SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE COMPUTING I: A CALL TO ACTION FOLLOWING THE L.A. RIOTS

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'The real question before us lies here: do these instruments further life and enhance its values, or not?'

Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 1934, p. 318

The smoke and fire of the Los Angeles riots (April 30 - May 2, 1992) were Mayday warnings from a desperate community. To ignore this signal would be tragic and unconscionable, but finding a meaningful response is a challenge for computing professionals. Silicon Valley seems a long way from South Central Los Angeles and the computing industry has been largely distant from the problems of the urban underclass.

Many computer professionals are sympathetic to the struggles of the poor, disadvantaged, and minorities, but have rarely thought about how their professional skills might be applied to serve those who need help. Could a Technology Peace Corps apply software to provide skills training, improve community communication, and support entrepreneurs? Could a Strategic Education Initiative improve basic education, reduce illiteracy, and engage young people in constructive projects?

On May 5th, three hundred concerned attendees of the ACM CHI'92 (Association for Computing Machinery Human Factors in Computing Systems) conference in Monterey, CA, made time to explore appropriate ways to apply their expertise to the problems of urban poor, minorities, the handicapped, the elderly, and other disadvantaged communities. This rapidly-convened special session revealed a wide range of existing model projects and offered hope that much more could be done.

The CHI'92 conference chairs, Jim Miller and Scooter Morris, quickly made room for this special session in response to a series of events that typify the emerging electronic global village. Dr. Christine Borgman, an associate professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at UCLA had written an electronic mail message describing events in Los Angeles on Thursday, April 30:

'From our living room we are watching smoke billow nearby, perhaps a half-mile, in our neighborhood mini-malls and shopping centers. Helicopters have been a constant background noise for 24 hours already. Looters have raced down our street with their booty from the nearby shopping center.

The entire social infrastructure seems to have collapsed. Last night in south central LA was horrible, but we thought it was over by morning. We were very wrong. Business as usual ceased by early afternoon today, sending people home as the violence built. UCLA closed its museums and galleries early in the day due to bomb threats. The streets were gridlocked with people heading home. The phone lines are jammed; it is difficult to get a dialtone, and then one reaches an 'all circuits busy, please try later' message. I lived through the 1967 riots in Detroit as a teenager and some of our neighbors are veterans of the 1965 Watts riots. We all agree that this is much worse.

People are very, very angry. It has built up from too many years of minorities easing further into poverty, of the wealth being concentrated in fewer and fewer people, escalating unemployment, the dreams of home ownership and prosperity slipping further away, and deeply embedded racism on top of it all.'

I was one of the recipients of her note on Friday and was moved by her personal and powerful descriptions. I replied by electronic mail, seeking some way in which to deal with my sadness and frustration. It took only a few minutes to formulate a plan to engage the ACM SIGCHI (Special Interest Group on Computer-Human Interaction) community. The suggestion to hold a special session was dispatched to the SIGCHI leadership and the conference organizing committee. Within hours the conference organizers agreed and I received suggestions from people already in Monterey and others who were planning to arrive soon.

Jeff Johnson, Chairman of Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR), helped form goals and plan the Tuesday morning session. In addition to having people speak out about their reactions and offer suggestions, we wanted to collect information on existing projects and to create a list of people who might participate in future activities.

One by one individuals came forward to describe projects they had done personally, such as teaching adults to read, offering free or low-cost computer education courses in local libraries, working with neighborhood schools to apply computers effectively, and offering mailing list maintenance services to community groups. Others reported on larger projects to promote science education in inner city schools, support school districts with innovative computing facilities, provide access to information resources for handicapped and elderly users, and improve fund-raising for charitable organizations. More than 100 of the attendees filled out forms describing existing projects and offering their assistance. The information will be compiled and made available by the CPSR.

This was a successful first step, but CPSR, ACM, SIGCHI, and other organizations must maintain a clear focus of attention over time. Projects must be initiated which make a significant difference to communities and which have enduring support. We must find support in local, state and federal agencies and obtain contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals. Successful projects will be identified by measurable economic and social benefits that justify expansion. These are high expectations but as computer professionals we must take bold positive actions so that when our children ask us what we did in response to the social turmoil of our time we can reply proudly.