

Changing Expectations of Inclusion, Toward Community Self-Discovery¹

By Paul C. Schroeder

Abstract: This paper suggests that communities are at a relative disadvantage in the emerging information society. The rules of information access and privacy that apply to governmental jurisdictions, corporations and individuals often do not recognize the real needs of communities and their members. Several definitions of community are presented, suggesting that participation and diversity of interests are essential community characteristics. Focus on communities in terms of information access and use implies that attention must be paid to the condition of our information polity, beyond that given to our information economy. Three rules, or expectations, are offered that aim toward a unified set of information access practices across all sectors of society. On this base a process of Acommunity self-discovery @ and the emergence of information sharing networks may be fostered. The paper is the result of a review of literature about the role of technology in the emerging information society, combined with the author's reflections on information uses in community-based organizations.

Introduction

Communities and their members find themselves at a relative disadvantage within our social environment, one that is characterized by an increasing emphasis on formal structures of organization including reliance on modern information management systems and technologies. While individuals, corporations and governments are all recognized as legitimate participants in public processes, the less formal groupings known as communities often find themselves without adequate leverage when public decisions are being made. This paper seeks to bring definition to this situation, and to contribute to the search for solutions that recognize community equity in the coming information society.

These concerns reflect those that Michael Curry has brought to the attention of geographic information systems (GIS) practitioners and researchers. He has suggested that there is a

“...need to recognize that far from a simple matter of the payment of fees here and the citing of the authority there, the understanding of the nexus of rights and responsibilities associated with such a system requires that one develop an appreciation of the ways in which the systems have been involved in a redefinition of those very categories. The terms ‘right’ and ‘responsibility’ were tied in Aristotle’s day to an almost visceral appreciation of what it meant to be a member of a community.... But today they have been recast in a far more limited way...” (Curry 1995: 68)

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Juxtaposing the concepts of “community” and “rights” may establish a countercurrent to the prevailing drift in the redefinition of rights and responsibilities in society generally. That this link has already been made is seen in the existence of such initiatives as the Community Rights Counsel.² This article attempts to establish a framework for community rights in terms of information access and use.

Although the term “rights” is used here, such phrases as “rules of fair information practice” or “expectations of appropriate behavior” in an information society might be more appropriate. To speak of rights is to invoke constitutional law and its elaboration in statutes and cases. In the United States, public access expectations are embodied in the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and in its variants in the states; complementary privacy protections are codified in FOIA exceptions and in laws such as the Fair Credit Reporting Act.³

In a similar vein, the term “information access” ought to be reconsidered along the lines of fairness in inclusion. What is sought is not so much a legal right to possess information objects as a heightened expectation of inclusion among those who are now at a disadvantage when seeking meaningful participation in broad public conversations.

Attempts to extrapolate theories of access that were developed in an era before digital data became standard have led to contradictory results. Laws intended to open governmental practices to public view now have become the means by which community members themselves are put on public view. The present rules of information access, privacy and confidentiality are applied differently to various sectors of society. In their effects, today’s practices often amount to permanent grants of special privilege to particular well-defined and well-endowed interests, amounting to an established structure of information inequality (Schiller 1996). The problem becomes acute when corporations attain the

rights of persons, and when governments are redesigned along entrepreneurial lines. A rethinking of the terms of our social contract seems to be in order. Simple extension of access rules into the digital environment, even when logical and legal consistency can be maintained, may not provide adequate protection for such poorly defined entities as “communities.” That we need a more unified set of “rights to know” or expectation of fair inclusion is a major conclusion that is presented here.

From Community Self-defense to Self-discovery

The background for the “community self-discovery” concept derives from practical problems faced by citizens and agency practitioners in coming to terms with the requirements of digital information systems. For instance, the GIS manager in a large regional planning agency was asked for all of the data sets that had been used in writing a major report (some of which were obtained from other agencies with use restrictions in place) and asked, “Just how reusable are these data sets?” while beginning to see the importance of contextual information that would be needed to make shared data meaningful. Municipal data managers have often questioned the right of commercial enterprises to obtain entire sets of local records, stating concerns about protecting public information assets and citizen privacy. A watershed conservation activist, having used public data to identify polluters, posed the question, “I know it’s public records, I know I can go down to the town hall and look up my taxes. But do I really want to know that everyone can know this?” A rural group seeking to distribute positive information about local communities via the Internet, in order to encourage development opportunities, found itself helpless in the face of unwanted development projects sponsored by outside interests who already possessed extensive knowledge about the region. Is it possible to turn similar situations of community self-defense into opportunities for community self-discovery?

These situations illustrate legitimate concerns that are gaining prominence as our information environment unfolds. “General state of “communities under siege” is suggested by the last of the examples, a phrase that probably evokes something meaningful within each reader. This phrase has appeared in diverse contexts, as reflected in a Web search returning documents related to rural communities, environmental justice, labor unions, politics in Mexico and Palestine, the “violence epidemic” in the United States, the banning of fox hunting, and the collapse of the cod fishing industry in Newfoundland.⁴

The fisheries example suggests a parallel in the intense public policy debate in Maine over the future of the forest products industry and of its dependent communities and over future ownership and control of Maine’s north woods. A current news story may serve to frame many of the observations that are central to the concerns presented here. Two paper mills are for sale in adjacent towns, “whose existence has depended on the paper company for nearly 100 years” (Lagasse 1999). The mill’s owners are based in South Carolina; the likely buyers are an investment group

from Quebec. Early in the process, the towns became competitors: might only one mill be sold or be closed? Later, employees initiated a move to buy the mills, but they are now faced with an ultimatum: give wage concessions and approve the sale, or both mills will be closed. “We are looking for information” said a lawyer for the workers, “[The company] didn’t get to this transaction without developing information about [the buyers], and what this entity is and what it could bring to the transaction. We are not playing games. We really need this information to evaluate whether it is an entity that we should proceed with.” An editorial in the next day’s paper blamed the company for not being more forthcoming with the details of the sale before the end of the legislative session, when assistance to the workers could have been arranged.

The sketch above emphasizes the need for timely and complete information when decisions affecting the common good are made, and that the practices in place today favor some actors over others. Other themes, such as the importance of leadership in the expression of community interests, will be touched in the discussion below. Throughout, the value of community life is assumed, whether in the form of geographic communities or communities of interest. One threat to community life comes from definitions tailored for outsider purposes without community assent or knowledge. The information strategy proposed here would encourage community members to undertake a process of self-definition, termed self-discovery, through learning about how definitions have already been created by others, toward knowing the effects these definitions may imply for themselves.

Definitions of Community

What is meant by “community”? While there is a growing literature about community uses and impacts of technologies, the dimensions of this concept are often left undefined. For instance, the introduction to the essays collected in *High Technology and Low-Income Communities* give special attention to meanings of the terms “poverty” and “information technology,” but does not present an overview of “community.” (Schön et al. 1999: 20f.)

Two attempts at broad definition, by Philip Selznick and Roger Lohman, are summarized here as a beginning. Selznick suggests “an appropriately weak, inclusive and neutral definition of community” as follows: “A group is a community to the extent that it encompasses a broad range of activities and interests, and to the extent that participation implicates whole persons rather than segmental interests or activities.” (Selznick 1996: 195) He further presents a “complex set of interacting variables” that includes: historicity, identity, mutuality, plurality, autonomy, participation, and integration. For Selznick, vitality in community requires both unity and diversity, “the reconciliation of partial and general characteristics.” (202)

Lohmann explains his key concept “commons” in terms that also may serve for community. (Lohmann 1992: 318) He cites M.I. Finlay’s outline of Aristotle’s *koinonia politiké* (“civil society”), which “involves five related dimensions: free and uncoerced participation; common (or shared) purpose whether major or minor, long-term or short-term; common holdings (such as a

fund or held resources ... or a repertory of shared actions); participation involving *philia* (a sense of mutuality, often inadequately translated as >friendship’); and social relations characterized by *dikaion* (fairness or justice).”

That the community concept implies multidimensionality is given more concise expression in Pingree comments on the survival of Maine’s island communities. Pingree wrote, “What becomes evident from the descriptions of the islands in this book is the variety of components that make up a viable community, and that sustainable practices are critical to community survival.” (Platt 1998: 7) Discussion below of information imbalances will describe how this necessary diversity of criteria is a disadvantage when confronting certain challenges posed by the information environment.

A subset of these many dimensions could be arrayed across two coordinates, one related to the geographic element in a community’s definition, and the other related to the amount of autonomy the community itself has in defining its membership or bounds, the aspect of “self-definition.” The simple matrix of Fig. 1 relates these.

Geographic, Other-Defined	Community of Interest, Other-Defined
Geographic, Self-Defining	Community of Interest, Self-Defining

Figure 1. Geographic and Self-Definition Aspects in Communities

For instance a municipality can be seen as “geographic, other-defined,” in the sense that it is a creation of the state, while a neighborhood block organization would be an example of “geographic, self-defining,” unless it is strictly operating as an arm of local government. All sorts of prejudicial stereotypes might be included in “community of interest, other-defined,” a box from which it might be very hard to escape or redefine, while “self-defining community of interest” could include any of the millions of formal and informal associations that are integral to our civic culture. Advanced information technologies such as GIS will emerge in very different roles in terms of each of these groupings.

Considered within this framework, the thesis offered here is that sustainable communities are often self-defining, that communities under siege are often other-defined, and that these may serve as fundamental criteria when evaluating how successful our information society might become in its polity aspect, the *koinonia politiké*.

That this matrix tends toward what Paulston calls Amodernist, either-or mapping.” (Paulston 1996: 436, fig. 1) should not obscure that gradations are present. For instance, while private corporations primarily may be thought to be “self-defining communities of interest,” they are also other-defined in that they are creations of the state and function legally only within the terms of under state charters. The relevance of this point is

stressed by Daniel Kemmis: “Corporations have always existed at public dispensation. They have been allowed by the public to exist, in the peculiar form that they take, only because the public thought that it was going to get more than it would lose in the bargain. Corporations only become a problem in public life when the public loses its ability to enforce this bargain.” (Kemmis 1990: 129)

Finally, the definition of organizations presented by Winograd and Flores, “networks of commitments and conversations” seems to serve well in characterizing relations in community. Their objective is successful information systems design. (Winograd and Flores 1986: 158) A parallel insight is David Karckhardt’s discussion of friendship relations within organizations, in “The Strength of Strong Ties” (Krackhardt 1992). These notions have a bearing on the discussion of the creation of Alateral information sharing networks” below.

Communities and Persons

Given the diversity of factors outlined above, it is no surprise that “many writers (and readers) are troubled by the fact that the idea of ‘community’ is so elusive.” (Selznick 1996: 195) Other more formal structures that are stable in time are much more amenable to definition, discussion and analysis. Our culture’s language and laws confer on the “individual” the highest place among the order of social units.⁵ It might be said that persons are in effect “formal structures stable in time” and that this is one key to their institutional standing. The status attained by the individual is coveted by other social units, particularly corporations, which were recognized as “persons” in American law by the end of the 19th century, culminating in the movement to extend First Amendment rights to them today. (Vibbert 1990)

In a similar fashion many of the formal rules and safeguards related to information access and privacy are framed with personal concerns at the center; see for instance the essays collected in *Technology and Privacy: The New Landscape* (Agre and Rotenberg 1998). The notion of a “community’s privacy,” perhaps required as a strategic element in community self-defense, is difficult to conceive and has certainly not attained prominence in discussions related to information policy.

Yet, what is known about a community, how this is used and interpreted, and how much of this knowledge is kept out of the community’s view can be of harm to the community and its members. Simply being slotted into an economic and demographic niche (a form of being other-defined) can make a geographic community a target of regional marketing strategies unknown and unwanted by its members. Or it may be subject to administrative decisions such as loss of services and even community identity; see (Wroth 1998) and (Bowley 1997). Communities of interest such as owners of small commercial fishing vessels may wish to protect information identified as critical to their livelihood, such as the location of historic spawning grounds; see (Ames 1997).

This is not to say that there ought to be something like a community right to privacy in any particular case, only that this

topic has important implications, and that discussion of consequences in terms of community welfare should have a place within the broader information policy horizon.

In addition to the blurred distinctions between persons and corporations and the privileged place of individuals over communities, there is a gradual merging of “public” and “private” with troubling implications for communities. For instance, significant public resources are devoted to “economic development,” often directly supporting projects initiated by private sector firms who also will be their prime beneficiaries. The complex negotiations that accompany this process are often underway for many months before the barest details are known to the community at large. Access to confidential private sector information is one of the most important trusts granted to public officials, who may be tempted to identify more closely with their client firms than with the public. Accountability is often after the fact, with the public cast in roles of opposition.

Issues of the public’s right to know tend to equate public information with official government documents. For instance, the “information commons” as described by Harlan Onsrud relates mainly to issues of “transparency in the functioning of government” (Onsrud 1998: 141). Yet the public information environment might legitimately include much of what is now held in private hands, the “enclosure” of which is sanctioned by current laws and practices, even when this may have significant bearing on the public interest and be may required for public decision making.

Arrangements that allow traditional public processes to migrate toward private institutions begin to resemble a complex shell game, with important public information cast as the pea.⁶ This situation suggests that a more unified set of rules should be devised and applied when public information requirements are at stake. To maintain present distinctions among governmental, private enterprise and individual standards of accountability only supports an endless process of “shape-shifting” in which governments pass for private enterprises and corporations pass for persons. The quest for this unified set of rules for all parties is a major motivation of the present work.

Needed: Unified Rules of Information Access

The matrix of community characteristics presented above can be supplemented by a transparency continuum that illustrates choices that might be made in devising rules that aim toward justice in the information society. A suggestion of where to begin is given in this section.

The spectrum “strong privacy” to Atransparency” suggests the range of strategic choices that are now available (Fig. 2). The criteria for adoption must be fundamentally pragmatic: what will work, and for whom? what will happen anyway?; how will the rules, or fair information practices, be enforced if at all?

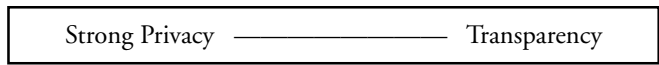


Figure 2. Strong Privacy - Transparency Spectrum

These are central terms discussed by David Brin in *The Transparent Society* (Brin 1998). His analysis suggests “strong privacy” leans toward technical solutions like encryption and must be supported by detailed legal sanctions, while Atransparency” strategies seek to level the field mainly through collective social effort such as “public feedback regulation.” Brin acknowledges that this dichotomy “oversimplifies” (20) but he then provides extended discussion of the complexities.

The three elements suggested below, broadly conceived to be the basis of Anew rights to know,” should be read as a whole. None of them could function alone, and all three depend on further actions in the form of community information strategies. Calling these Anew rights” does not mean that they are strictly “more rights.” Points one and two have the flavor of “more,” but a balance is sought in the third. The overall intent is to find some way to move toward a more fair set of information practices than are apparent in the directions taken today.

Here are the suggested terms:

1. All people will be allowed to know specific details about the representations that are maintained about themselves in the formal records of others. Members of communities will have access to similar information to the extent that the communities they are part of may be represented as aggregate or named entities.

Discussion. Freedom to know how any person is represented in someone else’s database, file cabinet, DNA archive or photo repository should also extend to knowledge about how the communities that person identifies with are represented. Ownership over that data cannot be claimed, nor is any veto power asserted over the uses to which this data may be put. Assuming that the data has been legally obtained, its use remains within the discretion of its data managers. Access to a representation implies some ability to suggest corrections to it, but not that the corrections will necessarily be accepted. Every person and organization is free to hold a representation of the world that comports with its own vision, and to act on it. It is simply asserted here that those who are represented have a right to know details about how this is being done.

2. There should be an expectation of full disclosure regarding the structure within which representations of persons and communities are maintained, including that structure’s connections with other record keeping systems (data sales and sharing arrangements).

Discussion. Because facts are meaningless without context, the framework structures of documentary information or data ele-

ments must be known. Legitimate questions include “what fields are linked to my name, address or unique identifying descriptors?” and “to whom do you freely give or sell data about me and my community?”

These first two requirements offer no guarantee that the responses to these questions will be fully forthcoming or accurate. Issues of verification become a matter of mutual learning in distributed information networks. Implementation of these principles needs to be accompanied by the nourishment of a culture of information sharing, equipped with robust information sharing networks.

3. Data sets that have been created and maintained by public sector agencies, especially in local jurisdictions, should be protected from wholesale export against the wishes of their data custodians. Open access arrangements may still be desired in many cases, but these should result from negotiated decisions made in the open political process, rather than be assumed through the extension of open access expectations.

Discussion. This point shifts attention from specific data elements and their uses, to expectations surrounding the sharing of entire data sets. It probably reflects most peoples’ everyday understanding of their data access rights and may be the position that is most congenial to information administrators. Further, it extends a privacy factor that is now available in the private sector to data managers in all sectors. Today’s public expectations of access to entire data sets are directed toward government information, the public sector whose boundaries with the private sector are already quite fuzzy (see discussion above). Reducing expectations or claims against entire data sets in the public sector should not imply that access to whole data sets will simply be eliminated, nor that terms of access must depend on ad hoc arrangements, nor that public data sets will simply go to the highest bidders. Rather, negotiated arrangements should proceed on a database by database basis, through the established political process, where the merits of open access can be decided in specific cases, considering local needs and specific local consequences. The political process may also be used to secure open access to private data sets when this is deemed to be in the public interest.

These three suggestions seek to avoid simple extrapolation of today’s public access principles. They address some of the concerns that are now held about the uninhibited access to data that is now available to the wealthy few, the massive transfer of personal and community information that is now freely available from local sources considered fair game in today’s digital information environment.

Who Will Enforce the Rules?

Given new principles as suggested, even if we want them implemented, who will enforce them? It is becoming clear that our information environment is not likely to be controlled predomi-

nantly through legal constraints and sanctions, though these provide a necessary base. There is a place for regulation via access laws, especially for the purpose of carrying out the public will as expressed through the political process. In critical situations, for instance when public health and safety are involved or when institutional corruption may undermine public process, information that traditionally has been shielded from public view is now beginning to open. The extra-legal disclosure of confidential tobacco company records is an outstanding recent example; see the essays and documents collected in (Glantz et al. 1996).

Rather than more laws, a shift in public expectations seems to be required. David Brin hints at the way this might work. “If some company wishes to collect data on consumers across America, let it do so only on condition that the top one hundred officers in the firm must post exactly the same information about themselves and all their family members on an accessible Web site.” (Brin 1998: 81) He links unacceptable information behavior to sanctions derived from the law of torts, where wrongs can be identified and addressed. His notion of “reciprocal transparency” provides a sense of the innovative problem solving that might inspire creative extensions.

Some of the characteristics of the commons, Aristotle’s *koinonia politiké*, should be considered in terms of creating a livable civic society appropriate to the information age. Just as our public discourse has centered on individual rights while neglecting those of communities, it has become customary to frame the information society largely in terms of an “information economy” rather than in terms of an “information polity.” To recast the process in political terms places responsibility for needed changes in the hands of those citizens who are ready to take risks, to ask unwelcome questions, and open themselves to the scrutiny that they direct toward others.

People as individuals and as members of communities expect to be treated fairly, not to become victims of other people’s opportunism in the information age. The elaboration of formal “strong privacy” protections will likely benefit most those whose activities thrive on secrecy rather than those who value the importance of participation in preserving communities.

Community Leadership in Information Society

Who are the community leaders most likely to engage in information advocacy roles that emphasize diverse community values over the relative advantages of special interests or individual gain? These could be found among those professions which are most closely tied to community goals today: public minded planners, journalists, librarians and educators, all of whom are preparing to take advantage of new knowledge resources in ways that build upon their professional commitments of the past. To these will be added technology-savvy advocates for interests identified with broader communities, new breeds of information access gadflies, and GIS professionals willing to share the fruits of their craft. Communities need people who will take on such leadership roles. One problem with invoking “community” as a social unit of analy-

sis is that no community exists apart from its members, and most especially its leaders.

One hurdle that these professionals must overcome is a tradition of client-oriented services. An example is the public librarian, whose services are often directed toward individual borrowers or “patrons” but who in the future may be expected to provide substantial guidance in the form of documents, studies, statistics and other resources on topics of general local concern. Librarians need to engage in proactive information sharing with their colleagues in communities who face similar community-based issues. These challenges in library practice are discussed in (Durrance and Preston 1987) and (Blanke 1996).

Planners also have been challenged to ground their practices “as much in ‘practical sense’ as in formalized knowledge” and to initiate processes of “collective deciding and acting through intersubjective communication rather than through the self-reflective consciousness of autonomous individuals.” (Healey 1993: 240) Planners must participate in “the invention of the democratic process.” (248)

Judith Innes has explored the role of information in the planning process and asserts that “the notion of value-neutral expertise is no longer widely accepted” (Innes 1998: 53) and that planners must understand that “when information is most influential, it is also most invisible. That is, it influences most when it is part of policy participants’ assumptions and their problem definitions, which they rarely examine.” (54)

Finally, the importance of a healthy local press cannot be overestimated. Newspapers provide daily documentation of events and issues that are closest to the lives of their readers. The existence of online news archives eases the search for background on issues, and facilitates lateral sharing strategies. The loss of an independent locally owned press spells bad times for many communities. (Robicheau 1999)

Brin’s “information transparency” prescription would be unthinkable without a committed infrastructure of people who are ready to make it happen, “common folk who manage to transform themselves into **citizens** — independent, cooperative indomitable.” (Brin 1998: 327, emphasis in original) This suggests that citizenship, even in the information society, is a status as much attained through practice as it is conferred at birth or through naturalization. The concept of active citizenship in defining an individuals’ direct relation to the state needs to be asserted.⁷

Community Information Strategies and Strategic Disadvantages

A premise throughout this work is that communities, much like individuals, might learn much about themselves through gaining knowledge of what others already know about them. This knowledge may be obscured through self-induced blindspots or through external barriers. An outward-looking strategy of “community self-discovery” could supplement, but not replace, other more inward-looking methods of community self-assessment.⁸

The notion of community self-discovery is supported by

cognitive theories that view knowledge creation as being a social rather than an individual enterprise, and that consider meaning to be rooted in relations rather than in stand-alone definitions. See the essays included in the volume *Research and Reflexivity* (Steier 1991), especially (Von Foerster 1991). Discussion of the “sociality of information” and its relation to civic culture is provided by Mestrovic (Mestrovic 1994).

Key to the information strategy suggested here is the formation of what might be termed cooperative lateral information sharing networks.⁹ Information that is needed is obtained as raw data in many forms, ranging from hearsay and gossip through the contents of sophisticated databases. This is often fragmentary and colored by contexts of origin and integrated into local frameworks of interpretation. In receiving and interpreting this knowledge, communities have an opportunity to learn about themselves; with this learning comes the potential for change. This opportunity is termed here “self-discovery,” a public process and a learning paradigm; see (Schön 1971, especially ch. 5, *Government as a Learning System*).

This process reflects the importance given by Huber and Daft to the information environment of organizations. What they term a “resource-dependency perspective” implies that “organizational environments contain resources upon which the organization depends for achieving its goals, such as survival. The availability and accessibility of these resources have considerable influence on the organization’s nature.” (Huber and Daft 1987: 131) While their focus is on formal organizations, this perspective also applies to community information requirements.

Sources for knowledge in the information environment may be grouped into three fundamental categories: documents and data already publicly available; documents and data kept in private hands; and general knowledge available in other communities where similar questions or situations are being faced. The first requires well-managed and accessible public records and adequate library resources. The second may be addressed through the active assertion of the new rights or changed expectations as outlined above. The third involves a process of discovery of relations and precedents that can only proceed through multi-participant information sharing networks, in which the price of obtaining information is the commitment to making similar information available, often proactively, to others. Community leaders will often expose themselves to risks in posing questions, allowing their interests to become known and risking exclusion from existing information loops where their questions may be regarded as inconvenient dissent.

Innovations in the design of cooperative lateral information sharing networks are now possible through online capacities for communication and document storage and retrieval. Channels must be kept open through public expectations of openness and a suitable legal framework. The functioning of the network is the most important element, rather than its specific contents, which are always incomplete, temporally sensitive and context bound. In Carrie Meyer’s terms, discussing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in international context, “the information-shar-

ing *relationships* among NGOs, or between NGOs and their target groups, may be of more interest than the particular information shared.” (Meyer 1997: 1130, emphasis in original)

Historian of science, Stephen Toulmin, advances the reassertion of premodernist values, “the oral, the particular, the local and the timely.” (Toulmin 1990:186) The networking strategies suggested here may provide a chance to nourish these within an increasingly globalized information environment.

Communities face particular disadvantages in the information gathering process that are not encountered by well-defined social groupings. For instance, private corporations are well defined, with existence and rights granted under law. They are internally well disciplined, and are not required to uphold social protections such as the requirements of freedom of speech, which is constitutionally protected only against governmental interference. Their goals are well specified, with bottom line profitability as the fundamental criterion of success. Communities on the other hand must accommodate an intrinsic plurality of interests and promote participation. This becomes a disadvantage in an increasingly ordered and economically regulated information infrastructure.

An innovation that seems well suited for developing distributed information-sharing networks has been termed “public feedback regulation” (Brin 1998: 252ff.). This strategy involves posting of such data as toxic emissions, airline departure and arrival statistics, university graduation rates and contributions to political action committees. This approach supplements existing formal regulation of the private sector. Innovative variations on this strategy are becoming more possible and attractive with use of online technologies.

Communities may gain an advantage in this complex mix through an ability to insist that the coming information society must be a *polis* in which communities and their members are full participants. Questions surrounding the creation of an information polity achieve prominence in the public mind as questions about the information economy are gaining today. The coming polity will evolve as much through the evolution of public expectations as it will through the extension of legal sanctions or through technologies such as make strong privacy solutions possible.

Conclusion

A rethinking of the terms of participation in our information society is in order. Simply extending the rules of information access that are in place now, without reconsidering the theories on which they were based in a pre-digital age, has brought unintended consequences. In many ways communities find themselves at a disadvantage, not least because their status as partners in the information society is hard to define, and because they are subject to more complex sets of constraints than those faced by governmental units, corporations and individuals.

The proposals offered here attempt to redefine inclusion and participation in a way that recognizes community needs. The goal is to strengthen community, however defined, as a

valued component of public life. A unified set of rules is sought which may apply to all members of the information polity, correcting for imbalances that seem to grow more serious over time. Ongoing community self-discovery through awareness of what is already known by others is suggested as a positive strategy that goes beyond community self-defense. This strategy depends on active community leadership and on nurturing new skills of citizenship that are needed if a culture of information sharing is to emerge.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper titled “Asserting New Rights to Know, Toward Community Self-Discovery” was presented at the 1998 meeting “Empowerment, Marginalization and Public Participation GIS;” see <http://www.ncgia.ucsb.edu/varenius/ppgis>. A core document illustrating the topic of that meeting is (Harris and Weiner 1998).
2. Community Rights Counsel identifies itself as a “public interest law firm defending laws that make our communities healthier, more livable and socially just;” see <http://www.communityrights.org>
3. Though some state “sunshine laws” pertaining to public meetings and records were in place earlier, most were enacted during the 1970s; the federal FOIA was enacted in 1966. Harlan Cleveland’s historical summary in (Braman 1984) states that these laws were developed “in a wave of revulsion (their purpose clauses are full of resentment and fury) against deception, corruption and cover-up in high places.” Summary of current laws is available in *Access to Electronic Records* (Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press 1998) with supporting documents. The theory that based these laws in the requirement of open government is now being replaced by a theory that emphasizes commercial values in access to public records; see for instance language framing Perritt’s proposals for management of public information in the National Information Infrastructure, “wholesale access by resellers is as important as retail access by end users, and resellers should be able to decide how many existing value-added elements they want.” (Perritt 1994: 83) This tilt toward information as commodity reflects the demands of the legal system itself; see Mestrovic’s “the logic of legal concepts suits a society that produces commodities” (Mestrovic 1994: 153). In practice the “sunshine laws” are often ignored; for instance, see reports of recent press investigations into compliance with Illinois= FOIA provisions, reported in (Wills and Fusco 1999) and related stories. These points suggest that a framework for future expectations in information relations must be wider than discussion of laws and rights.

4. A search for "communities under siege" via www.altavista.com, July 12, 1999 returned 41 documents; "(communit*) near (siege)" returned over 900.
5. For historical treatment of this theme, see (Macpherson 1962).
6. In some jurisdictions laws have been crafted to inhibit this process. See (Kaney 1997) who describes a court interpretation of Florida's sunshine law that "will make clear that agencies cannot avoid the Open Meetings Law by delegating functions to private entities any more than they can avoid the Public Records Law."
7. For instance, the Internet home page of Maine's Gov. Angus King states that "technology can make government much more responsive to its customers." See <http://janus.state.me.us/govoffice/homepage.htm>. Similar shifts in terminology are underway in other areas where individuals are considered in their public roles; see examples from healthcare discussed in (Richards 1999), quoting Harvard Medical School professor Arthur Kleinman, "when we transform patients into consumers, we are transforming more than just the word."
8. Examples of community self-assessment strategies can be found in the work of the Floras and their colleagues (Flora et al. 1997), and the work of Norman Uphoff (Uphoff 1991) as elaborated by Christopher Mausoloff (Mausoloff 1996).
9. At attempt familiar to the author is the Gulf of Maine Information Exchange; see www.gominfoex.org and www.gulfofmaine.org/gominfoex/terms_of_reference.htm.

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