
Taking Action in a Changing World: Research and Community

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Abstract

The CHI community is global, diverse, and highly engaged. In light of international policy developments that impact both our community and the practice of

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science in general, this SIG will bring together members of this community to discuss both policy changes we could pursue, and future research directions to fight against issues such as isolationism, misinformation, and censorship. What actions can we take to help maintain a strong, inclusive, and diverse community of researchers, and to best protect the freedom of scientific inquiry? How can HCI as a field of research make choices that lead to substantive, positive impacts on this changing world?

Author Keywords

policy; research agenda

ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.1 Computers and Society: Public Policy Issues

Introduction

Following the 2016 United States presidential election and subsequent policy developments, there has been concern throughout the CHI community about the impact on both our community members and research. Predominantly, the travel ban in the United States implemented in January 2017 [1] directly affects members of our community, and has the potential to negatively impact engagement, collaboration, community wellness, and knowledge sharing.

There are also concerns over issues such as freedom of scientific inquiry, the free flow of information, and funding for computing research. Globally, similar isolationist policies are spreading through historically strong democracies (notably the “Brexit” vote). Hence these issues represent a shift in the global political climate, and this shift has the potential to strongly impact our international research community.

Moreover, the U.S. presidential election also highlighted a number of issues that are relevant to HCI research, such as the spread of misinformation and fake news [2], online harassment, and usable security. The HCI research community can contribute not only to understanding the role of technology in facilitating or preventing certain effects, but also to designing and developing technology interventions to protect personal freedoms, online education, and civil discourse.

This SIG brings together members of our community to discuss this situation with two major discussions in mind: (1) What actions can we take to help maintain a strong, diverse community of researchers and to best protect the freedom of scientific inquiry? and (2) How can HCI as a field of research make choices that lead to real, substantive positive impact in this changing world? Moreover, how should we be considering the potential political implications [6] of our work?

This discussion is not meant to be partisan, but motivated by real, concrete effects on our community, along with empirically grounded problems. As researchers and scientists, we propose to take a strong commitment to the open sharing of knowledge and a global research community as foundational assumptions to ground our discussions and efforts.

Maintaining a Strong, Diverse Community

In considering how to best support our entire, borderless community, part of the discussion will be potential ways for taking action. Some possibilities for discussion include:

- (1) Advocacy and activism. How can we best advocate for ourselves and our research? Events like the Scientist’s March in April 2017 suggest a growing desire for organization towards defending the value of science.
- (2) Making change at a policy level. Are there ways that we can have a direct impact on policy? What mechanisms are there for having our voices heard? What prior success stories have there been in this arena, especially in computing?
- (3) How do we best deal with the current situation as it stands? What are possible solutions for dealing with issues like conference locations and international collaborations? If the current trends continue, there could be restrictions for the foreseeable future. How can we protect the members of our community who are impacted?

Towards a Research Agenda

This discussion concerns how HCI as a field has the potential to have real, substantive, positive impact on the world in the context of these changes. What research questions do we see motivated, and what sorts of problems can (and should) be addressed with HCI research and solutions?

Using a ‘three pronged’ model, we propose the following research directions to discuss:

- (1) Design-focused research. Design as a discipline encourages holistic thinking about the integrative aspects of a socio-technical system. What avenues of design inquiry can help inform the future of design thinking about these challenges?
- (2) Systems-focused research. What new technology should we work toward developing that can address some of these challenges? Research in areas like online sentiment analysis, usable privacy and security, and just-in-time fact-checking is ongoing [3,4,5], but what further advances are needed to combat recent changes?
- (3) People-focused research. For example, in what ways might HCI methods help expose cognitive and perceptual biases in the ways people and technology interact to prevent or enable the open flow of information?

SIG Format

This SIG is intended to be part town hall style discussion and part working groups. Our hope is that the conversations here will spark ongoing conversations that will continue after the conference, facilitated by channels of communication opened at the event.

Community Participation

For the first part of the SIG, the moderators will facilitate questions addressing the community as a whole, as well as the open sharing of concerns and experiences. This will be a combination of thoughts offered in the room, as well as information collected prior to the conference.

It is important that this discussion reflect the entire CHI community, and not only those who are present at the conference. There will be a pre-conference call for sending in stories, questions, and concerns, which the moderators will be able to share with the participants at the SIG. A remote videoconferencing connection will also be set up so that researchers from around the world will be able to participate (anonymously or not) and send in questions as well.

It is also important that community members feel comfortable sharing things that may be personal, make them vulnerable, or might potentially be viewed negatively. We will facilitate ways to provide information anonymously—both in the pre-conference call and during the SIG. For example, SIG organizers will collect written or typed questions and input on paper in a sealed box so that the identities of contributors who wish to remain anonymous will be protected. We will also take suggestions prior to the SIG event about the best ways to ensure privacy needs are met.

Working Groups

The second half of the SIG will begin by participants coming together into smaller working groups, where people drawn to addressing specific problems can meet and discuss. The goal is for these conversations to continue after the SIG and hopefully become actionable. Though the topics may shift based on the discussion and participants, some likely topics are:

- (1) Activism and advocacy
- (2) Policy impact
- (3) Actions for CHI, SIGCHI, ACM
- (4) Design-focused research

- (5) Systems-focused research
- (6) People-focused research

After the Conference

After the CHI conference and the SIG event, the organizers commit to facilitating a continuing discussion among the volunteers and participants. Such discussion will be undertaken through diverse communication channels, to possibly include, but not limited to:

- (1) An anonymous email list
- (2) Online spaces such as Facebook groups
- (3) An open letter from the HCI community
- (4) Follow-up SIGs at future SIGCHI conferences

Conclusion

In the current global political climate, the assumption of free and open communication around research, science, and the HCI community cannot be taken for granted. We among the research community propose to conduct a SIG event to discuss potential policy changes we can pursue and future research directions to fight against isolationism, misinformation, and censorship. The discussion and call to action is expected to continue long after the SIG event. This event will serve to facilitate bringing together those who are willing and ready to engage in research and policy change for our changing world.

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