Introduction to the Critical and Ethical Studies of Digital and Social Media Minitrack

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Abstract

This minitrack features research on two themes: how and when digital and social media design choices and user practices support and/or challenge existing power structures (including power structures internal to organizational cultures), and the ethical issues associated with studying digital and social media technologies, or associated with the design, engineering, deployment, and use of such technologies. The papers in this minitrack discuss a wide range of topics related to these themes and span a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches, ranging from the relationship between publicly accessible social media data and researcher ethics, to social support for women in open source software forums and how sociotechnical systems promote existing power structures such as the hegemonic structures of web 2.0 platforms. The following introduction reviews the overarching themes connecting these papers in additional detail, before discussing each paper's fit within these themes and providing individual descriptions of each paper.

1. Key Themes in Critical and Ethical Studies of Digital and Social Media Research

The area of critical and ethical studies of digital and social media research spans many sub-fields, including critical technology studies; critical information studies and critical information science; computer-mediated communication; human-computer interaction; critical, social, and community informatics; critical data studies; researcher ethics; and more. The papers in this minitrack reflect the breadth and depth of scholarship these fields through particular engagements with the obligations of ethical research, women in technology, and a call for ethical design in sociotechnical systems. One key challenge in bringing research in such wide-ranging fields together is the ability to apply different approaches and different lenses to examine similar processes--specifically processes that exist at the increasingly important intersections of society and technology--bringing to fore larger concerns about issues such as power, agency, ethics, and justice.

This minitrack's primarily concerns reflect how various digital and social media platforms exist within different societal contexts, and the societal and cultural factors that shape their use. Rather than a focus on the technical functions of these platforms, the minitrack centers people and the multitude of human concerns that arise as people interact with these platforms. The foci of the minitrack--how and when digital and social media design choices and user practices support and/or challenge existing power structures (including power structures internal to organizational cultures), and the ethical issues associated with studying digital and social media technologies, or associated with the design, engineering, deployment, and use of such technologies--bring with them an opportunity to pose unique inquiries and best practices for engaging in this type of research and questioning engagement with these platforms more broadly.

The papers represented in this minitrack each respond to the two major themes in different and compelling ways. The first paper, "Researcher Views and Practices around Informing, Getting Consent, and Sharing Research Outputs with Social Media Users When Using Their Public Data" addresses the second theme most strongly, revealing attitudes toward and ethical concerns about informed consent and data practices among social media researchers. The authors illuminate diverging current practices and attitudes about how ethical informed consent in social media research should be handled, raising important questions about whether compliance with ethical review boards

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is sufficient to build meaningful relationships with online communities.

The second paper, "How do Women of Open Source Software Support Each Other?" takes up concerns about gender and support in open source online forums, addressing the first theme's call for critical inquiry around user practices support and/or challenge existing power structures. Using data from several Open Source Software forums, the authors query the types of social support available for women participants and how women nurture support systems within these forums. The third paper in the minitrack, "'Thank You, Next': A Call for Intentional Design," also takes up the first theme, investigating how sociotechnical systems propagate existing hegemonic structures, looking specifically at historically male dominated markets like the music industry. Finding that sociotechnical architectures and affordances promote the existing patriarchal structure, the author makes a strong argument and call for more intentional design practices. The following sections will provide more detailed explanations of each paper.

2. Researcher Views and Practices around Informing, Getting Consent, and Sharing Research Outputs with Social Media Users When Using Their Public Data

Publicly accessible social media data is frequently used for scientific research. However, numerous questions remain regarding what ethical obligations researchers have in regard to using such content. Nicholas Proferes and Shawn Walker report on researchers' own views and practices regarding informing, getting consent from, and sharing research outputs with users when using publicly accessible social media data. Proferes and Walker find both diverging current practices and views on what researchers ought to do in the future: some researchers view the ethics of public data use as merely requiring compliance with the requirements of their ethics board, while others' ethical practices go beyond what is minimally required; some researchers worry about the effects of contacting users to inform, seek consent, or share outputs with users; finally, others note that they want to build bridges with online communities through these mechanisms, but struggle with a lack of precedent and tools to do so at scale.

3. How do Women of Open Source Software Support Each Other?

This paper presents an analysis of 10,698 messages from five online forums with 1,344 participants to identify patterns of activity, major topics of discussion, and the type of social support available for participants in these Open Source Software (OSS) forums. Authors Vandana Singh and William Brandon found that these forums serve as safe spaces shared by marginalized populations, for collaborating, networking and most importantly providing social support to each other

4. "Thank You, Next": A Call for Intentional Design

As a social network science axiom, homophily informs the current design of Web 2.0 platforms, like Spotify. As a result, sociotechnical systems propagate current hegemonic structures such as historically male dominated markets like the music industry. To understand how the current design of sociotechnical systems promote existing power structures, Melina A. Garcia performed an empirical social network comparison between the organic 2018 Hip-Hop collaboration network and Spotify's automated related Hip-Hop artist network. Garcia's study produces several interesting findings including, (1) organic network tie formation differs from automated networks, (2) homophilous and heterophilous connections were positively correlated with artists' gender, and (3) statistically significant homophilous male connection were observed in Spotify's related Hip Hop artist network but not in the organic network. By and large, Garcia's findings suggest that Spotify's sociotechnical architecture and affordances promote the existing patriarchal structure.