
Fail Whaling: Designing from Deviance and Failures in Social Computing

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Abstract

Social computing technologies are pervasive in our work, relationships, and culture. Despite their promise for transforming the structure of communication and human interaction, the complex social dimensions of these technological systems often reproduce offline social ills or create entirely novel forms of conflict and deviance. This panel brings together scholars who study deviance and failure in diverse social computing systems to examine four design-related themes that contribute to and support these problematic uses: *theft, anonymity, deviance, and polarization*.

Keywords

Deviant behavior, norms, online communities, community standards, socio-technical systems

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces

Introduction

Understanding how online communities lead to deviant behavior has been a topic of interest to the human-computer interaction community for almost 20 years [1,2]. Deviant behavior encompasses anti-social interactions, content theft, system misuse, and other unintended consequences. The gravity of deviance in

social computing systems has compounded in the past decade as blogs, social networking sites, peer produced content, and immersive virtual environments have dramatically reshaped not only the media landscape but also transformed how vital social institutions like schools, newspapers, political parties, and corporations operate. This panel brings together a group of scholars whose work examines deviance and failure across a variety of contexts. The panel will discuss four design decisions and the implications they have had for the way many major social computing systems operate.

Themes and Questions

This panel will provide a forum for exploring the features of technologies that contribute to deviance and failure in social computing systems like Twitter, Wikipedia, blogs, Scratch, open-source development, and massively multiplayer online games. This panel attempts to address how do to reconcile traditional mechanisms for regulating social behavior through laws, norms, markets, and code within new media characterized by anonymity, ephemerality, liminality, decentralization, and mass participation.

Four specific themes will be discussed: *theft*, *anonymity*, *deviance*, and *polarization*. Each of these four themes is potentially disruptive to the success of online communities. Prior research suggests that each theme might lead to a breakdown of norms and conventions online and thus, deviance and failure. We will present these themes in a contrarian light to show how particular design decisions enable such deviant behavior. However, sometimes disruptive features can also enable surprising successes online. We will explore how each theme should lead to failure, but sometimes

does not, while other design decisions should predict success but instead result in failure.

Theft: Let people steal?

Letting people take content developed by others is illegal in many contexts like music or movies but tolerated or even encouraged in contexts like open source software or online creative collaboration. Many popular online communities share their content under free licenses. While people appropriate freely-shared content without attribution, this “theft” can also serve an important role in communities by socializing people into more ethical practice, performing norms, and serving as a focus for community activity. Remixing practices on Scratch or editing behavior on wikis are examples where the system lets people steal. Panelists Andres Monroy-Hernandez and Benjamin Mako Hill will discuss how these communities have attempted to manage theft as well as the unexpected implications of communities designed to support content remixing.

Anonymity: Eschew accountability?

Social identity and reciprocal accountability govern many offline social interactions. However, users of information and communication technologies often lack strong identity or reputation signifiers, allowing for more anonymized behavior. This anonymity can lead to disinhibition and de-individuation which can inflame passions and aggravate interactions. At the same time, anonymity also provides an opportunity to perform alternative identities or share information that might endanger users. Stable online identities can provide accountability, but they also facilitate exclusion and status closure by community elites. Panelists Michael Bernstein and Aaron Shaw will discuss how commenting practices on message boards like 4chan and moderating behavior on blogs

like DailyKos illustrate how social computing platforms can benefit and suffer from both approaches.

Deviance: Ignore all rules?

Online communities accumulate norms and rules governing reflecting the wishes and best practices of its owners and members. However, as the complexity of these rules increase, contradictions and tensions emerge and it becomes difficult to equitably adjudicate disputes and socialize newcomers into the community. Some social computing systems like massively multiplayer online games or Wikipedia are extremely open-ended and permit users substantial leeway to enact deviant behavior. The ability for users to “ignore all rules” is both a relief valve on the pressure from narrowly-proscribed behavior as well as an opportunity to enact innovative new patterns of behavior. Panelists Brian Keegan and R. Stuart Geiger will discuss how communities balance agency, control, and innovation as well as some dynamics by which these co-evolve.

Polarization: Silence alternative views?

Ideological pluralism, mass participation, and deliberation in a public sphere are essential to liberal democracy. However, processes of homophily are powerful positive feedback loops which result in like-minded people preferentially interacting with similar people. This can lead to polarization as the scope of ideas people are exposed to become more narrow and extreme. Platforms like Twitter enable deliberation, but tweeters employ practices to simultaneously share and delimit the people and ideas to which they are exposed. Panelists Sarita Yardi and Michael Conover will discuss how the success of social computing systems may depend on the ability for users to silence alternative

views to re-create a “public sphere” they would prefer to participate in despite forgone opportunities for better dialogue and the risk of exploitation by grifters and other trolls.

Format

This session emphasizes discussion and audience interaction in a highly parallel format employing three distinct sections. In the first ten minute section, the moderator will lay out the contours of all four themes as well as introducing the co-authors and summarizing their cases. In the second section, the audience will break out into smaller, “sub-discussion” sessions around each of the four themes for fifty minutes in different parts of the room. Two panelists will lead each of these sub-discussions. These sub-discussions will seek to solicit cases and examples of how other communities manage and regulate the particular design theme, evaluate gaps in current technology and theory, and discuss methodological or ethical implications of collecting and analyzing this data.

After these sub-discussion sessions, the panel will reconvene for the third and final thirty minute section to recap and integrate the ideas raised in each of the thematic sub-discussion sections. Areas for synthesizing across these themes include the ethical contours of how to use large-scale behavioral trace data about deviant behavior, re-evaluating extant social and technical theories about regulating deviant behavior, and implications for developing future systems and theory.

Throughout the panel, we will use a live backchannel visualizer to highlight keywords participants are sharing on Twitter or IRC in each of the sub-discussions. This

backchannel tool will provide a “commons” to surface themes and prompt discussions across sub-discussions. Experience suggests that the anonymity afforded by this high profile visualization will also elicit deviant behavior from the otherwise upstanding members of the CHI community. This live backchannel visualization demo will thus provide a venue to test social and technological interventions against deviance.

Panelists

Each panelist is an accomplished scholar with research published and cited in top journals and conferences examining diverse types of failure and deviance in social computing systems. Confirmed participants include Michael Bernstein who examines anonymity in the massive /b/ board on 4chan, Michael Conover who analyzes sockpuppetry and astroturfing on Twitter, R. Stuart Geiger who studies vandalism on Wikipedia, Andrés Monroy-Hernández who studies conflict in

creative collaboration in the Scratch online community, Benjamin Mako Hill who studies failed collaborations in the F/LOSS development community, Brian Keegan who studies cheaters in massively multiplayer online games, Aaron Shaw who examines gatekeeping practices on the DailyKos blog, Sarita Yardi who examines political polarization on Twitter, and finally Professor Amy Bruckman who will serve as a moderator and has lead previous panels on managing deviance in online communities at CHI 1994 and CHI 2006.

Citations

- [1] Bruckman, A., Curtis, P., Figallo, C., and Laurel, B. Approaches to Managing Deviant Behavior in Virtual Communities. In *Proc. CHI 1994*, ACM (1994).
- [2] Bruckman, A., Danis, C., Lampe, C., Sternberg, J., and Waldron, C. Managing Deviant Behavior in Online Communities. In *Proc. CHI 2006*, ACM (2006), 21-24.