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

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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. The papers in this minitrack discuss a wide range of topics related to these themes and span a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches. This introduction reviews the overarching minitrack themes that connect these compelling works and then describes the contributions of each paper.

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.

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 calls 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, justice, and human liberation.

The papers represented in this minitrack each respond to the two major themes in different and compelling ways. The following sections provide more detailed explanations of each paper.

2. “Ideal Speech” on Wikipedia: Balancing Social Marginalization Risks and Social Inclusion Benefits for Individuals and Groups

Despite efforts to promote social inclusion, digitally cocreated information on Wikipedia is vulnerable to

marginalizing content. In this paper, Amber Young and Ariel Wigdor examine Tim Cook's Wikipedia biography prior to him coming out as a member of the LGBTQ community. This critical hermeneutic investigation reveals a paradox of social inclusion; the authors find that efforts by activist editors to promote social inclusion at the group level may bring about the unintended consequence of marginalizing an individual and deference should be given to individuals about what highly visible digital information to publish.

3. A Queer and Feminist Defense of Being Anonymous Online

In a similar vein, this year's minitrack nominee for Best Paper argues that from the earliest days of digital communities online abuse has been connected to anonymity, making a flat rejection of digital anonymity problematic by foreclosing forms of queer and feminist praxis. Using Craigslist as a case study, Jessa Lingell discusses the persistent stigma attached to online anonymity before addressing specific tactics of online anonymity associated with queer and feminist values of privacy and mutual aid. Drawing on accounts of Craigslist users who saw anonymity as a protective form of control over their personal information, Lingell outlines ways that anonymity is not solely an enabler for misogyny and homophobia, but can also be a subversive tool for self-expression and intimacy.

4. COVID-19 Community Archives and the Platformization of Digital Cultural Memory

In this study, Amelia Acker and Lucy Flamm introduce two case studies of COVID-19 community archives published with GitHub to understand how GitHub is used by COVID-19 interest groups for organizing community archives to protect their knowledge from the Chinese government's censorship efforts. Acker and Flamm describe how these digital community archives emerge and exist on the platform, how knowledge of them circulated on other US based social media sites, and demonstrate strategies and tactics volunteers used to keep these community archives alive, resist censorship, and guard the safety of these collections. The authors find that these COVID-19 community archives are at risk due to both platform accessibility and content, and argue that understanding how organizers use platform affordances is essential to theorizing how platforms

are impacting approaches to preserving cultural memory.

5. Holding Space for Voices that Do Not Speak: Design Reform of Rating Systems for Platforms in GREAT Economies

Further exploring the minitrack themes, Prasanna Karhade et. al. argue that research should acknowledge and address the fact that underlying economic structures that design and deploy knowledge-producing technical objects on online platforms are not egalitarian and may create new circles of exclusion. Exploring implications of this for a starkly unequal country like India, Karhade et. al. illustrate these ideas by integrating induction and abduction to study rating systems on a pan-India food discovery and delivery platform. Rating systems are borrowed from WEIRD contexts and their findings highlight the need for the decolonization of research approaches for GREAT domains and critical research of technical knowledge objects.

6. Design Triggers for Excessive Online Video Clip Watching

This work researches how design adaptations interfere with excessive online video clip watching. The authors base their study on the reinforcement cycle of disorder development and the Four-Component Model for Non-addictive Information Systems (4-NAIS). The paper presents a study with over 150 participants, arguing that bridging findings from psychology and neurosciences with information systems is necessary to design information systems that are capable of tackling the problem of technology-triggered disorders.

7. The Impact of Online Disinformation on Democracy in Taiwan

Although many scholars claim that online disinformation is having negative effects on democracy, there are few studies that examine the impact of online disinformation at the individual level. In this study Julian Neylan assesses the impact of online disinformation on political behavior in Taiwan presenting the results of a randomized survey of 400 Taiwanese respondents who were exposed to either a control article or a social media post containing disinformation. Through this study, Neylan demonstrates definitively that disinformation can have an effect on party identification.