

Book Review: Sozioinformatik – Von Menschen & Computern ... und Bibern

Frank Wolff

Department of Business Informatics, Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW),
Coblitzallee 1-9, 68163 Mannheim, Germany

Corresponding author: Frank Wolff (frank.wolff@dhbw-mannheim.de)

A Book Review on

Sozioinformatik – Von Menschen & Computern ... und Bibern

[Social Informatics – About People & Computers ... and Beavers].

Christa Weßel (Rastede: Weidenborn Verlag), 2021, 197 pages, ISBN: 978-3947287079.

Keywords

Social informatics; Germany; Holistic view; IT design; Education.

The 2021 book on social informatics by Christa Weßel “Sozioinformatik: von Menschen & Computern ... und Bibern” [Social Informatics: About People & Computers ... and Beavers] is a contemporary and reflective overview on social informatics written in German. It is based upon the author’s rich professional experience of diverse aspects of research and development, consulting and teaching social informatics and related areas. On about two hundred pages, the book comprises a thorough survey on related and relevant disciplines, a critical assessment of the current status and diverse interpretations of the goals of social informatics.

In the course of the argumentation, the book conveys the multifaceted nature of the subject by looking more closely at typical issues of social informatics and drilling down to specific research projects, for instance the development of a public web-based information system on hospitals for both citizens and professionals. The book does not focus on detailed recipes to design IT for people but strategies for a holistic and integrated organization of system development and usage with, e.g., storytelling and comprehensive project clarification.

The fundamental theoretical explication is complemented by examples. They are located in diverse fields such as healthcare, universities, schools, public and private companies and personal life. A major part of these subjects refers to changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Especially notable about the book is the ingenious and skillful guidance of the reader into the topic using beautiful metaphors. This starts with the subtitle of the book “About People & Computers ... and Beavers”. Beavers are a very good example of social beings that produce artifacts, make use of technical structures and live in sophisticated settings. They change their environment and the environment has an impact on their life.

The reader encounters other images and analogies in various parts as means to structure the topics of social informatics arranged in an analogy to a tree with roots, stem, branches and blooms. The first part, *roots*, illustrates the history of social informatics. Furthermore, it is complemented with an overview of relevant other scientific fields and education in social informatics. The consideration of *stem and branches* as the second part of the book starts with a reflection on identity and ethics, before other aspects are addressed such as digital dexterity, life 4.0, living in networks, the environment, responsibility and ways of implementation and diffusion of innovations.

The third part, *blooms*, tells stories of social informatics in different areas of life, such as the importance of personal communication in leadership instead of controlling tools and the benefits of a combination of a web-based tax declaration systems with personal cooperation of tax officers and citizens. The final chapter of this part offers an outlook on the future of social informatics.

Another notable stylistic device is that several chapters start with the introduction of a movie, in some cases in the science fiction or fantasy genre, in others historical. Questions referring to the particular film and the topic of the chapter encourage the reader to reflect upon these topics in the widespread field of social informatics.

The main text is supplemented by numerous sources from scientific literature to further stimulate a sensible reflection on the influence of computers on people’s social life and vice versa. Thanks to this, the book is attractive for a broad audience of users, developers and managers of computer systems who want to gain in-depth insights into the manifold impacts of IT systems on people and society. For students, teachers and researchers in this field, it can provide a convenient starting point for seminars and raise promising novel issues with its thought-provoking style.

Author's note:

* The German community also uses a direct translation of “Sozioinformatik” into English as “socioinformatics” or “socio-informatics”, but from an international perspective, it is better to translate the title and focus of the book as “social informatics” as we do in this article.