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Introduction to the Special Issue on "The Legacy of Rob Kling: Social Informatics as a Research Discipline"

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The late Professor Rob Kling was an influential scholar in the field of social informatics (SI). Not only was he a visionary promoting the conceptualization of this new area (Kling, 1999; Kling & Allen, 1996), but a lead researcher as well. As a tribute to this profound, eclectic professor, we present this special issue of *The Information Society* to honor his contributions to the social informatics community. Unlike a festschrift, where papers are focused on research topics related to a professor's previous work, this special issue is dedicated to Rob's impact on the past, current, and future state of the field of SI.

The articles in this special issue are a subset of 24 papers presented at the Social Informatics Workshop, held at the University of California, Irvine, March 11–12, 2005 (cf. http://www.crito.uci.edu/si), to honor the contributions of Rob Kling as founder of SI. The workshop was focused on papers and presentations related to SI generally, and to extending his research on computerization movements (CM) in particular. The workshop papers related to CMs are being published in a book (Elliott & Kraemer, in press), whereas the papers in this special issue deal specifically with Rob Kling's contribution to the genesis of the SI research community in the United States and Europe. We both worked closely with Rob Kling during his tenure at the University of California, Irvine, as did Jonathan Grudin, Suzanne Iacano, and John King who are authors in this issue. Several other authors worked with Rob when he went to Indiana University, including Blaise Cronin, Debora Shaw, Alice Robbins, and Steve Sawyer. As coeditors of this special issue, we wish to enlighten researchers about the richness of SI research and further Rob's vision and hopes for institutionalizing it as a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research field.

Social informatics refers to the interdisciplinary study of the design, uses, and consequences of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that takes into account their interaction with institutional and cultural contexts, including organizations and society (Kling et al., 2005). SI researchers are especially interested in providing reliable knowledge about ICTs and social change, based on systematic empirical research with the purpose of informing public policy debates and professional practice, as well as academic understanding. For example, SI research has resulted in a better understanding of the design, use, configuration, and/or consequences of ICTs such that they are more workable for people in organizations and society (Kling, 1999). SI research also strives to understand new social phenomena that emerge as people use ICTs such as digital libraries, virtual teams, and virtual organizations. In this special issue, we highlight Rob Kling's contributions to the field of SI and suggest ways to continue the growth of this field.

The first article in this special issue is a reprint of one of Rob Kling's papers from 1999: "What Is Social Informatics and Why Does It Matter?" (*D-Lib Magazine*, Volume 5, Number 1, January 1999). This paper presents a definition of SI, tracing its history and presenting the state of the SI field as of 1999. It serves as background information for those reading the other papers in the special issue and is a clear example of Rob Kling's writing style.

The other articles in this special issue are papers from the social informatics workshop. The second and third articles present analyses of Rob Kling's *oeuvre* over time, showing how his ideas emerged and influenced other researchers. These authors use a relatively new technique in gathering their data from the Web of Science. Web-based tools now enable researchers to do "Google-type" searches over large digital libraries. The fourth article is a critical

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critique of Rob's critical style of analysis, and the fifth is a perspective that provides an overview of the state of SI and what it may take to institutionalize the field. The following is an overview of each article.

In "Peers and Spheres of Influence: Situating Rob Kling," Blaise Cronin and Debora Shaw emphasize the broad, eclectic nature of Rob's research and how his ideas and insights emerged from his interactions with colleagues and students, not from research in isolation. They sketch the networks of which Rob was a persistent or fugacious presence during his academic career by identifying all those whose work he cited and whom he "acknowledged" in his writings. They also identify how his ideas took root in and drew upon different intellectual communities. They do this by mapping citations to his *oeuvre* over time in terms of their disciplinary sources. One outcome of their analysis is a complete bibliography of Rob Kling's work. Another result is the tracing of how Rob Kling in his short career of 25 years was able to build a community of interest around SI.

Alice Robbin, in "Rob Kling In Search of One Good Theory: The Origins of Computerization Movements," continues this analysis of Rob's work by examining Rob's intellectual contribution as a corpus of work in which he applied core sociological principles grounded in evidence. She shows how Rob boldly employed multiple theoretical frameworks and methodologies and multiple sources of evidence to make his points. Her paper examines the craft of inquiry he used to understand technology and social life. She traces the evolution of his theorizing, use of method, and gathering of evidence to situate his analysis in a critical perspective towards computers and social life. Robbin's analysis shows that, beginning early in his career and continuing until his death in 2003, Kling conducted a detailed critique challenging contemporary paradigms that dominated thinking about the introduction of technology into organizations.

In "Going Critical: Perspective and Proportion in the Epistemology of Rob Kling," John L. King, Suzanne Iacono, and Jonathan Grudin provide a critique of Rob Kling's insistence that researchers adopt a critical perspective. They show that Kling's work was filled with successful examples of critical refutation, where he challenged assumptions or statements about the nature or role of computerization and provided stimulating alternative interpretations. The purpose of this paper is to help clarify the epistemological foundations for Rob's critical perspective in CMs, and to highlight the strengths of the critical perspective as it evolved in Rob's work. In addition, they discuss the problems with an uncritical critical perspective.

In the perspective, "From Findings to Theories: Institutionalizing Social Informatics," Steve Sawyer and Andrea Tapia discuss the history, status, and future of SI as an academic field of study. The premise of SI is that ICTs are both sociotechnical and thus socially shaped and situated. They review the history of SI to help contextualize and frame the presentation of what is needed to institutionalize this as one of the established perspectives from which to study computing. They make the case for SI to be on its way to becoming a scholarly institution—accepted as one of the several approaches to studying computing. In addition, they argue that institutionalization requires attention to developing the appropriate set of structures, which include: (1) defining the core and peripheral elements of the institutions, (2) identifying leaders and filling critical leadership positions, (3) formalizing structures and processes of participation and inclusion, (4) resolving internal discord among key participants, and (5) communicating organizing values, principles, and contributions to others. This paper is also a tribute to Rob Kling in its acknowledgment of Rob's visionary role in activating scholars to recognize and pursue the SI approach to scholarship.

These five papers provide readers with an overview into the emergence of SI as a research field and could be used in a graduate or undergraduate course in SI or as a road map for future SI researchers. We hope this special issue contributes to the institutionalization of SI as an important and influential field of study. Rob would have been pleased with such an outcome, as he fervently promoted the field of SI throughout his research career.

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