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

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Abstract

The minitrack focuses on two themes: a) research that critically interrogates how and when digital and social media reify or challenge existing power structures, and b) research that addresses applied ethical issues associated with doing research on digital and social media. Papers in this minitrack provide both conceptual and empirical approaches to these two themes, providing important interventions for thinking about information exchange in communities and societies, key ideas, paradigms, and methods. These works illustrate the critical or ethical dimensions of digital infrastructures, social media platforms, and data use.

1. Introduction to the Minitrack

Critical and ethical studies of digital media technologies are longstanding research topics in the fields of information, communication, and technology studies. As digital media systems become further entrenched as key infrastructure for politics, social practices, the economy, culture, and daily life in general, scholarly attention has grown year after year. Our call for papers for this year's HICSS minitrack highlighted existing and emerging problems related to the perpetuation of gender, race, ethno-nationalist, and faith-based hostility and bullying found in a range of online environments, political economies and labor conditions of digital content creation, practices of political community, unequal data access, and studies that mobilize non-traditional or experimental research methods developed for the specificities of digital and social media, among others.

2. Exploring Values Embedded Within Social Media Platforms: A Case Study of WeChat

The authors of this work, Sun and Suthers, investigate embedded values within WeChat, employing a three-dimensional theoretical framework of cultural affordances. Using semi-structured in-depth interviews, follow-up discussions, and observations, with data analysis following the grounded theory approach, the findings highlight the presence of embedded values manifested in WeChat's design features, including offline status omission, mutual likes notification on Friends' Circle, the absence of deletion notification, information symmetry, and the absence of read receipts. These design choices reflect the cultural affordances of WeChat that shape user experiences on the platform.

3. All Warnings Are Not Equal: A User-Centered Approach to Comparing General and Specific Contextual Warnings against Misinformation

Misinformation warnings have become one solution for fighting untruthful messages online. This study explores how users cognitively process two types of warnings: general and specific contextual warnings; both are adopted by TikTok and Instagram Reels. Through analysis of TikTok and Instagram users, the authors illustrate how misinformation warnings indeed aid participants in making judgments about a video's veracity. However, the authors also show how general contextual warnings may lose their effectiveness as a result of (1) the lack of ability to attract and maintain attention, and (2) the inability to provide relevant information to verify specific video content. This work contributes to the evolving scholarship on misinformation warning compliance by casting light on nuanced participant perceptions and behaviors that, if not carefully addressed, may hinder the efforts of misinformation mitigation on social media.

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4. Typification and Characteristics of Digital Safe Spaces: A Literature Review

Digital safe spaces are important for vulnerable groups seeking refuge and comfort in digital platforms to establish connections and companionship with peers. However, the digital safe spaces literature has lacked a clear articulation of what the main characteristics of digital safe spaces are, and how they can be differentiated from other digital spaces. In this paper, Ruiz-Bravo takes on this challenge and, through a literature review on the information systems (IS) and human-computer interaction (HCI) fields, proposes ten distinct characteristics and three different types of digital safe spaces. This paper contributes to the literature on digital platforms' social impact by offering a comprehensive understanding of digital safe spaces. In addition, it brings the concept of digital safe spaces to the IS field by providing a clear set of characteristics and a typification of the concept.

5. Country of Origin Bias in Online Reviews and Its Impact on Products Rating

Online reviews are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they are blessings if they help customers make more informed decisions and help companies increase their sales. On the other hand, they might mislead customers and damage products' success in the online environment if they suffer from systematic bias. Research on online review bias has predominantly focused on three possible sources of bias, social influence bias, negativity bias, and self-selection bias. Extending these previous studies, author Khoshghadamn examines country-induced bias in product reviews when there is a pervasive sentiment against a country in society. This paper argues that the pervasive feeling against a country increases consumers' sensitivity to products' country of origin, and also results in more expressions of negative feelings in the review content.

6. Social Media As A Social System Justifier In The Wake of #MeToo Campaign: Examining Nuances and Challenges In The Entertainment Industry.

The #MeToo movement has brought global attention to the issues of sexual harassment and gender-based violence, empowering survivors to speak out and challenge systemic injustices. Social media acts as a powerful system justifier, shaping societal beliefs and influencing the narratives surrounding online activism. In this work, authors Parekh, Thakkar, and Bhatt use a two-study design, a) to investigate the system justifications observed within the #MeToo movement; b) to explore consequences and revelations surrounding institutional systems, drawing insights from the #MeTooIndia movement. The paper's findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the movement's dynamics and impact on challenging systemic issues related to gender inequality and sexual harassment.

7. Search Me, O [Algorithm] and Know my Heart: Queer Faith in Dating Apps

In this work, the author King explores the intersection of gender, sexuality, and religion from the perspective of queer Christians using dating apps. Through a Foucauldian discourse analysis of fifteen interviews and nine participant self-studies, King's analysis shows the ways queer Christians use dating apps to find people to date in a very thin dating market and end up doing queer identity work in the process.

8. Objective Social Media Use and Well-Being: An Actual Behavior Study

A myriad of research has examined how time spent on social networking sites (SNSs) impacts users' well-being; however, the results are inconsistent. Recent criticism has been that measuring time spent on SNSs with self-reported assessments is prone to errors. In this work, authors Baum, Abramova, Gladkaya, and Krasnova address this limitation by assessing 383 participants' actual SNS use via the screen time feature on their smartphones. The authors find that objective overall SNS use on smartphone apps is not a good predictor of well-being. A deeper look at the nine examined apps suggests that only time spent on TikTok and Snapchat is negatively linked to well-being as manifested via increased negative affect, anxiety, and depression.