
HCI, Communities and Politics

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Abstract

Working with communities around social change presents a challenge to common HCI methods, as politics often comes to the fore. In some cases, the politics of a community are explicit, for example, when working with activists or advocacy groups. In other cases, political aspects are less explicit but surface in considering the allocation of resources or in groups wherein issues of race, gender or class are of major importance. To address these dynamics, HCI researchers have to go beyond traditional HCI tools and metrics, which too often bracket out the political in an effort to focus on the instrumental issues and uses of technology. This panel juxtaposes several community-based HCI research projects in which politics have been a significant factor and asks "How do we address the politics inherent in community-based HCI research?"

Keywords

Community, Politics, Social Change, Ubiquitous Computing, Sustainability, Design Research

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Human Factors

Introduction

French leader Charles de Gaulle famously commented that politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians. He was, of course, talking about running a country. We understand politics in a broader sense, as the organization of the relations of different parts of a society or group. In this context, de Gaulle's assertion is even more apt. HCI research in community contexts meets politics in at least two forms. Inevitably, in contributing to new products, processes and systems, we are intervening in the organization of relations, and whether we intend it or not, our interventions will affect those relations. In addition, working with communities brings encounters with political situations, positions and agendas. So, when we talk of politics here, we mean the work of interpreting and negotiating power issues in doing HCI research, rather than the better considered areas of, say, the usability of voting systems.

Our focus is on community-based HCI research which makes political aspects of HCI explicit, either by working with political groups engaged in taking action or by working with people in such a way that power relations are made visible and become available to communities to consider. Many methods support these practices, but all projects so conceived find themselves dealing with situations that go beyond traditional HCI wisdom. In a year when CHI is celebrating diversity, our panel explores what makes these situations complex, how we deal with the complexity, and what may be learnt from doing so, summarized in the question: "How do we address the politics inherent in community-based HCI research?"

In this discussion it is important to note that we are using "community" to mark a process of working with

different publics, and not to imply a total homogeneity of values or interests. Such publics may be geographically bounded or distributed; comprising government and NGO institutions and officials; activists, and often, those who are economically and/or socially marginalized or oppressed.

New Contexts Require Attention to Politics

The projects addressed by the panel are associated with the fields of ubiquitous computing and/or sustainable HCI. Although the politics of these fields have received only minor attention to date in CHI, we maintain these are politically charged areas. As sustainable HCI grows as a research field, it comes into contact and needs to contend with the issues of resource allocation and use, production as well as consumption and consumer culture, climate change, and public engagement with science. Likewise, as ubiquitous computing grows from concept to reality, it too encounters political issues: social systems are interpreted in code; matters such as control of privacy and surveillance arise [5]. With these strands and others like Information and Communications Technology for Development (ICTD) and Globicomp [2], insights come from engaging diverse publics. We argue that these new contexts for HCI require new approaches to research that explicitly and directly contend with the politics that run through them, in some cases defining them. Not to attend to politics does disservice to our own research community, and is arguably unethical towards the communities we work with. By not attending to politics, we run the risk of reinforcing or worsening power relations in terms of gender, race, class, nationhood and/or sexuality in these communities. And we present back to our research community at best a shrouded view of the context and effects of our work.

In addressing politics in community-based HCI research, we do not need to invent new discourses and method from scratch. There are traditions we can draw upon, including Computer Supported Cooperative Work, Socio-Technical Systems Design, Design Research, Social Informatics, Science and Technology Studies, and Social Practice Art. In HCI too, there is research that is community-based and that touches upon politics and the political in technical systems. However, most of this work in HCI differs from our focus in two ways: 1) the work seeks to apply standard HCI methods, and, we argue, in the process dulls the edge of the political to make it fit within HCI or 2) the work was *about* politics, but itself was not political work, that is, not directly engaged with or as political actors.

The Politics of Community-Based HCI

Community-based HCI presents a set of political challenges and themes. Although not exhaustive, the following topics are particularly salient:

Design Processes that support Engagement

One overriding challenge is finding means to bring to the surface and enable engagement with political aspects of design and technology development. For example, in the *Neighborhood Networks* project [1], DiSalvo and colleagues worked with community members to speculate on the uses of sensing and robotics technology in their environment. As part of this endeavor, participants engaged with the issues and procedures for the use and placement of technology in public space, and in the process, experienced and came to understand issues of “public” space ownership and governance and were challenged to make decisions about how to implement their designs in negotiation with local and federal laws and regulations. In such situations, the role

of the HCI researcher broadens to include being an educator and facilitator.

The HCI Researcher as Political Actor

In some modes of research, particularly when working with advocacy group or activists, the HCI researcher becomes herself a political actor, as in, for example, designing technologies to support protest or other activist endeavors, which places the work of the researcher squarely in a political arena. Furthermore, to work thus often requires a trust from that community, based upon knowledge of the researcher’s political commitments [3]. In such scenarios, the researcher’s position shifts away from the standard scientific stance as a detached observer or designer, and comes into conflict with the norms of HCI research.

Choice, Identity and Expression

Exploring the politics of a situation gives rise to different understandings. Rather than conceiving of design *needs*, it acknowledges the possibility for conflicting *interests* between different players in the community, and may lead the researcher to take a role in helping broker structures of control for implementing and/or using systems [4]. In particular, this approach creates a space for discourse around identity and values. These activities again engage the researcher in a more overtly interventionist relationship than is deemed appropriate in discussions of HCI practice.

A Political Panel

This panel is “political” both in theme and in its challenge to dominant beliefs about practice. Many HCI researchers – particularly those wishing to appear scientific – avoid these aspects, or seek to mitigate their presence and impact in research activities and

publications. But politics in a myriad of forms is ever present. This panel is a chance to explore the value of taking this perspective by looking at extremes.

Confirmed Panelists and their Projects

The panel is an international assembly of researchers working in different domains. In alphabetical order, confirmed participants are:

Carl DiSalvo is an assistant professor in the School of Literature, Communication and Culture at the Georgia Institute of Technology. In his research, he works with adult and youth communities to develop technology fluency programs that explore the political potentials of design products and processes.

Ann Light is reader at Sheffield Hallam University and has worked on expressly political design projects, such as "Practical Design for Social Action", "Democratising Technology" and "Fair Tracing", involving work with groups to elicit values and explore potential impact.

Tad Hirsch is a senior research scientist with Intel's People and Practices Group. He holds a PhD in Media Arts and Sciences from MIT's Media Lab, where his dissertation focused on the design of communications systems for oppositional political activism.

Christopher A. Le Dantec is a Ph.D. candidate in the Human-Centered Computing program at Georgia Tech. His research examines how technologies we build effect social change. This approach weaves elements of activist research and participatory design around the view that human-values are expressed through technical systems and artifacts.

Liz Goodman is a PhD student at the University of California, Berkeley's School of Information. Elizabeth studies the relationship between mobile technologies, and the experience of place.

Katie Hill is completing her PhD on designers' roles in community development, with a focus on political, grassroots design. She is examining practices where the roles of designers have shifted from being technical experts to being social or political agents of change.

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References

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