
Research Ethics in HCI

A Town Hall Meeting

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Abstract

As interactive technologies evolve and reach into every aspect of modern life, research practices in human-computer interaction (HCI) have changed. The methodological and epistemological foundations of the field are shifting to reflect the diversity of contexts in which rapidly changing digital technology is being used. Alongside these changes, new ethical challenges emerge for the HCI community, both in terms of research ethics and responsible research and innovation. Open dilemmas include issues such as the shifting meaning of informed consent, anonymisation or privacy in an always-online world. The SIGCHI Ethics Committee has been established to look into the processes, practices and structures at SIGCHI venues to deal with such ethical dilemmas and how they can be addressed in a transparent, consistent and open way. This town hall style panel will be an opportunity to prompt community discussion and collect input into how we can further address these challenges.

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Introduction

With the rise of novel digital technologies which are pervasively shaping diverse aspects of our life-worlds, the environment in which the HCI community is operating and conducting its research is changing. In what has been termed “3rd wave HCI”, work has shifted to be increasingly situated, value-driven and involving stakeholders in the design processes [6]. Consequently, this has resulted in a fundamental shift in what kind of methods we use and how we construct the knowledge from our research [10].

However, these shifts have also led to novel ethical challenges for the community which are constantly evolving. It has been recognised that HCI’s deepening entanglement with the social dimensions of technology use requires researchers and practitioners to be alert to the ethical implications of their processes and outcomes. The novel dilemmas arising from this entanglement also highlight the limitations of traditional approaches to research ethics and call for an active and continuing engagement with ethical questions. For these reasons, ethics in HCI has attracted increasing attention in recent years as evidenced by a series of workshops [7, 15, 16], conference papers [11], special issues [12], journal articles [2, 9] and book chapters [5].

The ACM SIGCHI Ethics Committee, convened in 2016, is appointed by the SIGCHI Executive Committee and is charged with making recommendations to SIGCHI to address ethical issues that arise from the specific nature and context of research and practice in this field. The goal of the committee is not to rule on particular issues or cases, but to revise and evolve ACM SIGCHI procedures to help the community develop a shared understanding about research ethics and how to handle ethical concerns throughout the research process, while minimising bureaucratic

overhead. This particularly relates to the peer review process of SIGCHI related conferences and journals.

With this submission, we propose a town hall style panel meeting at CHI 2017 to engage the community in a broad discussion about the ethical challenges of our work and how to best implement sensible ethics procedures that account for the variety of topics which are researched and that consider the diverse cultural backgrounds, norms and values of the contexts in which this work is conducted.

Challenges

In order to translate the needs and requirements specific to our field into sensible and meaningful procedures and structures, it is important to ground the discussion in concrete issues arising from HCI work (compare [11]). The town-hall meeting will be open to all contexts and topics of ethical concern, but we anticipate a number of themes to emerge across current research efforts. For example, research around online data continues to challenge ethical conduct. Open questions include what constitutes “public” data, and are there circumstances in which studying content created by humans becomes human subjects research [4]? What are researchers’ obligations to follow Terms of Service for websites [13]? Is it acceptable to study deleted content? What are best practices for obtaining informed consent or appropriately anonymising data collected online [1]? These are challenging questions. As supported by research conducted by Vitak et al. [14], our research community does not have clear norms around best practices for online research.

The growing area of research conducted at the intersection between the arts and interactive technology is another example. In this context novel ethical dilemmas arise from the increasingly blurry boundary between audiences and

participants and how voluntary and informed their decision to take part can be [2]. Similar dilemmas arise in a critical design context in which provocation in public spaces is a widely used strategy [8]. Design thinking in HCI more generally opens up ethical challenges as many aspects of the process are inherently exploratory and unknown in the planning phases, which limits the power of traditional, anticipatory approaches to ethics [9]. The growing number of works that actively involve stakeholders in the designing of technology further complicates the traditional notion of ethics as eliminating potential harm. By empowering stakeholders to shape outcomes, we also share ethical responsibility with our participants and have limited power over the process. This dilemma has been recognised in Action Research for some time [17]. Likewise, we struggle to better understand the ethical dimensions of our community's exclusivity and inclusivity, especially with respect to the nature of collaborations labeled "capacity-building" and "for development" [3].

We anticipate that other themes and topics will emerge during the town hall meeting, helping us to understand which concrete ethical challenges the community grapples with.

Format and Programme

This session will take a Town Hall format, maximizing time for questions, comments, and discussion by attendees. A representative of the SIGCHI Ethics Committee will give a brief (no more than ten minute) review of the current status of research ethics in the community and the work of the ethics committee over the past year. Following that, we will open the floor for discussion in three sections:

1. What specific ethical issues are members of the community currently concerned about?

2. What steps can we as a community take to facilitate conversations about ethics?
3. How can we design procedures, policies and structures at SIGCHI venues to reflect the community's ethical positions.

The town hall will be attended by a subset of the membership of the SIGCHI Ethics Committee and facilitated by the chair, Amy Bruckman.

People

Amy Bruckman is Professor and Associate Chair of the School of Interactive Computing at Georgia Tech, where she does research on social computing. She is chair of the ACM SIGCHI Ethics working group.

Christopher Frauenberger is Senior Researcher at the Human-Computer Interaction Group, Institute for Design and Assessment of Technology, Vienne University of Technology. His research focuses on designing technology with and for marginalised user groups, such as those with disabilities. He is committed to participatory design approaches and builds on theories and methods from diverse fields such as the action research, disability studies, philosophy of science, research ethics amongst others.

Melissa Densmore is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Computer Science at University of Cape Town and Acting Director of the UCT Centre in Information & Communications Technology for Development. Her research interests are in human computer interaction for development (HCI4D), around ICT-based content creation and collaboration in low-resource rural and urban communities.

Jenny Waycott is a Lecturer in the Department of Computing and Information Systems at the University of Melbourne.

Her current work focuses on the design and use of new technologies to support older adults who are socially isolated. She has coordinated a series of CHI workshops on ethical issues encountered in HCI research conducted in sensitive settings.

Cosmin Munteanu is an Assistant Professor at the Institute for Communication, Culture, Information, and Technology (University of Toronto Mississauga), and Co-Director of the Technologies for Ageing Gracefully lab (TAGlab). Cosmin's multidisciplinary work includes mobile interaction through speech and language, mixed reality systems, digitally-inclusive learning support for marginalized users, assistive technologies for older adults, ethics in human-computer interaction, and usable privacy and cyber-safety.

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