

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

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Abstract

This minitrack focuses on two themes: a) research that critically interrogates how and when digital and social media reify existing power structures or realign power for underrepresented or marginalized groups, and b) research that addresses 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, though the media scandals of recent years might explain the urgency with which scholars are currently pursuing this research. 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 among digital and social media researchers, and studies that mobilize non-traditional or experimental research methods developed for the specificities of digital and social media, among others.

2. Match Made by Humans: A Critical Enquiry into Human-Machine Configurations in Data Labelling

The authors of this piece, Sravya Chandhiramowuli and Bidisha Chaudhuri, discuss

labor practices, data labeling, AI, and work practices. This article summarizes the key conclusions of the data work literature while also providing an ethnographic in-depth description of working in a data labeling "QA" team at an Indian price intelligence software startup. The lengthy explanation provides an insight into this new AI project, especially in terms of illustrating the physical effects of labor processes on workers' bodies and describing the kinds of abilities needed to categorize data using workflow tools and across cultural boundaries. The study acknowledges the expansion of knowledge work into new fields based on computational demands and appropriately compares it to recent studies on similar substandard and low-paying digital piecework/gig work. This understanding is provided in the study based on empirical ethnographic research using first- and third-person perspectives, participant-observation (or, more appropriately, direct engagement), and the utilization of 20 qualitative interviews.

3. "We Care About the Internet, We Care About Everything" Understanding Social Media Content Moderators' Mental Models and Support Needs

Offering unique, richly detailed insights, this paper presents the results of a grounded-theory based interview study with the in-house content moderation team at a mid-size social platform. Authors Sarah T. Roberts, Stacy Wood, and Yvonne Eadon explore how these commercial content moderators actively contributed to the design and implementation of policy at the company during an explosive period of user growth, while also navigating the demands of their roles during socio-political unrest. They simultaneously highlight how, even with managerial support and mental health services provided, the work of content moderation remains an extremely taxing and ill-compensated form of labor.

4. Ethics, Power and Agency in Transnational Qualitative Methods: Remote Collaboration in a Refugee Camp

In this paper, a research collaborative of ten authors set out to answer two questions: "How can we work more ethically, reduce power dynamics, and work remotely to channel funds directly to communities? How can we maximize community engagement and be more aware of our impact on communities?" Composed of both academic and community researchers, the authors provide a unique perspective on the coordination of participatory research in a refugee camp during the beginnings of the pandemic. Offering a rich account of building a team and collecting data across multiple sites, this methodological paper contributes to both minitrack themes by unpacking issues of agency, power and ethics in participatory research design.