. Small stipends went to the women in the community, but the grants to fund the project were not sustainable over the long term to maintain the momentum. Bazzell often characterized the effort by saying, "Democracy is messy," but a necessary struggle when trying to sustain momentum in the website design and content management process. Hiring community members, shifting resources off-campus into the community, and training and developing skilled staff was far less efficient than having University staff implement the SisterNet community informatics work. These power dynamics, from a Black feminist perspective, are worth struggling with as we try to properly frame future CI projects, particularly in decision making processes about resource distribution and priority setting.

There were key findings in this community informatics project that can build upon previous scholars' work in CI. For example, student programmers did not fully appreciate the cultural and aesthetic needs of Black women who want visually pleasing and culturally relevant websites. The women of SisterNet use beautiful African cloth, statues, art and flowers in the design of their events because they know that beautiful aesthetics in a community that often suffers from low-self esteem is a gesture that yields positive results. Women feel appreciated and respected by SisterNet because the organization consistently communicates "we value you" and "we stayed up all night making this place beautiful for you because you are worth it," as Bazzell often says. Translating this cultural imperative into the ICT solutions generated by the researchers at the University was difficult in the partnership. Because the women of SisterNet were not technologists, there continued to be challenges in designing the SisterNet web site, which limited the organization from being able to further its online goals. A key learning in this experience is the value of the knowledge of African American women. Bridging the digital divide in a community health informatics project is more than the provision of technology. Reconciling the skills and knowledge of the women with the skills of the University proved challenging, even though the overall results of the partnership were positive.

What was especially important in the University's relationship with SisterNet was the mutual evolution of knowledge. CI theory in the work of Ann Bishop and Bertram "Chip" Bruce's Community Inquiry Labs was refined through the ongoing feedback loops established in the SisterNet project. Technology helped to reinforce and support the women's knowledge and move them from having "good ideas" to being able to act upon their knowledge and find mutual reinforcement through online knowledge sharing on the website. ICT, in the case of SisterNet, helped Black women "see themselves" online and build online knowledge banks on issues of

health and wellness. Regularly, the use of email listservs and a website has helped Black women to move from invisibility to visibility on the web. Women who were previously constrained by geography, weather (snowy winters in Illinois), transportation or lack of childcare, were able to “find” and connect with Black-woman-centered images and information that validated their experiences. The focus on the agency of Black women to be able to connect instead of a focus on technology solutions was the appropriate priority. The evolution of the project to refining technology solutions and computer interfaces that incorporate the knowledge and sensibilities of Black women is the next step in finding mutual success. In many ways, the women of SisterNet see the implementation of solutions that reflect their desires (a beautiful web page that), beyond the essential tasks (a functional web page), as the next progression of community informatics.

One of the key learnings from a Black feminist perspective is that the women of SisterNet served as the cultural knowledge producers of content for their website, which is largely uncompensated labor. This is an important element of community informatics projects that might be worth a closer look, particularly as knowledge is captured and preserved on the web, which can later be mined and repurposed for profit by others. Bishop and Bazzell both worked to encourage greater IT skill mastery among the women, and women served as both students and teachers – mentors and learners, which was also a key to success in the project. ICT as a solution or pathway to the mission of SisterNet was not a universal truth in the project. This is a fundamental challenge in community informatics projects. That the application of ICT to social, political and economic projects can foster empowerment is not necessarily a given. The integration of the value of ICT into the consciousness of Black women might be proportional to the value that Black women believe ICT brings to help them achieve their goals. There was incredible value in the SisterNet project for learning about how to actualize the priorities of Black women, which reinforced that “they matter.” Ensuring that ICT and technology usage and access does not become the dominant paradigm, but rather meeting the fundamental needs of marginalized people must be the focus. Funding for CI projects that prioritize ICT solutions should be reconceptualized to ensure that new forms of domination (domination through technology solutions) are not unintended consequences in future work. Bishop, Bazzell, Mehra and Smith reflect upon the project with a clear Black feminist critique when they summarize their project with a focus on *people* over technology:

How do we bridge the social aspects of the digital divide? As members of diverse communities, we all must look to change in our *social* literacy, access, training, and content efforts. In terms of social literacy, we must learn how to read each other, how to grant respect and validity to diverse funds of knowledge and social capital. We need to be socially accessible, opening ourselves to new relationships. Social training must occur as stakeholders throughout a community model and practice a shared vision of social justice. And finally, we need new social content in the form of artifacts and structures - both online and offline - that embody constructive social change^{vii}.

Conclusion

Community informatics projects and their long-term viability and sustainability, is something that is gaining more attention in public-community partnerships. Page and Scott^{viii} who pay careful attention to feminist theories and the ways that community informatics is problematized, suggest that it’s important that we keep a critical eye on current funding models for CI projects that do not account for the organic development of community based organizations. This includes projects that don’t have direct organizational involvement (CyberChurch) and those that are built by the

labor of the community (SisterNet). Collins' Black feminist perspective is a basis for grounding community informatics in the truth and reconceptualized priorities of the African-American community that prioritize the community's needs from their perspective.

Community informatics projects can be important efforts that ensure ICT access and usage as tools for social change. But, future work should not prioritize domination by technology where computers and the Internet are privileged as solutions to social justice issues of poverty, health, education and literacy over people- and resource-driven solutions. Community informatics solutions are only viable when ICT is actually *needed* (and used by the community) as a necessary solution to the social, political and economic organizing efforts of a community.

I set out to study these two projects to better understand the context of engaging with local non-profits and organizations. In Alkalimat's work, scholars are using a detached observer model to collect data and make practical contributions that are based on a study of history, social networks and ICT solutions. These types of projects have relatively little community involvement directly, but most certainly could not exist without the community and their everyday practices. I also wanted to evaluate the constraints and opportunities of ICT so I can better understand the institutional forces that are setting the stage for future community informatics projects. SisterNet gives us a model for understanding how the organic needs and local knowledge of Black women can be reconfigured for even greater success, particularly in the area of (largely) uncompensated cultural production and the prioritization of Black women's values in CI projects affecting them.

Future opportunities exist to study the constraints under which community organizers and University researchers are working together. More questions abound, such as: to what degree is it important that communities be networked and online in order to participate in society? To what degree is ICT working as a new form of colonialism? And more importantly, to what degree do CI efforts thwart, include or empower marginalized communities.

References

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ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*

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^v <http://www.cyber-church.us/>

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