Minitrack on
Critical and Ethical Studies of
Digital and Social Media

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Abstract

This minitrack addresses the cultural and political impact of digital and social media (DSM) technologies. DSM radically alter how we conceptualize the production, circulation, and consumption of information, and transform how we work, live, and play together in communities. However, users of DSM are increasingly expressing unease, and sometimes outrage, at the social and political terms they find they must accept in embracing DSM as the primary mechanisms for sharing their work and participating with others.

Session 1 examines the opportunities and tensions that arise as DSM increasingly mediate public, creative, and social endeavors. Session 2 addresses the ethical challenges of conducting research on DSM. Session 2 closes with a discussion with all the authors and the audience to bridge the two sessions.

1. Session 1

1.1. Political Economy of Work on Digital Platforms

This paper uses a case study of Etsy to illustrate the political economy associated with such e-commerce platforms. While Etsy has expanded opportunities for meaningful, fulfilling work for some who previously would not have had access to entrepreneurship, the author notes two key arenas for future political struggle: the visual environment of a platform and the governing procedures by which decisions about a platform’s code are made. The paper recommends that DSM users pursue a "do-it-together" solidarity.

1.2. A Fair Exchange: Exploring How Online Privacy is Valued

This paper reports on a study of perceptions of the “fairness” of giving up one’s privacy in exchange for the use of nominally online free services. Study participants’ feelings were nuanced, contextual, and somewhat fluid. Subjects frequently expressed distrust in the providers of popular information services and reservations about current practices after learning about data mining and user profiling.

1.3. Software Update Unrest: Recent Happenings around Tinder and Tesla

The third paper in Session 1 discusses the tensions that arise as DSM become central in the power dynamics of software developers (producers) and users (consumers) of services. By examining unrest that followed major software updates of Tinder and the Tesla operating system, the authors highlight how deliberations about software updates can function as remotely enacted, highly social, and heavily mediated debates over how technology is made.

2. Session 2

2.1. We Aren’t All Going To Be on the Same Page about Ethics

This paper reports on interviews with digital and social media researchers that illustrate the challenges they experienced when collecting, managing, and analyzing online data. Analysis of the interview data reveals that, despite over a decade of research on internet research ethics, researchers still struggle to address ethical challenges in their work. Though some feel they have the guidance they need from existing resources, colleagues, or institutional structures, many still worry about the ethical impacts of their work.

2.2. Critical Reflection on Social Media Research Using an Autoethnographic Approach

The final paper examines the use of social media data in our research autoethnographically in order to reveal the epistemologies that animate our quests for knowledge. The author analyzes the interplay among her own publicly-available social media content, her private social data, and her timeline of lived experience in diagnosis and treatment of Stage IV cancer. She argues that the knowledge researchers gain solely from social media data is partial (“almost” knowing) and should be enhanced by qualitative research that includes social media users themselves.

2.3. Discussion: On The Critical and Ethical Study Of Digital And Social Media

1530-1605/16 $31.00 © 2016 IEEE
DOI 10.1109/HICSS.2016.237