



Methods, Information Systems, and Mapping  
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### BOOK REVIEW

*Community Quality-of-Life Indicators: Best Practices III*  
M. Joseph Sirgy, Rhonda Phillips, and Don R. Rahtz, editors.  
International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies,  
Blackburg, VA 2007. 194 pages. \$25, \$10 (PDF)

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One of the best sources on the history, conceptualization, and design of quality of life indicators is the International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies (ISQOLS). Their latest volume highlights projects in Clark County, NV; Santa Cruz, CA; Menomonee Valley, WI; São Paulo, Brazil; Calgary, Canada; the Peel Region in Ontario; the Federation of Canadian Municipalities; and Europe's Slow Cities. The chapters summarize the respective initiatives, which, in turn, are summarized in the preface by the editors, who are leading researchers in the indicators industry. A careful read of the volume suggests that something has shifted in the indicators industry, a relatively new and growing phenomenon driven by technology and privatization.

My exposure to the industry began in 1986 when searching for a doctoral program at a university with a large enough mainframe to handle a 1.4 gigabyte Census Bureau database. The technology tied empirical analysis to the thinkers in the academy who worked closely with government agencies that generated the data. Things changed in 1993 with the release of Intel's Pentium I microprocessor that enabled us to crunch large databases on desktop PCs. Technology encouraged private firms to get into the indicators business and a new audience for indicators emerged to include politicians and private foundations. Hence by the mid-1990s, there were over 200 community indicators projects in the United States. The field continues to expand in the new century through advanced multi-cast technology (e.g., pod casts, www) and indicator franchises (e.g., collaboratories, cyberinfrastructures).

One of the implications of the twin trends of technology and privatization is the high cost of conducting indicators research and the uncertainty as to who will pay for this work. Academics feel the pressure to secure outside funding and hence rely on student labor. Businesses are not interested in funding analysis that links economic growth with environmental and social outcomes; they will, however, fund research that links urban communities to mainstream capitalism. Journals do not pay for research, and foundation grants are rarely long-term.

As a result, there is a call in the volume for government to fund quality of life research, which brings us back to the originators of economic, social, and environmental data. Indeed, one of the largest indicator groups, the National Infrastructure for Community Statistics (co-founded by the Urban Institute and the Brookings Institution), is now a government enterprise under the direction of the U.S. General Services Administration.

So where is the indicators industry headed? What is the contribution of the industry to society? My concern is that rather than question what we are doing and why, those of us in the indicator industry will continue to do what we have been trained to do in the tradition of our fellow social scientists. For example, poverty researchers write papers that conclude that poverty exists and that it is important to conduct further research to understand more about poverty. The wheels turn and our upper middle-class lifestyles are supported, but little changes for the rest of society. Indeed, many of the chapters in the volume validate the spatial imbalance in quality of life around the world, a conclusion well established by government statistical systems.

Perhaps the indicators industry is no different than other industries impacted by global capitalism. Benjamin Barber argues in his book, *Consumed* (2007, Norton) that the market system has reached a point of over-producing goods beyond the needs of first world people while ignoring the less profitable needs of third world people. Resources are shifted into advertising and branding in rich nations. Is the indicators research community caught in an analogous self-perpetuation? Are we fabricating a need, such as these community indicators, to keep us busy, wealthy, and ego satisfied? Perhaps that is the topic of another article that could showcase the value added by the indicators research industry today.

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