Chapter I

Global Perspectives on the Information Society

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ABSTRACT

This chapter surveys issues and priorities being raised internationally by governments, civil society and the private sector in conceptualizing a global information society. Examinations of social, ethical and policy implications of information and communication technologies are often limited in scope, by region, constituency, issue, or other social dimensions. It is critically important, given growing global interdependencies in terms of labor, trade, communications resources and other factors, that social informatics and community informatics research begin to include more international perspectives and analyses. Efforts initiated within the United Nations sphere and other international bodies in recent years are offering unique opportunities to develop such perspectives. This chapter examines

the body of issues being raised through these processes. This chapter seeks to show the diversity of perspectives that exist globally on these issues. Global perspectives on social, ethical and policy implications of information systems introduce the consideration of both the common and the diverse needs of the world's many cultures, regions and nations. Information and communication technologies are seen in this context as both enabling solutions to the world's many social problems and as potential sources of threats to labor, environment, culture, and other facets of society.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter surveys current issues and priorities being raised internationally by governments, civil society and the private sector in the context of developing an information society. Examinations of social, ethical and policy implications of information and communication technologies (ICTs) are often limited in scope, by region, constituency, issue, or other social dimensions under study. It has become critically important, given growing global interdependencies in terms of labor, trade, communications resources and other factors, that social and community informatics research begin to include more international perspectives and analyses.

Social informatics has been defined by Kling (1999) as "the interdisciplinary study of the design, uses and consequences of information technologies that takes into account their interaction with institutional and cultural contexts." Social informatics research has three principal areas of focus:

1. The development of models and theories that explain the social and organization uses and impacts of ICTs;
2. The development of methodologies that improve the design, implementation, maintenance and use of ICTs; and,
3. The study of philosophical and ethical issues that arise due to the use of ICTs in social and organizational contexts.

Community Informatics is an emerging field of computer and information science—and arguably a part of social informatics—concerned with developing a coherent theory, methodology and praxis to support the development, deployment and management of ICT-based solutions to community problems. Community informatics has been described as a discipline with a scope and purpose analogous to the well-established field of management information systems (MIS) (Gurstein, 2002). The characteristics and needs of communities can be significantly different from those of the types of organizations for which ICTs have traditionally been developed: well-funded businesses and governmental organizations. The major differences are as follows:

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