Roundtable:
Research Methods in Community Informatics at the Broadband Moment

This roundtable will present and explore a range of research methods for community informatics. As a multidisciplinary field, community informatics methods are varied and complementary. As an emerging field with fuzzy boundaries, community informatics can benefit from debate and cross fertilization with research that examines similar phenomena, but does not call itself community informatics.

Up to now, the dominant approach in community informatics has been the ethnographic case study method, participant or involved observation. A small number of scholars are using archives and other documents and records, retrieving or repurposing data for studies of multiple cases. Still others use surveys, interviews, and government datasets to examine a large number of cases.

February 2010 is a special moment to reflect on methodology for community informatics. Close to $7.2 billion in stimulus spending is being awarded to bring broadband, public computer centers, and broadband adoption programs to local communities. A National Broadband Plan is to be announced this month as well. This is expected to result in an explosion of community informatics activity which could be the subject of expanded community informatics research. The U.S. Departments of Commerce and Agriculture and the Federal Communications Commission are debating what data to collect from this activity, what data to share and how. They are searching for ways to encourage research to inform the nation’s technology policy. A national broadband plan is to be announced in February. Community informatics may be able to make an advance in the wake of these developments if we can pool our methodological knowhow and turn up the power of our microscopes.

This moment has an echo in the origins of community informatics. In the 1990s, community informatics rode a wave of investment in community technology that came from federal agencies, philanthropies, and (primarily hi-tech) corporations. Today the national broadband policy discussion includes debate over what methods and metrics should guide research. Community informatics in the I-Schools has a role to play in this debate.

Six scholars will describe the methods they have used in order to answer the fundamental question “How do communities compute?” The focus here is primarily but not only on local communities and communities of interest within those local communities. There are three aspects to this question:

1. What is community? How is it measured?
2. What is informatics? What are the metrics of access and use of digital tools?
3. What theories explain these data?
1. Methodological breadth: We’ll consider diverse types of data and explore how standardization could lead to greater comparability.
2. Methodological depth: We’ll consider the utility of multiple research methods to examine the same case or sample of cases.

Six i-school faculty-scholars will participate on the panel, and the chair will be Allen Renear, Associate Dean for Research at the University of Illinois.

1. Lynette Kvasny, Penn State University. Lynette Kvasny will discuss ethical dilemmas that were raised during her CI fieldwork with a small business association in West Philadelphia.
2. Chris Coward, University of Washington. Chris will describe a multiple methods approach currently being employed for a 5-year study to assess the social and economic impacts of public access computing across eight countries. Methods include national inventories and classification of centers, operator and user surveys, and a series of in-depth studies that use ethnographic, quasi-experimental, and other techniques to interrogate specific impact mechanisms.
3. John Carlo Bertot, University of Maryland. John Bertot will discuss the survey methodologies that he has practiced in examining public computing in libraries since 1994 as well as the field methods that have complemented and extended that work.
4. Mia Lustria, Florida State University. Mia Lustria will talk about a 3-year grant to develop and evaluate a tailored reminder system to encourage breast cancer screening among rural, underprivileged women. Her work spans a multi-method approach including participatory approaches involving clinicians and potential beneficiaries in the design of the reminder system and a randomized controlled trial of the prototype in two rural communities in Florida. Endpoints include system use by clinicians, use of mammogram services as well as behavioral intentions of eligible patients.
5. Noriko Hara, Indiana University. Noriko Hara will discuss a comparative study that examines tacit knowledge transition in Japan, Singapore and Taiwan using quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, social network analysis, and time diary.
6. Kate Williams, University of Illinois. Kate will describe and compare three studies: a case study of a Toledo community technology center, a repurposing and use of the federal TOP data, and a current multi-method study of Chicago branch libraries.

This 90 minute session will allow up to 8-10 minutes for each speaker and 30-plus minutes for discussion. Follow-up may include correspondence with federal agencies to explore mechanisms for facilitating data flow and research.

There are two goals for the panel: