Roberta Lamb, on the way

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I came to know of Roberta and her work through the late Rob Kling (her advisor) who, in the mid 1990's, pointed me to some of Roberta's work. I liked the focus of Roberta's work and how she went about her scholarship. I wrote to ask about a paper of hers: she responded with a flurry of pointers and text, the first of many great interchanges. We began to interact regularly by email. I first met Roberta in person in 1997 when she briefly stopped by for dinner while traveling from one place to another. This meeting is metaphorical: Roberta was a woman constantly on the go and very much on her way someplace important.

Roberta became a close intellectual colleague, a co-author, and an inspiration. I write now to remind the future that Roberta, while not sentimental, must be remembered for her passion and contributions to the approach to studying computerization that is social informatics.

Roberta and I both focused on the relationships among work, information and communication technologies, and organizations, and we both had an interest in the real estate industry: Roberta did some of her dissertation field work on commercial real estate, and I have spent years studying residential real estate. This is what first brought us together for that dinner in 1997 – to talk about the social analyses of computing relative to changes in real estate.

Roberta seemed always to be on her way someplace – collecting data, meeting with co-authors, attending meetings. In 1999, I saw Roberta at a workshop when she was on her way to Hawai'i. She and Rob had begun circulating drafts of what became an elegant paper contrasting traditional tool-based views of digital commerce with socio-technical models (Kling and Lamb, 2000). We chatted about her ideas and issues with the paper. Their approach – to contrast socially thin, or 'standard tool-based,' views of digital commerce with a richer socio-technical view showcases the alternative insights that social analyses of computing provide us. Their deconstruction of the several meanings of what might be digital commerce, their careful attention to contrasting tool-based views with socio-technical views of digital commerce, and their use of micro-analysis relative to macro-data, make this a classic social informatics paper.

I remember Roberta was delighted to be heading to Hawai'i; but, sad to be leaving her friends and colleagues at Case Western Reserve University. She was also enthusiastic about starting new field research. She had been out of the field since her dissertation (save for some small data collection activities) and was keen to get back. Her love of doing research was contagious and all-encompassing. She enjoyed the gamut: focusing the questions, developing the data collection approach, engaging the field, working with the data and her colleagues, and writing it up for others.

This pattern of meeting Roberta as she was on her way seemed to pervade our relationship. A few times it was me, however, who caught up to her while I was on the way. In late 2000 I had the pleasure of visiting Roberta and her colleagues in Hawai'i. She and her companion, Brian, hosted me for a few days' visit as I was traveling towards Australia. Beyond being excellent

hosts to a tourist (me), we spent the time on two tasks. She gave me helpful feedback on the draft of a chapter (on the common principles of social informatics) of the social informatics book on which Rob, Howard Rosenbaum and I were working (Kling, Rosenbaum and Sawyer, 2005). She seemed quite keen to explain all the issues, value choices, and related work that I'd not yet included. This conversation carried on during walks, meals, car rides, and even as we went to the airport.

During this visit we also spent time on a draft of the social actors paper she and Rob were developing (Lamb and Kling, 2003). I read several versions of this paper as it developed in response to reviewers concerns, their own thinking, and colleague's comments. The paper makes three contributions. The first, and to me one of the most compelling parts, is their depiction of research streams relative to social analyses of users. The second, and the one that should be the focus of continued attention by scholars in several research communities, is the development of the social actor – a nascent theory and set of claims. The third contribution is this is a second exemplar of the type of work and thinking that makes social informatics such a powerful intellectual position relative to studies of information systems.

Tenure at Hawai'i, and a Fulbright fellowship to Finland (and to work with the incomparable Eija Karsten) followed publication of the social actors paper. It seemed Roberta was on her way again. She was also diving into a larger study of oceanographers (with her close colleague, Elizabeth Davidson, and several students). We met up at the annual conference of the American Society of Information Science and Technology in 2004 – she was on her way to Europe and some more data collection. Rob Kling had passed away and we did more reminiscing than planning: what little planning we did focused on the *gedenkenschrift* special issue on Rob's work.

Putting together Rob's *gedenkenschrift*, and participating in the 2005 social informatics workshop hosted by Ken Kraemer at Irvine, allowed us to work together and visit more. We co-authored for the second (and last) time on our summary and next steps piece on social informatics (Lamb and Sawyer, 2005). Roberta was an excellent co-author: prepared, articulate, and engaging. These were good times: working together on something in which we both believed strongly and cared deeply.

Roberta returned from Finland, and once again was on the move – this time to the Bren School of Computing at Irvine. This was an exciting move – into an "*I-School*" – though it meant leaving leave her community of colleagues and friends from Hawai'i. We last met at the IFIP 9.4 Working Group conference in remembrance of Rob Kling (held in lovely Maribor, Slovenia in September 2007). Roberta was organizing the re-start of the IFIP 9.1 Working Group (on computers and work) and establishing herself in the informatics group at Irvine. We chatted on carrying forward social informatics, engaging colleagues in related areas, and our own empirical research. Roberta was stoic about her health (how does one ask?) and very forward-focused.

We last spoke by phone in early November, 2007. She was chatty (that is normally my role), and we reflected on the rising numbers of people pursuing social informatics work, developments regarding the IFIP working group 9.1 workshop she was organizing, the series of workshops that the National Science Foundation was holding on the future of social informatics,

and about getting some of our work published: professional academic talk. A few days later she was no longer with us.

Great words and deep insights on Robeta Lamb's departure will be written by others in this issue. I write my stories to help us recall Roberta's dynamicism and to remind us of her contributions to shaping the trajectory of research on computerization. I want to convey Roberta's love of scholarship, her real passion for all aspects of research. And I want to highlight her contributions to social informatics: the social actors model, the contrasts among socio-technical models and tool-based views of digital commerce (and the uses of information and communications technologies more generally). I write to make clear that Roberta was always on her way someplace. She was building community, she was immersed in research, and she was taking the rest of us along with her. Roberta wanted important theory development work, field critiques, and empirical results. Roberta was on a mission and she very much wanted us to be a part. I'm all in.

Works cited:

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Endnotes:

1. Thanks to Kristin Eschenfelder and Elizabeth Davidson: their comments on earlier versions of this helped me to put my thoughts in order and to make Roberta more visible to you.