

Research Ethics Town Hall Meeting

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ABSTRACT

As technology and data access continue to evolve, research ethics in the areas of Human-Computer Interaction and social computing are becoming increasingly complex. Despite increasing interest among researchers, there is still a lack of consistent community norms around ethical gray areas. One charge of the SIGCHI ethics committee is to help develop these norms by facilitating open conversations with different stakeholders. This panel will be an opportunity to develop a collective understanding of diverse perspectives on ethics, and to gather input from the GROUP research community around the ethical challenges we face as researchers who study social and collaborative computing systems and those who use these systems.

Author Keywords

Ethics; Social computing; Social norms; Research ethics; Research methods.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers are increasingly interested in ethics – both ethics as experienced in the world [7, 11, 21, 27, 46], and the ethics of our own practices [8, 10, 12, 17, 18, 19, 28, 32, 36, 37, 41]. Several theory-and-practice approaches have been proposed in the related theme of values [15, 20]. More broadly, ethical concerns have driven influential research-and-practice directions in HCI and CSCW, such as action research [23] and participatory design [4, 22, 33, 39]. However, despite this increased attention, the HCI and social computing research communities still lack concrete norms when it comes to many emerging ethical issues [44]. This is particularly true with respect to research that does not fall under traditional definitions of human subjects research, such as use of public data [44], and research in some industry settings.

This panel serves two purposes. First, we will provide a report to GROUP participants about the current work of the ACM SIGCHI Research Ethics Committee – similar to [10, 19] sessions at other conferences. Second, we hope to engage the broader, more diverse participants at GROUP, to expand the list of questions and proposals beyond the current focus of the SIGCHI committee. For that purpose, we will be sending a series of email invitations to submit questions and position statements, first to all authors whose work is accepted at GROUP 2018, and subsequently to all people who are registered for the conference. Our hope is that the actual contents of the panel will reflect, in part, the pre-conference responses of GROUP 2018 participants.

BACKGROUND

As Bruckman et al. noted [10], “new open questions have come into view in recent years. For example, what constitutes ‘public’ data, and are there circumstances in which studying content created by humans becomes human subjects research [8, 50]? What are researchers’ obligations to follow Terms of Service for websites [42]? Is it acceptable to study deleted content? What are best practices for obtaining informed consent or appropriately anonymizing data collected online [3, 24]?”

Workshops devoted to grappling with these kinds of issues have been convened at a number of ACM conferences [13, 18, 47, 48], including GROUP [14]. These conversations have been particularly important in light of public scrutiny of methods and ethics [29, 51] that have led to disagreement throughout our research community with respect to best practices. Other workshops have examined similar contextualizing issues, such as [43], which dealt with participatory design issues when some of the members of the group face issues of cognitive, emotional, physical, or social challenges. Talhouk et al. considered the situation of refugees and migrants [41] – a situation that became even more urgent between the dates of submission and enactment of their workshop. Finally, Fox et al. convened a third workshop in a series to discuss feminism and CSCW, integrating overlapping or *intersectional* issues of gender, sexual orientation, and power [17]. Panel sessions have examined contextualizing issues, such as social justice [16, 17], colonial violence [21], and issues of social good [36].

And yet, HCI and CSCW are far from agreeing on a consensus set of values [2, 34, 44]. We need a better understanding of the different contexts of our various types

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of work, including diverse societal contexts [25, 31, 38, 40], disciplinary expectations [35], institutional requirements [10], and the needs and views of our users and other stakeholders [15, 20]. It is also important to have these conversations with the broader community, and not only those who have a particular interest in ethics.

PANEL CONTENT AND TIMELINE

Based on earlier Ethics Committee panels [10, 19], we will report on what the committee has learned about informed consent, institutional review, and issues around data-access and data-permissions. We will also introduce new topics like discussing the differences between the formal guidelines for ethics, and how to discern ethical methods in the actual practice of doing research. This includes considerations for collaborating with empirical partners and ensuring their safety, also when they are in vulnerable situations like refugees [1], political activist [49] or living in politically contested areas [7] Finally, we will also discuss how to cope with empirical findings, which might not be something which the empirical partner necessarily is happy to report, and how to deal with potential publication of political contested agendas [6, 26]. Finally, we will bring forward selected issues from earlier panels and workshops, including privacy ethics, feminism, intersectionality, vulnerability, and social justice.

In the participatory and community spirit of GROUP, we will send a series of emails to accepted authors and registrants, inviting them to propose topics, questions, or position statements to be discussed during the panel. We will develop a short-list of proposed topics based on the emerging themes from this solicitation to be reviewed in mid-December by the panel co-organizers. Each panelist will prepare to present on these topics during the panel; we will consult with the GROUP conference organizers before we finalize our final list of topics. During the panel, we will encourage an open conversation with all GROUP attendees and have a designated note taker to retain the knowledge and questions generated during the panel to report back to the SIGCHI ethics committee in the form of a white paper report.

Biographies

Pernille Bjørn is Professor in Computer Supported Cooperative Work in the department of Computer Science at University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Her research explores the basic nature of collaborative work with the aim of designing collaborative technologies, and includes multiple studies in different empirical domains such as healthcare and global software development. Her most recent work focuses on the societal difference in global work and the political agendas, which emerge when e.g. agile methods are used as micro-management mechanisms by American clients to control and monitor the work of software developers working out of Bangalore, Indian – or how the global work of Palestinian tech start-up working out of Ramallah, West Bank are shaped by the constrained enabled by the lack of technical information infrastructures.

Casey Fiesler is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Information Science at the University of Colorado Boulder, USA. She is a member of the SIGCHI Ethics Committee, and her research area is law and ethics in the context of social computing. This includes empirical studies of research ethics, focusing on understanding public perceptions of research, as well as legal implications for research around factors such as Terms of Service.

Michael Muller works as a Research Staff Member at IBM Research, USA, where he collaborates on research and prototypes for collaborative systems that support human work. He has been active in bringing the practices, politics, and ethics of participatory design into North American contexts, and has organized or participated in conference sessions that addressed ethical concerns. Most recently, with Q. Vera Liao, he began a research program of open, informant-based research into ethical concerns around AI-based technologies and solutions.

Jessica Pater is a PhD Candidate in Human Centered Computing at the Georgia Institute of Technology and a Senior Research Scientist at the Georgia Tech Research Institute. Her research focuses on mental health in the context of everyday computing. Her dissertation research in characterizing online eating disordered behaviors within clinical contexts has led to developing new ethical approaches to using public data that involves content related to sensitive self-disclosure or mental illness.

Pamela Wisniewski is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Computer Science at the University of Central Florida. Her research expertise is situated at the juxtaposition of Human-Computer Interaction, Social Computing, and Privacy. Her goal is to frame privacy as a means to not only protect end users, but more importantly, to enrich online social interactions that individuals share with others. She co-organized the GROUP 2016 workshop on ethical obligations for studying digital communities, and more recently, a workshop at Facebook on bridging industry and academia to tackle responsible research and privacy practices. She was also inducted as an inaugural member of ACM's Future Computing Academy and is working on initiatives that foster the future of computing through early career support.

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