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Opportunities for Collaborative Research on Information Technology and Social Change in Academic Libraries

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Everyone agrees that the times are changing. Most also agree that information technologies have a great deal to do with these changes. Indeed, we are inundated with widely promulgated utopian and dystopian myths predicting or decrying the inevitable coming of the "information society," and with demands to radically change our ways in order to create "learning organizations" and "virtual libraries." Few of us, however, have access to reliable and valid knowledge about how human beings actually create and use information technologies to change their lives for better or worse. Recently, many of those from a wide variety of intellectual disciplines and occupational practices who are interested in developing and applying such knowledge have come together under the interdisciplinary banner of Social Informatics.

Social Informatics refers to the body of research that examines the social aspects of computerization. It examines the various roles that information technology can play in social and organizational change. It also considers how social forces and practices influence the organization of information technology. Such research aims to ensure that technical research agendas and systems designs are relevant to people's lives--that technical work is socially driven rather than technologically driven. Such research thus often takes on the quality of action or evaluation research in which participants and researchers work together in order to plan, implement, and monitor change involving the introduction of information technologies.

Indiana University's new Center for Social Informatics, under the direction of Rob Kling, is a focal point for high quality research on these topics. It brings together faculty, graduate students, and professionals from a wide variety of fields and with a broad range of experience in order to promote research that is meaningful both to practitioners and to theorists.

As a major networked research library undergoing significant organizational and technological changes, the IU Libraries represent an example of an organization greatly in need of the knowledge that social informatics research could provide. Likewise, the IU Libraries represent a site rich in research opportunities for those interested in advancing knowledge in the field of social informatics. Thus, the idea of a Collaborative Research Program was proposed to the IUL and SLIS administrations and approved in January 1997. The program aims to provide opportunities for IU librarians to work with CSI members and associates on problems of mutual concern. A trial collaborative project was begun last semester to explore ways of analyzing and improving how the IU Libraries help staff to learn about and employ distributed information technologies.

The real purpose of research is to develop useful knowledge about an issue in which continued ignorance creates major human problems. Opportunities exist to create such

knowledge, but we need to actively pursue them. If you'd like to be involved in future collaborative projects, or have ideas about specific problem areas that need to be investigated, please contact me with your proposals.

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For more information--including links to online full-text versions of exemplary research--connect to the following:

Center for Social Informatics:
<http://www.slis.indiana.edu/CSI/>

The Information Society journal:
<http://www.slis.lib.indiana.edu/TIS/>

Social Informatics Home Page:
<http://www.slis.indiana.edu/SI/>

URL: <http://www.indiana.edu/~inula/notes/>
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