Introduction to the Social and Ethical Challenges Accompanying Digital and Social Media Minitrack

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This minitrack addresses the increasing social and ethical concerns about the potential for harm from the affordances of social media technologies. Social and digital media, as the set of technologies and services that enable the production and consumption of information by individuals, is shifting the locus of gatekeeping and power in society and enabling new choices for individuals and groups to share information and knowledge.

Much of the opportunities provided by the set of these media are viewed as positive, but there are social and ethical implications. The social implications are just being felt and imagined. However, entrepreneurs, system designers, and researchers already face ethical challenges in developing social media services and in conducting research on social media data. The call for papers for this mini-track anticipated that we might get conceptual papers that addressed long-term social implications but also empirical papers that focused on two significant themes.

One focus might be ethical concerns for those who either design social media platforms or conduct research on social media. A second focus could be on the issues associated with the impact of social media use by individuals and groups as they challenge the roles of societal institutions such as law, education, and government agencies.

Indeed, we received more good papers than we could include in this minitrack. We accepted two that reflected the challenges we as designers and researchers face, and we accepted one paper that asks us to confront our comfort with the relationship between technology and our human identity.

The first paper, by Markus Tschersich and Michael Niekamp, titled “Pros and Cons of Privacy by Default: Investigating the Impact on Users and Providers of Social Network Sites,” presents a new argument about the risks and effects to users and providers of such sites of a Privacy by Default regulation. The authors provide empirical evidence that challenges the widely accepted assumption that restrictive default privacy settings cause overly negative consequences for providers.

The second paper is by Paul Watters, Maya Watters, and Jackie Ziegler. In their paper, “Maximizing Eyeballs but Facilitating Cybercrime?” the authors explore the ethical challenges of advertisers and advertising networks. Advertisers use advertising networks to facilitate placing ads on sites to achieve the “most relevant eyeballs.” In so doing, they may place ads on high risk sites that can abet criminal activities, enable harm to users, and risk harm to their brands.

“Almost,” “More Than,” or “Truly” Human, the third paper, is by Elizabeth Chapin. In this paper, the author uses the lenses of digital and social anthropologies to explore the interaction of older and newer metaphors in contemporary sci-fi TV shows. The human-computer interactions in these shows reveal Western social concerns with human security and challenge the nature of what it means to be human. This paper asks us to reflect on the long-term foundational issues of how social and digital media may be changing our sense of social identity.