

3

Information Communities

DEFINING THE FOCUS OF INFORMATION SERVICE

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Community is one of the most profound concepts in information science because community needs, behaviors, and assets should drive the development, implementation, and evaluation of information services. Community can be thought of as the engine by which information services are developed and delivered; indeed, community is part of the information system itself. But what is community? There are probably as many responses as there are people to ask. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the importance of community in information services. After completing this chapter, the reader should have an understanding of the ways that community is defined, how community has been approached historically in information services, how information communities differ from information grounds, and the different roles that information professionals may play therein.

Definitions of Community

At first blush, the notion of “community” seems simple. When asked, most would think of a group of people who share a lot of things in common, and the implications for information professionals would be to identify, design, deliver, and support services and systems that facilitate the exchange and growth of knowledge among those groups of people; however, it gets more complicated when one thinks deeply around the nature of those commonalities. Are they shared interests? Shared location? Shared ancestry? Who is excluded from the community, and what are the impacts of not belonging? And then the situation grows more complicated by considering additional factors. Do the people have to share these commonalities by choice (in the case of blood ties, one does not really get to choose)? Does it matter how often they communicate? Does it matter whether they use multiple modalities to communicate (e.g., in person, online, etc.), how close they feel to one another, or whether they share more than one commonality? Indeed, Hillary noted ninety-four definitions of community, with three broad strands: geography, social interaction, and ties.¹

In the introduction to their classic multivolume series, *Encyclopedia of Community: From the Village to the Virtual World*, Christen and Levinson describe how community can be approached from four key angles:²

- *Affinity*: Membership is based on common interests (e.g., book clubs, hobby groups, artists' colonies).
- *Instrumental*: Membership is based on a shared desire to achieve specific goals, whether political, economic, or other (e.g., an activist network such as from Amnesty International to Neo-Nazis, a set of hospice workers, a professional association, a political party).
- *Primordial*: Membership is based on ties of blood, kinship, race, ethnicity, or deeply held shared beliefs (e.g., the Asian American community, monastic communities).
- *Proximate*: Membership is based on residence in a particular place (e.g., a shantytown, a condominium complex, a neighborhood, a city).

Four Angles of "Community"

- Affinity
- Instrumental
- Primordial
- Proximate

These angles, of course, are not mutually exclusive, and some communities may exist along several of these dimensions simultaneously. For example, the community of humanities undergraduates at a university may have commonalities of affinity (interest in the humanities), instrument (getting a degree, having fun), and proximity (living in the same set of dorms). The community of model train enthusiasts may have commonalities of affinity (interest in trains) and instrument (learning about and building model trains). The community of Hmong refugees in Merced, California, share a primordial (ethnic and cultural) bond, as well as proximity.

These days, communities are often thought of as enabled by and primarily existing through digital technologies: virtual, electronic, or online communities, or social networks like Facebook or Twitter. Komito argues that only two types of community—moral communities characterized by egalitarian values and reciprocal relations, and norm-based communities based on a system of shared rules and meanings—are generally possible in a virtual sense.³ Youth, in particular, who have grown up surrounded by and using digital media, seem to form communities in which much of the action takes place online. Cyberbullying is but one reminder that communities can have a dark side.

Development of a Community Approach in LIS

Historically, information services and research were concerned primarily with serving user communities based in the sciences. Pauline Atherton Cochrane⁴ is among those well known for the early emphasis on the community context (e.g., their work settings, relationships, and norms as a group) underlying the information needs and uses of scientists and engineers, in order to create usable and useful information services and technologies for them. Today, such "socially grounded" approaches to system design and evaluation in professional communities are common. While public libraries have a long history of targeting particular groups for their services, such as children, the "working man," or immigrants, public librarianship and the general community were not considered as carrying the same gravitas as the hard sciences and business until the 1960s when research began to open up to focus on studying the everyday information needs of the general public (see also chapter 8, "Community Anchors for Lifelong Learning: Public Libraries"). Moreover, concern for the information communities of underserved, disenfranchised, marginalized, and vulnerable people has gradually come to the fore for noted researchers in LIS.

Sanford Berman's wide influence as a "radical librarian" began in 1971⁵ with the publication of *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*; this publication signaled a long career devoted to fighting for standardized cataloging and classification systems to employ terms that were common in everyday use, as well as socially and culturally equitable, rather than biased toward majority and privileged perspectives. In 1975, Thomas Childers published the seminal book *The Information-Poor in America*, commissioned as a comprehensive review of the literature by the Bureau

of Libraries and Learning Resources in the U.S. Office of Education.⁶ Brenda Dervin has employed disciplinary approaches from communications in her research on information communities in everyday life and among vulnerable groups such as those suffering from cancer; since the 1980s, her work has been used in LIS to develop theory on “sense making,” evaluate services, and design new systems, both on- and off-line.⁷ A pioneer in using ethnography in LIS, beginning with her dissertation in 1984 on the working poor, Elfreda Chatman⁸ developed theory around “small-world” information practices and concepts such as information poverty and life in the round, drawing from the information communities of incarcerated women, the elderly, and janitors. Roma M. Harris and Patricia Dewdney’s seminal research on the information communities of battered women in the 1990s⁹ has been particularly productive in its application to information services.

While the term “information communities” may not appear explicitly, as a phenomenon it is evident in the work of these pioneering researchers in that they focus on the needs and behaviors of groups of people who have a shared stake in mobilizing information resources. This research focus flourishes today, continues to bring innovative—especially qualitative—research methods and theory to LIS, and relates to cognate phenomena, such as “information ecologies,” popularized by Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O’Day.¹⁰ Considering the broad context of health, for example, information communities are reflected in the work of such LIS researchers as S. Leigh Star, Jeffrey Huber, Lynn Westbrook, Lynda Baker, and Tiffany Veinot. Across other domains of everyday life, there is a growing number of exemplary LIS researchers who have made major contributions with studies that break new ground in theory and methods for understanding diverse information communities, including Lynne McKechnie, Reijo Savolainen, Crystal Fulton, and Pamela McKenzie.

Information Communities

Information communities share some of the elements of community, plus they have the additional element of focusing on the role of information. It would be overly simplistic to assume an information

“Information Communities share some of the elements of community, plus they have the additional element of focusing on the role of information.”

community as just a particular target population or user group for an information service. As Joan Durrance, a pioneer in the information community field, explains, information communities form primarily around people’s needs to get and use information.¹¹ She thus defined information communities as “constituencies united by a common interest in

building and increasing access to a set of dynamic, linked, and varying information resources.” She further elaborated how information communities can be

a partnership of institutions and individuals forming and cultivating a community of interest around the provision and exchange of information, or knowledge, aimed at increasing access to that information or increasing communication, and thereby increasing that knowledge.¹²

Thus, an information community is a group of entities that blurs the boundaries between information seekers, users, and providers, recognizing that a single person or institution can embody multiple segments of the information life cycle.

Research has shown that effective information communities have five characteristics:

1. emphasis on collaboration among diverse information providers,
2. capacity to form around people’s needs to access and use information,

3. capacity to exploit the information-sharing qualities of emerging technologies,
4. ability to transcend barriers to information sharing, and
5. capacity to foster social connectedness.¹³

While not all of these characteristics will necessarily be met to the same degree in every information community, they are illustrative of the factors that make one community rich in information flow and social cohesion over another.

The information communities first studied by Durance, Fisher, and Unruh were online community networks or free-nets that involved public libraries as key partners along with other agencies focused on community service in a particular geographic area. The framework's elasticity makes it relevant a decade later, when society has grown more complex and technology has grown more ubiquitous, where people of all ages create and search for information themselves and yet still rely on institutions for assistance. Three contemporary examples suggest the diversity of information communities today. One is FemTechNet:

Check This Out
 Examples of Current
 Community Networks
 SkokieNet
<http://www.skokie.net>
 and
 The Blacksburg Electronic Village
<http://www.bev.net>

FemTechNet is an activated network of scholars, artists, and students who work on, with, and at the borders of technology, science and feminism. . . . Members in the network collaborate on the design and creation of projects of feminist technological innovation for the purposes of engaging the interests of colleagues and students on advanced topics in feminist science-technology studies. This project seeks to engender a set of digital practices among women and girls, to teach and encourage their participation in writing the technocultural histories of the future by becoming active participants in the creation of global digital archives.¹⁴

FemTechNet uses Wordpress blogs, Vimeo, videoconferencing, and digital course management systems, among other technologies for sharing, creating, and archiving its work.

Another example of a contemporary information community is Paseo Boricua, a vibrant, low-income neighborhood in Chicago whose motto is "Live and help others to live." Led by the Puerto Rican Cultural Center,¹⁵ Paseo Boricua boasts a high school with one of the highest graduation rates for Latino students in the country and rooftop greenhouses that provide the community with one of its only sources of fresh vegetables; a highly successful HIV/AIDS prevention center and housing for homeless transgender youth; nationally recognized health programs focusing on diabetes and heart disease; and many other innovative cultural, health, educational, and economic activities—all designed and led by community residents themselves. The information that is the lifeblood of the Paseo Boricua community's accomplishments is generated and shared face to face in the local bakery, classrooms, and spoken word performances, as well as digitally through, for example, an electronic newspaper, listservs, a YouTube channel, a digital archive, electronic books and digitally produced posters and leaflets, and cell phones.¹⁶

A final example of an information community is the network of immigrants and refugees that forms and operates in many places across the globe today. The InfoMe program, based in the Seattle area, is studying and facilitating the information work of immigrant teens who serve as information intermediaries for their families, friends, and even complete strangers.¹⁷ InfoMe is identifying how and why youth help others with information and technology, a phenomenon based on the fact that it is immigrant youth who learn the language and culture of their new country the quickest. Thus, immigrant

youth are called upon to help their families navigate the health-care system, their schools orient more recently arrived immigrants, their friends feel less isolated, and their churches alleviate the hardships of those coming to live in an unfamiliar place, with few resources.

TEXTBOX 3.1

Topic for Discussion

What are your information communities? What different roles do people play in these information communities? What are the implications of these roles for information flow?

Information Grounds

Information communities comprise large sets of complementary stakeholders and last for long periods of times. These characteristics suggest design specifications for information service providers. Information grounds are another important conceptual framing that intersects with community and is rooted in information science; however, it focuses on the spaces and places where information is encountered.

Information grounds are informal social settings where people experience information, where they create, remix, curate, and share everyday information, all while attending to another activity: at cafés and pubs, on the metro, at casinos, at hair and tattoo salons, in bus queues, at the grocery store, at football games, in waiting rooms, at parks, at libraries and book stores, by luggage carousels, while flying, while waiting for a class, and at the beach, and in online settings too, including World

of Warcraft, Etsy, Instagram, OKCupid, Facebook, and more (see also part IV, “Information Users: Engaging, Creating, and Collaborating via Technology”).

“By understanding their characteristics—people, information, and place—information grounds can be facilitated to optimize people’s everyday life situations and overall happiness.”

Everyone has her or his own information grounds. They may spring up in an ad hoc manner, or be places people frequent routinely. They may represent a place where they are hoping to mingle with others or a place where they want to remain anonymous. It might be a situation in which people have been “trapped”

together, like in an elevator that is stuck or a doctor’s waiting room—also known as hostage settings. Information grounds also spring up during times of crisis, disaster, and displacement. By understanding their characteristics—people, information, and place—information grounds can be facilitated to optimize people’s everyday life situations and overall happiness. The findings of information grounds research can be used powerfully for designing information technology, services, and policy.

The information grounds framework was developed by Fisher (née Pettigrew) in the 1990s based on her research on community health clinics in Canada. Researchers and professionals have used it extensively worldwide for understanding the role of informal social settings in information flow. She originally defined information grounds as “environment(s) temporarily created when people come together for a singular purpose but from whose behavior emerges a social atmosphere that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information.”¹⁸

Information grounds have seven properties:¹⁹

1. Information grounds can occur anywhere, in any type of temporal setting and are predicated on the presence of individuals.
2. People gather at information grounds for a primary, instrumental purpose other than information sharing.

3. Information grounds are attended by different social types, most if not all of whom play expected and important, albeit different, roles in information flow.
4. Social interaction is a primary activity at information grounds such that information flow is a by-product.
5. People engage in formal and informal information sharing, and information flow occurs in many directions.
6. People use information obtained at information grounds in alternative ways, and benefit along physical, social, affective, and cognitive dimensions.
7. Many subcontexts exist within an information grounds and are based on people's perspectives and physical factors; together these subcontexts form a grand context.

To facilitate designing ways of analyzing and supporting people's information grounds, the people-information-place framework developed by Fisher, Landry, and Naumer is frequently used.²⁰ It comprises fifteen facets or characteristics, grouped under three main headings:

- *Information*: significance, frequency discussed, how created/shared, topics
- *People*: membership size, membership type, familiarity, actor roles, motivation
- *Place*: focal activities, conviviality, creature comfort, location and permanence, privacy, ambient noise

The premise is that the information professional can use these fifteen facets as a lens or sliding scale to understand the functioning nature of a particular information ground, specifically to understand who the people are, the role of the place where they meet, and how they experience information there. Through analyzing these factors, the information professional can identify ways of supporting the information ground.

For example, maybe information about a particular topic would be more efficiently disseminated by improving the "place" factors such as making coffee and muffins available, acquiring plants, or providing better lighting. If an information ground has excellent place factors, then it may signal opportunities for disseminating a broader array of information, such as providing health or financial information via a hair salon. There are many technology devices and training techniques with salon staff that could be integrated here to expand their information role beyond the realm of beauty advice. Sometimes places where people feel most anonymous are where they are most receptive to sharing and experiencing information; thus ambient noise and unfamiliarity can work in a positive way.

Information service providers have an opportunity when it comes to information grounds; the ones people find themselves in most frequently are not necessarily their favorite nor the best designed for information tasks. In the InfoMe project, their most frequent information grounds are their friends' homes, schools, places of worship, and local hangouts, such as sports fields or malls. The teen participants in InfoMe have been active collaborators in the design of new technologies and services that would vastly improve their ability to get and give information in the places where they spend most of their time. These are just a few examples of the powerful ways information grounds facilitate information flow in communities.

TEXTBOX 3.2

Topic for Discussion

How do information grounds differ from information communities? What roles do people play in information grounds? What are the implications of these different roles?

Conclusion

In this chapter, “community” was shown to be a complex, broad concept that could be addressed from many different perspectives. Information communities is a powerful concept, unique to information science, that is used to describe a group of organizations and individuals who share a commonality and work together toward sharing information in support of that commonality in an optimal way. Information grounds, another community, place-based framework unique to information science, refers to informal social settings where people experience information while attending to another activity. Though Information communities and information grounds differ in many ways, they both present gateways for guiding the work of information professionals that are based on a holistic and complete view of people’s lives and the context in which they experience information services.

Notes

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