The Power of Community Events for Designing Participatory Community ICTs

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ABSTRACT

This research describes the development of a method for analyzing communities by focusing on community events. The theoretical framework that informs the *community event research method,* as it is called here, comes from the theory of social capital and from an argument based on the work of Clifford Geertz and Barry Toelken that community events are symbolic systems that capture local knowledge. By focusing on community events it is possible to know the ethos of a community and build socially inclusive community information and communication technologies (ICTs) based on an understanding of this ethos and not focus on the problems (pathos).

Keywords

Community informatics, community events, community ICT design, community event-driven analysis, diasporic communities

RESEARCH PROBLEM

This study looks at the research problem of developing a method based on community events helpful for participatory designers in community informatics to uncover the "local knowledge" [1] of a marginalized diasporic community and to explore ways of recasting this local knowledge into designing more socially inclusive community ICTs.

The development of this method focuses on mapping the action of the research activity as what happens when various methods, theories, practices and goals integrate, adjust into a unit of analysis of community events, producing an interpretation which is useful for designing more socially inclusive community ICTs.

Community informatics (CI) is an emerging field of research and practice that is at a point where social informatics was in the late 20th century with respect to mapping out its borders. CI is a technology-based discipline devoted to the development of local "communities and the design and implementation of technologies and applications, which enhance and promote their objectives" [2, p.2].

A review of the CI body of knowledge illustrates a slowly maturing discipline [2, 3]. The shortcomings in the evolution of community informatics' doxa relate to a gap in the establishment of a common ground of principles, methods and theoretical frameworks needed to bring coherence and establish disciplinary boundaries for CI [Bishop, personal communication; 3, 4, 5].

Pitkin, for example, argues that CI researchers must "develop thoughtful, grounded theory" that can be used to challenge a "tendency of community informatics advocates to be non-critical about their work. This is obvious in the utopian, futuristic language of much community informatics literature, reflecting a fascination with the hype surrounding emerging developments in information technologies" [4, p.6].

CI is meeting its challenges of closing its theoretical and methodological gap, as Pitkin recommends, "head on" [4, p.10]. Some notable theoretical and methodological works have been presented in recent years, or are currently being developed on various key concepts and issues of relevance to CI.

Clements and Shade [6], for example, provide an interesting model for implementing universal and affordable access that includes seven (7) indicators (telecommunications infrastructure, input/output devices, media tools, content services, social support, community support and governance of the ICT project). Day, Taylor and Marshall [7] are currently developing a methodology, the "community network analysis," where their CNA method employs a Social Network Analysis to identify community needs as well as provide a tool to synthesize data from community development and information science areas.

Along these lines, the *community event research method* (CERM) represents an alternative framework for participatory designers to integrate heterogeneous voices and realities from a community into a participatory ICT design by focusing the analysis on community events. The theoretical framework that is informing this method comes in part from the theory of social capital and from an argument based on the work of Clifford Geertz [1] and Barry Toelken [8] that community events are symbolic systems that capture local knowledge.

The premise of the argument that informs the construction of the community event research method comes from an analogy between scholarly communities and marginalized communities. Just as it is possible to study the behavior of scholarly communities by focusing on how they create knowledge objects (books, articles, research papers, conferences, etc.) similarly, it

is possible to study a community's behavior (how it organizes, creates local knowledge, what are its information needs) by focusing the analysis on community events.

CONTEXT

The context is situated within a Latino community of Humboldt Park, Chicago, Illinois, that is a diaspora, during the years 1999 though 2003. This research is about a Puerto Rican community that was interested in connecting with me to accomplish a research goal of designing a community ICT. The process of achieving that goal generated a new method based on the tradition of community informatics (CI).

In general, the concept of *community* is defined in this study as a dynamic and constitutive group that can develop tenacious coalitions that work towards a particular end while dealing with internal tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions that may hinder the accomplishment of a particular goal.

RESULTS

This study chronicles the discovery of a participatory design method and partly focuses on developing and applying it. It is argued here that community events can help participatory designers capture the essence of a community's behavior and that understanding the ethos of a community is pivotal for designing and effecting a successful participatory intervention project.

This asset-based, participatory design method is most similar to the folk event [8] because it focuses on uncovering the belief systems, actions and relationships in a local community. Yet the method selects as its unit of analysis a progression of community events, which are related in some larger cultural context (in one way or another), for systematically identifying strong and weak voices in a community.

The presentation at PDC 2004 will provide illustrative examples that show how a community event driven analysis leads to an understanding about which belief systems (ethos) a community maintains, defends, faces, takes a stand against or ignores, and helps shed light on a community's information needs and information flow. Because this event driven analysis has been developed and applied within the context of a diaspora, this research presents insights that will be of concern to the general audience of participatory designers involved in designing community ICTs for diasporic communities.

DISCUSSION

The CI discipline calls for its researchers and practitioners to be forever engaged, borrowing Berkenkotter's words, with a "diffusion of methods, ideas and approaches from field to field" [9, p.175]. But this need for multidisciplinarity raises a number of critical issues and research problems related to the maturation of a common rhetoric for an emergent discipline. For one, the complexity of understanding community ICT projects requires participatory designers to go beyond just describing success stories (or failures) onto analyzing the principles underlying the various ICT developmental case studies.

Yet, going beyond just describing stories will require from participatory ICT designers within CI to work on providing a common ground of principles, methods, constructs, theories and definitions. Participatory designers can learn from and contribute to closing CI's theoretical and methodological gap. Moreover, in the measure that this gap is narrowed then more theoretical research that contributes to a steady evolution of the CI discipline and that brings principles and insights into designing and implementing more successful participatory community ICTs should appear in the future.

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