

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

Tonia Sutherland
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa
tsuther@hawaii.edu

T.L. Cowan
University of Toronto
tl.cowan@utoronto.ca

Jas Rault
University of Toronto
jas.rault@utoronto.ca

Abstract

This minitrack focuses on two themes: a) studies that critically interrogate how and when digital and social media (DSM) support and/or challenge existing power structures or realign power structures—including power structures internal to organizational cultures—that affect underrepresented or marginalized groups, and b) the ethical issues associated with studying digital and social media content and practices, or associated with the design, engineering, deployment, and use of such technologies.

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

The broad research field of critical and ethical studies of digital and social media spans many sub-fields, and includes but is not limited to critically-based (as framed, for example, by critical race theory, critical feminisms, decolonial theory, critical theories of gender and sexuality, etc.) and ethics-oriented approaches to technology studies; information studies and information science; researcher ethics; systems sciences; computer-mediated communication; social media; cultural, social, and community informatics; and more.

This minitrack's primary 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.

This year's minitrack brings together papers that bridge studies of digital and social media with other disciplines and traditions including data sovereignty, critical race studies, queer studies, and gender and sexuality studies. 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, bringing to fore larger concerns about issues such as power, agency, justice, and human liberation. The papers represented in this minitrack each respond to the two major themes in different and compelling ways.

2. Bringing Black Feminist's Thoughts, Self-Definitions, and Creative Agency to Digital Media and Technology Design

Users from marginalized groups are often faced with the challenges that result from a lack of diverse thought in the design and implementation of media and technologies that we engage in our daily lives. In this paper, our selection for this year's Best Paper Nomination, authors Brooke Bosley, Takeria Blunt, Jihan Sherman, Brandy Pettijohn, Britney Johnson, Amber G. Johnson, Blaire Bosley, Susana M. Morris, and Andre Brock disrupt problematic narratives present in tech and design fields by (re)inserting Black Feminism and leveraging their personal experiences to build on design methods. This thoughtful paper uses personal narrative to argue for the value of Black feminist thought and methods in the sub-disciplines of computing, such as digital media, human computer interaction (HCI) and human-centered computing (HCC).

3. Uncoupling Inequality: Reflections on the Ethics of Benchmarks for Digital Media

The authors of this powerful paper, Anne Washington, Lauren A. Rhue, Lisa Nakamura, and Robin Stevens, demonstrate shared interrogation by exploring the ethics of machine learning benchmarks from a socio-technical management perspective with insight from public health and ethnic studies. Turning to the management literature, they interrogate cross-cutting problems of benchmarks through the lens of coupling, or mutual interdependence between people, technologies, and environments. They argue that uncoupling inequality from machine learning benchmarks may require conceptualizing the social dependencies that build structural barriers to inclusion.

4. Grindr and Data Trafficking: Theorizing Consent in Data Localization

In this study, Aynne Kokas offers a comparative policy analysis of the case of Grindr, an LGBTQIA+ dating platform that has changed hands between China and the United States, using the platform to demonstrate what data trafficking is, how it undermines national sovereignty, and how it erodes human rights. This important study offers a framework to discuss when a community's data is moved abroad without their clear, informed consent, (a practice Kokas terms "data trafficking"), extending how we think about the relationship between the commercial data generated by individuals across multiple platforms, and how we understand transnational consumer data security.

5. Targeted Ads and/as Racial Discrimination: Exploring Trends in New York City Ads for College Scholarships

Further exploring the minitrack themes, Ho-Chun Herbert Chang, Matthew Bui, and Charlton McIlwain use and recycle data from a third-party digital marketing firm to explore how targeted ads contribute to larger systems of racial discrimination. Focusing on a case study of targeted ads for educational searches in New York City, this important contribution carefully reflects on and considers how internet platforms systemically and differentially target advertising messages to users based on race; the tangible harms and risks that result from an internet traffic system designed to discriminate; and finally, offers novel approaches and frameworks for further auditing systems with opaque, black-box processes that forestall transparency and accountability.

6. "Tinder Will Know You Are A 6": Users' Perceptions of Algorithms on Tinder

Using in-depth interviews of Tinder users, Christie Abel, Lucy Pei, Ian Larson, Benedict Salazar Olgado, and Benedict Turner explore how users interpret their algorithmically mediated experience on the platform. The authors find that users have various explanations of whether and how Tinder uses algorithms and that users have varying degrees of certainty about these explanations. This engaging work discusses how users, as part of their sensemaking practice around how algorithms work, engage in forms of improvisation. In addition, the authors argue that algorithm awareness leads to a more nuanced acknowledgement of inequality and power, including the power-laden roles of platforms themselves.

7. "This Is the Future of Advertising!" Or Is It? New Insights into the Justifiability of Deceptive Crowdwork in Cyberspace

In this paper, Santtu Kauppi and Wael Soliman ask the important question: what could justify participation in a mass-deception campaign? To answer this question, the authors adopt a qualitative vignette approach and utilize neutralization theory as a guiding lens. Their findings point to several neutralization techniques that crowdworkers could invoke to convincingly rationalize involvement in a cyber deception campaign. Importantly, the findings shed new light on a growing pessimism about work ethics in cyberspace which may lead people to join deception campaigns, believing them to be the future of advertising.

8. The Impact of the Covid-19 Cases with Twitter Users in Their Perception of the Brazilian Government

During the COVID-19 pandemic, political discussions in Brazil revolved around the pandemic and the controversial leader Jair Bolsonaro. Twitter reflected these discussions, highlighting reports from users who had family members victimized by Covid-19. In this revealing paper, authors Celso Júnior, Marcelo Loutfi, and Sean Wolfgang Matsui Siqueira investigate perceptions of the federal government through a quantitative and qualitative analysis of these users' tweets.