

Keynote Address: Rob Kling and Beyond  
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I would like to thank the organizers of this Symposium for inviting me to make a presentation today and, especially, my colleagues Howard Rosenbaum and Kristin Eshenfelder. I am delighted to be here this afternoon, particularly because I currently serve as director of the Rob Kling Center for Social Informatics at IU Bloomington and have, as you might guess, a strong personal and professional commitment to what we call “Social Informatics.”

What I’d like to share with you is more along the lines of what Kling set out as his agenda for Social Informatics—his contribution, where we are today, and where we might or could be headed. My remarks might be entitled: “Beyond Rob Kling.” I hope some of what I say this afternoon will contribute to our conversations at this ASIST conference and towards a dynamic, action-oriented agenda that advances a global, not only a North American and Western European, vision of what Social Informatics offers us for both its theoretical and empirical insights in the marketplace of ideas and for its practical utility in the public and private sectors.

What I took away from the September 2006 IFIP conference in Maribor, Slovenia on Social Informatics, which was a memorial to the more than two decades of contributions to social informatics by Rob Kling, stimulates some of my thoughts. Blaise Cronin and John King, from whom I have appropriated some wise thoughts that I think are worth communicating, also contribute.

First, I’d like to summarize Kling’s contributions to Social Informatics. Then, I’d like to make some remarks about his intellectual legacy, focusing on identity, legitimacy, fundamental questions and the problem space. Then I’ll conclude with a summing up about where we can go from here.

## **1. About Rob Kling’s Contribution**

We owe a great deal to Rob Kling. He was engaged, lively, enthusiastic, energetic, charismatic, intellectually curious and playful, open to ideas and criticism, socially aware, and politically committed. Kling was not, however, the first to assign the name “Social Informatics” to what has evolved to become a legitimate domain of study. It is important to recognize that we owe our thanks to the Norwegian sociologist Stein Bråten whom Rob visited in Oslo in the early 1980s. Europeans have been doing Social Informatics for at least, if not longer, than Kling.

Rob was, however, its central figure, promoter and proselytizer, a “scholar on a mission,” as Roberta Lamb noted in her 2003 *TIS* memorializing on his passing. Rob was a major scholar and contributor to the conceptual scaffolding of Social Informatics through sustained inquiry and a very public record of his work.

His definition of “Social Informatics” became influential. And as eclectic his personal interests and what he attended to were, this definition has both directed and constrained our attention to the core of his theorizing and philosophy about the relationship between the social and the technological. Following students in science and technology studies and the social construction of technology, Kling argued that the social and the technological were co-constitutive, that there was a mutual shaping. This was, indeed, as I see it, one of his two most important contributions. The second was his ethical and moral concerns about technology.

His focus and, indeed, *grosso modo*, most of his analyses, followed from his definition. He wrote — in what we can take as a manifesto for social informatics, in his article entitled “What Is Social Informatics?” that a “serviceable working conception” was one that “identifies a body of research that examines the social aspects of computerization.” He then suggested a more formal definition: “the interdisciplinary study of the design, uses and consequences of information technologies that takes into account their interaction with institutional and cultural contexts.”

He went on to write that Social Informatics was a “field that is defined by its topic (and fundamental questions about it) rather than by a family of methods.” And he argued that there had been more than 25 years of systematic research that yielded “theories and findings that are pertinent to understanding the design, development, and operation of usable information systems, including intranets, electronic forums, digital libraries, and electronic journals.”

He was correct: the research had yielded useful information. But at the same time he also identified a core structural problem that impeded the penetration and legitimacy of Social Informatics. The problem, as Kling saw it, was that “social informatics studies [were] scattered in the journals of several different fields, including computer science, information systems, information science, and some social sciences” and that “each of these fields use[d] somewhat different nomenclature. These communities of practice, we can call them, were “diverse and their professional languages and terminologies difficult to penetrate for the non-specialist.” Kling’s goal – his hope, was that this term “Social Informatics” would help make similar ideas across disciplines accessible to nonspecialists. It would also strengthen communication among specialists and strengthen the dialogs between communities of designers and social analysts.

His conception of Social Informatics is Kling’s legacy: an approach to studying problems concerning society and technology, and specifically, the consequences of computerization. We can summarize this legacy as:

1) the adoption of a critical stance towards technology in order to destroy false illusions embedded in prescriptive education, research, and the ideologies of ICT use in social life (Robbin & Day). That is, technology is not neutral. It went far beyond the technical: It had consequences for the polity, society, organizational life and individuals. And it was implicated in social change and transformation.

2) research based on observation of the empirical world.

3) research that applies useful theories and concepts from various fields.

4) research questions that cross disciplinary boundaries.

5) education of information professionals, and,

6) responsibility-centered role for information professionals; thus, public policies of the consequences of computerization are a legitimate topic of study.

## **2. Where are We Now? Kling's Intellectual Legacy: Identity and Legitimacy, Fundamental Questions, and the Problem Space**

What Is Social Informatics beyond Rob Kling? Is there a compelling vision of what Social Informatics is and its agenda? Does it matter? Kling argued that Social Informatics was defined by its “fundamental questions” about the “social aspects of computing.” Have any of these “fundamental questions” been defined? Is “computerization” the core concept? Or should we be talking about “technology” more generally? What are the institutional and theoretical problems that Kling and we have encountered?

I have concluded that there isn't a canonical literature or theoretical foundation that we can point to. Rather, it has been more like a “bundle” of ideas and foci that direct attention to the social aspects of computing, to human values and choice, and to the larger issues of public policy and ethical behavior. And, I believe, this has contributed to the difficulty of explaining just what Social Informatics is about, to persuading people in other fields to train their students in Social Informatics, and to creating it as a legitimate field of study. Furthermore, because other fields focus on these ideas, as well, we who describe what we do as Social Informatics do not have a monopoly on these intellectual concerns.

Kling noted that “interdisciplinarity” was the nature of Social Informatics. The reality is: is that interdisciplinary fields “have difficulties naming what they do and deciding who really does it.” (September 22, 2002)

<<http://www.pixelcharmer.com/fieldnotes/2002/social-informatics/>>. Social Informatics is not unique in this regard. However, interdisciplinarity has contributed to difficulties in legitimating and institutionalizing Social Informatics.

Perhaps the problems with identity and legitimacy lie in the very nature of what Kling studied and what many of us study — this great variety of problems that interest us, and that these problems span diverse disciplines. And perhaps the focus on “computerization” is no longer useful because we live in a multimodal technological world where technologies are converging and opening up new sets of problems. It is these that pose the challenges we face for legitimating a domain of study that we call Social Informatics.

### **3. Where Can We Go?**

Perhaps, however, the solution is not to dwell on academic identity and legitimacy. Rather, I would suggest that to make Social Informatics worthy of attention, to make Social Informatics an influential actor, and to legitimate Social Informatics, we need to:

1) go beyond the definition of Social Informatics that Kling gave, which really focused rather narrowly—if you deconstruct his definition, on the social and on outcomes of computerization.

2) identify new topics and problem spaces that interest us. This is truly easy to do because the list is long and we come from diverse disciplines. The Kling’s core ideas were sound but need to be expanded.

3) develop a theoretically informed set of methodologies. I believe this is one of the areas of research in Social Informatics that deserves far more attention than has been given in the past.

4) develop a cohesive network of colleagues, members of the diverse disciplines and professional associations who share theories and praxis and, as such, yield a “critical mass” of scholars and practitioners. Critical mass is a necessary precursor, I believe, to institutionalizing a domain of study.

5) “step outside a small group of academic researchers to present our work in their venues – e.g., industry, healthcare, government, etc. – rather than simply building a discipline within academic institutions” (Lamb). This requires active boundary-spanning in academic and practitioner professional associations.

6) focus on educating information professionals — through the problems that we investigate, about what is Social Informatics, and why it is worth knowing about.

Where might we proponents of Social Informatics devote more attention and rigor and how might we advance the basic tenets of Social Informatics? I have a shopping list:

1. I would like to urge a greater recognition of the dynamics of systems, contingency, and unpredictability. This idea was implicit in Rob’s thinking and where, I believe, he was headed in his new ideas before he passed away. I think it would be well to make it explicit and to attend

more explicitly to concepts of “complexity, chaos, disorder, uncertainty, and unanticipated consequences.” And, in addition, to notions of ecologies, convergence, ubiquity, and pervasiveness. All these suggest a better match between what the empirical world and a set of problems that we could attend to.

Causal thinking is embedded in our thinking. However, we need to move from our expectation of linear processes and to examine the interactive, interdependent, and recursive nature of activities and events. This suggests that we need to revise the much quoted definition of Social Informatics, which emphasizes outcomes and consequences. Social Informatics also needs to examine the antecedents of design and implementation of computer systems and examine the contexts of technology as dynamical systems. Thinking this way leads to a set of interesting research problems, which I am not, however, prepared to address right now.

Along with good theory we also need appropriate methodologies, good analytical methods, and high quality evidence. These all are particularly important if we are going to persuade the political elites that fund our investigations and colleagues in other domains of study. Note that I do not identify what that “good theory” is.

My view is that as an interdisciplinary endeavor, Social Informatics will depend on theory from diverse disciplines. But whatever the theory or theories, it(they) should be robust and appropriate to the research question. Social Informatics does not need *a* theory as much as it needs good theory.

2. Thus far, much of our Social Informatics work has emphasized the sociological — as in the “social actor” and the institutional — over the psychological and the cultural. This is understandable, given Rob’s particular orientation and his influence over our thinking. However, we need to think more deeply about multiple levels of analysis and to integrate the social psychological, the psychological, and the cognitive along with the cultural, institutional and other perspectives.

3. Thinking along these lines, the cognate professional associations of HCI, the history and social studies of science, science and technology studies, along with information science, informatics, and the traditional fields of management, sociology, political science, linguistic, and psychology, information systems technology and education, should be actively pursued in terms of membership and joint contributions at annual conferences. I have not exhausted the disciplines, however, where we share a commonality of problem space(s).

4. There has been, nearly exclusively, a focus on the pervasiveness of ICTs, their “ubiquity,” you might say, as well as the virtual and online world. Yet, I want to urge a bit of caution concerning the potential “narrowness” of this perspective: we humans also live in physical and temporal space. I would like to see the integration of the “e-“ (as in “electronic” or virtual) with other lived spaces.

We should remember that Kling himself always privileged a mutual dependency of the technological and the lived world. And, we need to remember that other fields of study do not privilege the technological; indeed, it may not even enter into their thinking.

5. As I have already noted, Rob's thinking was dominated by the organizational institutional space. Yet, there remain many other "spaces" that deserve our attention: the home, media, school, art, culture — those so-called "non-functional" spaces of living that consume ourselves. This, of course, implies different topics than the ones that Rob studied, although he did give cursory attention to schools in his analysis of the success of a project in the IU Bloomington School of Education.

As King and Lyytinen point out in their discussion of identity and legitimacy of the field of information systems (*MIS Quarterly*), "We stand a better chance of academic legitimacy if we choose topics that correlate closely with their social salience" (p. 543). This, of course, is difficult to accomplish when Social Informatics is marked by interdisciplinarity and spans the boundaries of different disciplines.

Diversity can contribute to a lack of legitimacy. However, I contend that Social Informatics will have less to offer if we delimit the boundaries of what might constitute the central core of problems. (This of course, implies that we are able to identify a central core of problems. And it is here where we need to devote some of our energy.)

6. Rob devoted part of his career to identifying public policy issues that concerned computing. I see far less attention these days among Social Informatics folks to public policy. Furthermore, we also need more attention to ethics and the meaning of the "Information Society" than we have given. (Notice that I do not use "The Digital Society." I am convinced that what is central is information not what is digital. Questions around a core that concerns information would help identify core questions about information.

7. Finally, as difficult as we have seen it is to integrate Social Informatics in the educational programs of the computer and engineering professions, it remains worthwhile to continue our attempts to persuade our colleagues in other disciplines about the importance of the subject matter of Social Informatics. This suggests the usefulness of developing a core curriculum in Social Informatics for educating information professionals.

And, further, it suggests that we need to reconceptualize academic research so that its findings have meaning in their application. How is it, I always ask myself, that we see the importance of Social Informatics, the insights it gives us into the world of work. Yet we have been unable to make it resonate with others. We have been unable to persuade managers and supervisors, systems analysts, database administrators, and programmers in industry, government and the non-profit sector that Social Informatics can help understand why technology has not lived up to its promise. (Is this a function of not having something practical to offer other than our analytical skills in diagnosing the failure of implementation?)

I believe that if we can develop these ideas, we will develop an identity and acquire legitimacy. We may do a better job of persuading the elites who fund our research that our targets of investigation are worthy. As an interdisciplinary endeavor, I am, however, less sanguine that we can develop a strong theoretical core. Interdisciplinarity does not yield one. But I don't think a "strong theoretical core" is necessary for forging an identity and acquiring legitimacy.

To sum up, I have a "shopping list" of actionable items that I believe will help build an infrastructure for and advance Social Informatics:

1. Make progress on identifying a core, or more properly an interesting set, of researchable questions that, to use King and Lyytinen's words, are "socially salient" and that will also interest political elites and funding agencies. I can think of various problems related to technology that demand our attention. We should, however, remain catholic with a small "c" in these questions or topics. And we should not be constrained by insistence on *a* theoretical framework or *a* theoretical core. Legitimacy will not derive from having this core. Rather, legitimacy will come from have a set of researchable, interesting problems that have a common lineage, if you will (Lyytinen & King).

2. Develop a useful curriculum. We persuade others of the utility of our vision by training the future generations. To use Bourdieu's language: we must reproduce ourselves. With reproduction we may have a better opportunity for legitimating and institutionalizing the study of Social Informatics.

3. Support so-called "niche" journals of disciplines where most of the profession has ignored technology. I am thinking specifically of the new journal called *Information Technology & Politics*.

4. Aggressively pursue collaborative and intellectual networks to develop, foster, and coordinate collaborative cross-disciplinary research activities with colleagues in other professional associations whose members share similar theoretical, methodological, and empirical interests. Not just in one professional association or in one country but across associations and internationally. Specifically, I am thinking of young organizations like the Association of Internet Research and the well-established association Society for the Social Studies of Science (also known as 4S). I also include organizations such as IFIP and those who work in human-computer interaction and hold annual conferences such as the HCI International.

5. Utilize technology for social and intellectual networking and building a Social Informatics community. This is already being done. And I would like to encourage everyone in this room to participate in building and using the web site of the Rob Kling Center for Social Informatics, which, until now, has been underutilized. Thus, my last words are an invitation to join the Rob Kling Center for Social Informatics at Indiana University <<http://rkcsi.indiana.edu>>. The Center offers a focal place to join together in collaborative activities and to extend the ideas that we share at this conference.

6. Seek institutional support for undertaking research, educating students, and building and formalizing a social network.

This shopping list does not require a well-endowed research center. But it does require the energetic participation of you all in this room and everyone else who shares an interest and commitment in Social Informatics. I propose we move forward to make this list of activities a reality.

Again, I want to thank you for inviting me.

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