

## Afya: Social and Digital Technologies that Reach Across the Digital Divide

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*This paper presents initiatives taken in the Afya project towards bridging the digital divide through social and digital literacy, equitable access, training, and content initiatives at the community level. As a participatory action research project, Afya (Swahili for "health") is designed to engage African American women in assessing and increasing their access to quality health information and services. Based on principles of social justice, the project is geared towards redefining relationships and achieving constructive social change at a community-wide level.*

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### The Mission of the Afya Project

Afya (Swahili for "health") is a participatory action research project designed to engage African American women in assessing and increasing their access to quality health information and services. At the same time, it nurtures their interest, proficiency, access, and participation related to information technology and the Internet. Through the Afya project, we are striving to develop a practical vision for library engagement in community health and the digital divide that promotes social justice through community-wide alliances that model more democratic and participative relationships. Thus, Afya is concerned, fundamentally, with developing new social technologies (ways that people communicate and collaborate) as well as new digital tools and resources.

At the core of the Afya project is SisterNet, whose members are committed to achieving the lifestyle, behavior, and support systems that will lead to better health. SisterNet is a local network of African American women, founded by Imani Bazzell, whose members came together to fill a void. Many women in the Black community were hungry for information and support in their quest to understand their dissatisfaction with life, yet didn't necessarily have the language or mechanism to articulate and pursue alternatives. SisterNet started by organizing a health conference, called "Get With the Program," designed to explore the meanings of physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual health from a Black woman's perspective. The conference helped to introduce these concepts as vehicles with which Black women could transform their lives, and in the process, the life of our community. SisterNet women adopted the motto "Health, healing, leadership - For the lives we've always wanted." On the road to wellness, SisterNet women have developed numerous projects and opportunities designed to nurture healthy lifestyles and community activism.

SisterNet sees its efforts as an essential part of a political strategy to resist oppression and shape livable communities. Fannie Lou Hamer was quoted as saying, "We're sick and tired of being sick and tired!" One of the things SisterNet women were tired of was people making decisions about their lives without them even being "at the table." One of the ways to change that reality is to create your own "table."

## Collaborating for Change

The Afya project is one such effort to set out that table, the result of a partnership with the [Graduate School of Library and Information Science](#) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and a generous National Leadership Grant from the [Institute for Museum and Library Services](#). In many ways this project is about relationships. In fact, it has its roots in the relationship that grew out of its Principal Investigator and Community Consultant's association, which began when they attended childbirth class together. Ann Bishop's interest in and commitment to community involvement and closing the digital divide led her to invite Imani Bazzell to collaborate on developing this project, which would marry health activism to technology activism.

Other organizations have joined us in collaborating for change in our local community, forming an alliance in which each contributes needed expertise and resources. SisterNet women, ranging from age 18-80 and crossing economic classes, are involved throughout as "community action researchers." In this role, they were responsible for pinpointing key problems in community healthcare services in our discussion groups, evaluating existing digital services, and framing project goals and activities to address the problems they identified. Thus, SisterNet women have led the effort to arrive at a Community Action Plan for the Afya project, which they are currently helping to implement. One particular way that SisterNet women's local knowledge and expertise have been kept front and center as we develop new digital health resources and plan community-wide activities is through our continual, though fluid, use of scenarios (Carroll, 1995). Our scenarios are simple, unstructured anecdotes, narratives that bring together values and practices related to the use of health services and information. They provide authentic insights into local women's experiences related to both healthcare and computers and we are finding that they serve multiple purposes in the development of both social and digital technologies (Bishop, Mehra, Bazzell, & Smith, in press; Bishop, Mehra, Bazzell, & Smith, 2000).

Faculty and students at the University of Illinois - including Bharat Mehra and Cindy Smith (herself a SisterNet member) as research assistants - help develop the techniques and resources that support the work of community organizations in the Afya project.

The Afya project also involves a substantial role for [Prairienet](#), our local community network that is housed at the University, in the provision of computer technology and training. Like most community networks, Prairienet ([www.prairienet.org](http://www.prairienet.org)) is a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to contribute to community development by offering local digital content, Internet access, public access computers, and user training and support. Prairienet has provided us with computer training and Web development services, as well as free memberships and computers for SisterNet who have completed computer training.

Parkland College is a longtime supporter of SisterNet through its Department of [Adult and Continuing Education](#). They have given generous in-kind support as well as access to computer hardware, software and other resources for the SisterNet Resource Centers we are developing as part of our Community Action Plan.

Public libraries, healthcare providers, the public health district, and other health information and service providers can exclude or miss the mark in their efforts to include or consider the needs and interests of Black women. This project seeks to bridge some of these communication gaps and lapses through the active involvement of healthcare and library organizations. These local groups have been vocal in their desire to unite in efforts to build capacity for creating and sharing health information across the social, cultural, economic, and technology divides that separate Black women from service providers. Local service providers participated in our needs assessment focus groups and are also helping to implement our Community Action Plan.


We've chosen to use SisterNet's action circle model as the primary social technology for implementing the Afya Community Action Plan. SisterNet action circles are ad hoc in nature. They are formed when three or more women identify a problem and are willing to research and develop a plan to resolve it. Action circles build knowledge and experience as skills and information are shared and developed. They are also designed to further the interests of Black women by foregrounding their concerns and insights and prioritizing their needs and relationships.



## Democracy is Messy

We see SisterNet, and the Afya project in particular, as part of the larger national and global movement to make real the promise of democracy. Including traditionally excluded and disparate voices, and resisting elitism and hierarchies can not only be exhausting, but messy. Our approach to this work has three criteria to meet. It must be:

- **Community-wide**, including SisterNet women, university affiliates, and local health information and service providers;
- Committed to **redefining relationships**, especially as they relate to the balance of power between Black women and community-based institutions; and
- **Action/change oriented**. This involves inquiry, not for inquiry's sake but toward some end such as resolving a problem, creating a new opportunity, or expanding a relationship.



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## Afya Community Action Plan

We have encapsulated basic project goals for Afya's second year as:

1. increase computer access and literacy among Black women;
2. improve the quantity and quality of health information from local providers;
3. establish and institutionalize ongoing information provision from Black women, in both digital and print formats;
4. improve relationships between providers and Black women; and
5. facilitate the further development of a strong social network - for the exchange of support and information related to both health and computing - among SisterNet women.

Our Community Action Plan (see Figure 1) lays out specific actions to meet our goals. It is the result of a wide range of input and reflects the priorities of a unique cross-section of local Black women.

**Figure 1: Afya Community Action Plan**

- Establish Action Circle to develop a Web site featuring jargon-free culturally appropriate health information for our physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual well-being; chat and bulletin board space; news; tips; and public policy information;
- Establish Action Circle to develop a SisterNet Technology/Internet Guide;
- Identify and assist other local Black women's organizations interested in developing their own Web sites;
- Develop and offer series of free computer training workshops targeting beginner, intermediate, and advanced needs;
- Identify and train resource and referral agents (on- and off-line) to promote healthy lifestyles and use of technology;
- Establish Action Circle to develop five SisterNet Resource Centers featuring relevant books, magazines, pamphlets, and Internet access in comfortable and convenient locations for Black women;
- Establish Action Circle to develop and design visually appealing, easy to read health promotional materials on various topics and make them available at numerous drop-off sites;
- Establish Action Circle to design a health and technology "Bill of Rights" poster for public distribution and display;
- Establish Action Circle to identify leadership opportunities for women as SisterNet representatives on relevant committees, task forces, and so forth related to health and technology information and access (such as those set up by libraries, public health district, social service agencies, community organizations, private providers);
- Establish Action Circle to organize Black women's health fair designed to increase knowledge about health concerns and resources and provide opportunity for interaction between health information and service providers and community women.

Sign up sheets for the activities in our action plan were presented at SisterNet's annual community health conference. Our Community Action Plan encompasses the development of both digital and social technologies; and in fact the two are intertwined. For example, we hope that social activities such as developing a cadre of local Black women who are interested in collaborating with local health service providers to create more relevant and appealing materials will lead to the creation of digital content for SisterNet's Web site. Moving from the digital to the social realm, community members hope that constructive communication through SisterNet web site's chat rooms and listservs will help build trust and understanding, a spirit of collaboration, that will be reflected in social interactions that take place in local libraries and healthcare facilities.



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## Taking Action Across the Divide

Each element in our action plan is designed to meet the three criteria noted above, in terms of being a community-wide effort that is geared toward redefining relationships and achieving constructive social change. Let's look at several examples.

## SisterNet Resource Centers

SisterNet Resource Centers (SRC) are community-wide in that host sites will exist in Black hair salons and, later, libraries and health clinics. Each SRC represents a collaboration among various community partners. The host sites are contributing their facilities. SisterNet women are designing the SRCs and will serve as onsite volunteers for them. PrairieNet and Parkland are contributing the expertise and computer technology needed to establish and maintain the public access computing stations at each SRC. Libraries and health services will also supply expertise and materials associated with the SRCs, such as recommendations for health books and videos, and equipment such as the models used to demonstrate self breast exams.

Relationships are redefined in the course of creating and managing the SRCs in that SisterNet women are empowered, and experienced by others, as leaders in this initiative. SisterNet women involved in the SRCs take on a new role as informal outreach partners for libraries and health services, providing a critical connection to a population traditionally deemed "hard-to-reach."

We hope that change will occur along several fronts with the implementation of SRCs. First, that Black women and service providers will gain a respect for and increase their involvement with each other as they engage together in a shared enterprise. We are also striving for long-term change in Black women's health practices by providing an opportunity to model and practice good health and information habits on a regular basis. SRC materials will emphasize important and easy-to-adopt changes, such as performing self breast exams and gaining the ability to critically assess health Web sites.

## SisterNet Computer Training

Through the Afya project, we are offering computer training to SisterNet women (two cohorts have already completed the four workshops that precede acquiring their own computers). Our computer training is community-wide, held at computer labs in the local Urban League, Workforce Prep Center, and PrairieNet labs. The curriculum was designed and implemented by PrairieNet staff, with input from SisterNet and University of Illinois students.

Because SisterNet computer training puts Black women in the role of teacher and mentor (not just trainee), the traditional relationship between expert and novice is redefined. Our training is provided through a mentorship chain. A local Black woman who herself completed PrairieNet computer training and then went on to gain a staff position at PrairieNet is the main teacher for our Afya workshops. She is assisted by other Black women, serving as workshop volunteers, who have also gone through PrairieNet's basic training. SisterNet women participating in the current workshops act as over-the-shoulder mentors to their peers, with those who know a little more about computers sitting next to and assisting women who are complete novices.

Constructive change is embodied in this chain of mentorship: SisterNet women who participate in our training workshops can themselves go on to become workshop volunteers and even teachers. We have also instituted activities within the training workshops that are specifically geared to facilitating constructive social and technical change. The health Web site review exercise that Imani Bazzell developed directs workshop participants to explore a given health site on the Web, find something of interest that will help them make a positive change in their lives, and then report back to all workshop participants on what they learned. Thus, along with Web browsing skills, women gain motivation to use the Internet because they have seen that it contains useful and congenial information geared specifically to them. They also gain a little confidence in public speaking through their oral reports to the class. Finally, they find, share, and discuss action-oriented health information.

## SisterNet Health Fair

This summer, the SisterNet Health Fair will be devoted to Afya goals related to improving both health and technology capacities through its focus on alternative/complementary health and how to find and use information in that arena. The Health Fair will be held in a local public library and comprise booths and activities set up by a wide range of health and information providers across our community, and include SisterNet women as presenters. For example, the University of Illinois health sciences librarian will set up a booth that provides information on how to access and use their resources, such as an instruction sheet for searching the PubMed (Medline for the general public) database of medical literature. SisterNet women will present material from the SisterNet technology/Internet guide they helped develop.

The SisterNet Health Fair will embody a means to redefine community relationships that was advocated by both providers and Black women in our needs assessment discussion groups. Providers were especially eager to develop ways to bring women and providers together in an informal and fun environment, where they could get to know each other outside of the official, more sterile situations that typify exchanges in hospitals and libraries. Another detrimental aspect of official exchanges is that the balance of power they represent is tipped so dramatically to the "experts," i.e., healthcare and information service professionals.


In designing health fair activities, we plan to lean toward those that are diagnostic and reflective in nature, that lead Black women to identify and follow up on changes they want to make in their lives. For example, we will hold mini workshops in which participants learn about and try yoga and tai chi, as well as how to find, assess, and use Web-based information

related to alternative health. Women will contribute to a potluck refreshment stand where they sample nutritional food that can help reduce certain health risks and problems.

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## Conclusion

The digital divide is really a socioeconomic, cultural, and power divide that exists at both local and global levels. If we don't deal with the mistrust and inequities at their roots, we run the risk that technology access and use will simply perpetuate age-old patterns. Through the Afya project we are experimenting with ideas about how to close the digital divide through digital literacy, access, training, and content initiatives at the community level.

But modeling and practicing social justice and community engagement related to Black women's health is a much more difficult nut to crack. How do we bridge the social aspects of the digital divide? As members of diverse communities, we all must look to change in our *social* literacy, access, training, and content efforts. In terms of *social literacy*, we must learn how to read each other, how to grant respect and validity to diverse funds of knowledge and social capital. We need to be *socially accessible*, opening ourselves to new relationships. *Social training* must occur as stakeholders throughout a community model and practice a shared vision of social justice. And finally, we need new *social content* in the form of artifacts and structures - both online and offline - that embody constructive social change. 

## About the Authors

Ann Peterson Bishop is an Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois. Her research focuses on socially-grounded research methods and the use of information systems by disenfranchised groups. Bishop teaches courses in community information systems, information needs and uses, knowledge organization and access, social informatics, and information policy. Bishop serves as Principal Investigator for "Community-Based Creation of Networked Information Services: Developing Tools and Guidelines for Public Libraries," a two-year project funded by the Institute for Library and Museum Services (IMLS). She was Principal Investigator for the "Community Networking Initiative" (sponsored by the Telecommunications and Information Infrastructure Assistance Program in the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Kellogg Foundation), and co-PI for the University of Illinois' NSF/ARPA/NASA Digital Libraries Initiative project. Bishop is a co-founder - along with Greg Newby - of Prairienet, the community network that serves East Central Illinois.

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