Design and the Politics of Collaboration: A Grassroots Perspective

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Abstract

In this workshop, we will advance our knowledge of how CSCW technologies can be better aligned with *grassroots politics of collaboration*. What politics are inherent in CSCW tools and techniques? How can we examine whether sociotechnical systems support collaboration in ways that lead to equitable solutions for all and not just a select few? What can we learn about collaborative systems and practices from other communities of people with lived experiences of politics of collaboration? Our workshop will incorporate communal practices of grassroots movement building to collectively explore what it means to examine designs of CSCW artifacts and practices for the politics they embody and promote. The workshop simultaneously is about grassroots approaches, and also leverages lessons we have learned from grassroots movements in our workshop structure.

Author Keywords

Grassroots social movements; collaboration; cooperation value-sensitive design; social justice

Introduction

A central focus of Computer-supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) scholarship has been on political values driving processes of collaboration [22, 21, 26, 6, 30, 1, 11]. Politics of collaboration are interpreted and practiced differently in

different communities. For example, a grassroots perspective highlights the role of collaboration and collective action toward questioning power and systemic oppression [29]. Although grassroots groups (in the United States and beyond) use information communication technologies (ICTs), recent CSCW research suggest that these technologies are not always rooted in the grassroots analysis of systemic issues [4, 7, 11]. As a result, collaborative systems and practices around common ICTs (e.g. Slack) often end up favoring few people with certain normative privileges [11]—even when those people themselves sincerely believe that should not be the case. Recent work in CSCW and broader Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) point out similar disparities—between politics of technology and of its 'users'—in communities beyond social movements [15, 4, 7, 19]. We suggest that learning from communities of people with lived experiences of politics of collaboration can lead to more equitable solutions in CSCW. In this workshop, we will incorporate *grassroots practices* to explore what it means to examine sociotechnical systems for the politics they embody and promote.

Grassroots social movements question systemic oppression (based on race, class, caste, gender, and other normative characteristics) [29] by organizing from the margins of a society. A grassroots approach in the United States draw from many political theories, ideologies, and practices—notably, participatory democracy [29], black radical traditions [8, 34], and intersectionality [13]. At the crux of this approach is the belief that the people who are most oppressed by normative power structures have the most authentic analyses of power and oppression [8, 29, 34]. Therefore, our social movements should be led by and centered around the situated knowledges of people with lived experiences of systemic injustices. [28]. Toward this, movement communities draw sustenance from collabo-

ration among people in the front lines of political struggle [34]. Grassroots politics of collaboration, therefore, can be conceptualized as *a continuous practice of questioning normative power structures by centering lived experiences of systemic oppressions, and simultaneously working toward collective healing, resilience, and resistance against centuries of systemic racism, class and gender-based oppressions.*

ICTs play a critical role in the collaborative fabric of grassroots movements [29, 18, 11]. They range from corporation-enabled centralized technologies like Facebook to Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) platforms like riseup.net [11]—technologies that are often our objects of analyses in the CSCW community. Unlike the movements, these ICTs are often not rooted in a grassroots politics of collaboration. Findings from recent work (e.g.,[11]) suggest that while these technologies enable new modes of collective action among members of a movement, they also create new power relationships challenging grassroots politics. These barriers are often related to systemic exclusion perpetuated by technology itself: *those who have access to technology and identify as technologically adept end up having more power in a movement over those who have less or limited access.* Often the people with more access are also the people who have more racial, gendered, and class privilege in these communities—excluding people who are at the frontlines of systemic oppression who would otherwise be at the center of a social movement. With ICTs becoming integral in grassroots communities, this carries the risk of hurting the grassroots politics of collaboration.

One does not have to be embedded in grassroots groups to experience grassroots politics of collaboration. Issues of power and privilege around science and technology are relevant in other communities of practice beyond grassroots

groups [22, 20, 23, 6, 27, 12, 33, 15]. Prior work in our field also show that often these issues are reflective of the politics of the makers and marketers of these systems [5, 4, 7, 3, 16]. We can better align with grassroots values by critically looking at technologies that are expected to work for *the grassroots politics of collaboration.* These include both technologies that we make within the CSCW community and popular centralized solutions (e.g., Slack, Facebook) that commonly pervade these spaces. The work of critical questioning entails asking complex questions such as: who are the ideal users for these systems? Whose values do these systems promote in practice? Who gets excluded by the choice of these technologies?

Workshop Goals, Themes, and Activities

Our goal for this workshop is to re-visit collaboration not merely as a design feature but as a political value that is essential in issues of liberation and justice—and consider the implications thereof. Moreover, we believe that grassroots practices can inform the ways in which we examine the design of CSCW systems for their politics in more general contexts. Toward this, we will explore*: what would mean for CSCW systems to be better rooted in grassroots politics?* The CSCW community along with Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Science and Technology Studies (STS) have long been invested in understanding values inherent in technology [25, 35, 36, 10, 4]. Scholars across the fields widely recognize that CSCW artifacts do in fact have politics [36]. The politics are not only shaped by artifacts, but by power relations between researchers and communities [32, 14], as well as wider public understandings of technology design [31, 17]. In this workshop, we will build upon prior work, and further seek to generate dialogue and strategies for *how* to examine the grassroots politics of collaboration in our artifacts.

Our activities will be inspired by grassroots praxis [8, 29, 18]—a cycle of action and reflection [9]. Grassroots goals are often too complex (such as, climate justice [24]) to be reduced to a success/failure analysis of particular grassroots actions in achieving that goal. Yet, it is important to stay grounded in the fundamental analysis of power and oppression so that the actions (such as, demanding renewable energy in a community impacted by oil and gas leases [24]) are still aligned with the core politics. Toward this, many groups believe that a collective critical reflection of people's experiences with past and ongoing practices [24] can inform future grassroots strategies.

Movement groups periodically reflect on their strategies and commit to next steps of actions. For example, in a regional grassroots movement called the Southern Movement Assembly (SMA), this happens annually among the movement leadership. The first author is a researcher/activist working with SMA—the design of this workshop is inspired by events of this movement [24]. In what follows, we draw from our experiences with grassroots praxis, and further describe a plan for the workshop.

Our single-day workshop will have four sessions. We will first conduct a community-building exercise with participants. Next, we will focus on sharing experiences and dilemmas practicing the grassroots politics of collaboration in our own work. Toward this, we will have a call for participation—this session will include short talks from workshop facilitators as well as short presentations on accepted papers. In the next session, we will do a political analysis of CSCW technologies, and decide on how to better align ourselves with grassroots values. The final session will be focused on synthesizing from the workshop. We share more details on each session below.

Session I: Community-Building Exercise
We will begin with a community-building exercise inspired by grassroots traditions. This will also serve as our mutual introductions. This exercise will be focused on situating participants as individuals beyond the academy—what is a community that we belong to in life? What communities do participants feel accountable to, and how does that inform their CSCW work? As recent work in HCI also show us that sometimes we ourselves are affected by technologies we design—we are not always designing for an "other" [2]. Therefore, in this phase, participants will be also encouraged to share their lived experiences [4] with technological artifacts and practices they have designed and/or have been personally affected by. Situating ourselves in our personal/political histories, workshop participants will collectively develop some community agreements that will form the grounds for the remaining conversation. Toward this, we will discuss: what would make us feel safe sharing vulnerabilities, challenging understandings, and intimate histories? Participants can describe concerns, fears, and hopes to generate agreements on how the workshop can be made safer.

Session II: Presentation of Examples
Following the grounding exercise, three to five individuals will be invited to give short (no more than ten minutes) presentations about their work (we share more details on the CfP in logistics section), drawn from their workshop papers. Through this, we aim to gather some real-world examples of grassroots politics of collaboration and understand the role CSCW technologies play in practicing such politics.

Session III: Discussion on Current and Future Strategies
Next, we will break into small groups each with a facilitator (more details on this role in the next section) charged with summarizing and reporting back to the larger group.

When the large group reconvenes, we will seek a synthesis of the different perspectives. The group discussion will address key topics of value-sensitive design practices [10] and design justice [4] with a grassroots lens. Each group will talk about three broad categories: *'users', values,* and *community accountability.* In what follows, we discuss why these categories will be critical in our collective reflections on CSCW technology. We also provide potential questions that each small group will address toward this collective reflection:

- **'Users':** Most of the CSCW technologies we study and design—ranging from popular centralized tools to more decentralized, value-sensitive technical solutions—are made with values of a select few people with certain racial, gendered, and socioeconomic privileges [7, 4, 19, 15]. With a critical lens on design processes we ask: *Who are the "imagined ideal users [3]" of CSCW technologies (both artifacts and practices) we use/design? Who are the people using these tools in reality, and what values do they embody? What is the nature of involvement of these actual users in the design process? How do these choices (of who we design for/with) support/hinder grassroots politics of collaboration?*

- **Values:** The political tensions that arise in communities of practice questioning power lead us to realize that the values of the makers and marketers of technology are often at odds with the values of these communities. Yet, companies often market technology as neutral instruments that neither embody nor stand against any particular set of political values. The sociotechnical realities of many communities show that technology embodies political power—they are not value-free in practice. CSCW research widely

recognizes that they were not value-free in their making as well [10, 4]. Toward unpacking the value question of technology, we ask: *what are some sociopolitical values CSCW technologies (that we use/design) embody, and what values do they stand against? What are our methods of understanding these values we design for/with? How do these choices (of designing for/with/against certain values) support/hinder the grassroots politics of collaboration? How do grassroots movement values challenge us to reimagine our methods, infrastructures, and institutions for designing, building, and maintaining CSCW technologies?*

• **Community accountability:** A key element of grassroots movement culture is community accountability—holding each other accountable for our actions. CSCW and its culture of technology-building can benefit from concrete strategies of community accountability—one that encourages the people we design for/with to hold us accountable for the artifacts and practices we create. The discussions in this session will be in light of the community building exercise we do in the beginning. Toward this, we shall discuss: *beyond CSCW, what is a community that is holding the technologies we create accountable to the values they promote? Are there concrete strategies for staying accountable to these communities for how values may reproduce from the CSCW technologies we use/design?*

Session IV: Synthesis and Commitment to Action
In the final session, the larger group will re-convene to reflect on the entire day. Following grassroots tradition, our last step is to ask each attendee for a *commitment to action*. We will plan future steps for advancing these commitments in the CSCW field, which may include envisioning possible future events, working toward internal policy changes (e.g. changes to the ACM ethics code), submitting a reflection on the workshop in venues such as ACM *Interactions*, and more personal commitments to carry these values through our future work.

Outcomes
We expect to have the following key outcomes from this workshop.

Better supporting grassroots values
Our primary goal for the workshop is to better align CSCW practices with grassroots values. We aim to do this with both the overall design of the workshop, and with collective reflections on what it would mean to design artifacts and practices that are committed to the grassroots politics of collaboration. A key outcome of this workshop will be strategies to better support grassroots social movements and other communities of practice with CSCW artifacts and practices.

Uncovering key political tensions in community-centered design practices
We hope to bring together CSCW scholars and researchers working in different community-centered design projects. Accepted short papers will contribute to a shared knowledge of the key political tensions in community-centered design practices.

Strategies for politically committed CSCW systems and practices
A key outcome of this workshop would be to collectively develop strategies for practicing *the grassroots politics of collaboration*. We will reflect on our current design and research methods, and further share strategies for how we are going to be exercising our commitments to a politics of collaboration that is grounded in the grassroots analysis of power and systemic oppression.

A framework for political evaluation of sociotechnical systems and practices

Finally, we will also explore what it means to hold technology accountable for the politics it promotes. The CSCW community widely recognizes that artifacts do in fact have politics [35, 36], but our evaluations of artifacts have been centered around usability. With this workshop, we aim to push the evaluation paradigm toward a world where technology can be evaluated and held accountable for its politics—not just by technologists but by all people.

Logistics

Recruiting and selecting participants

We look for CSCW scholars, researchers, and practitioners designing sociotechnical systems for/with different communities of practice—particularly those who focus on values of social justice, intersectionality, participatory and direct democracy, collaboration, and collective action. We will have a website describing the goals, themes, and activities of the workshop. We will announce our call for participation on the website and will promote it via popular communications platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook mailing lists, etc.). The call for participation will ask candidates to submit a short paper on their background as a researcher, work(s) of relevance, and their ways of approaching *the grassroots politics of collaboration* through CSCW technologies they use/study/design. The workshop will have 10-20 participants.

Facilitators

The authors of this proposal will facilitate the workshop. Our call for participation will also welcome volunteers (with experience) interested in facilitating with us. The authors will have a meeting with the selected volunteer facilitators prior to the workshop to work through the facilitation plan.

Equipment and supplies needed

For our first, second, and fourth session (synthesis and commitment to action) we will use large sticky notes and easel pads, post-its, and sharpies. Facilitators will need to have notepads and pens for note-taking throughout the small group strategy sessions.

Organizers

Sucheta Ghoshal

Sucheta Ghoshal is a PhD Candidate in Human-Centered Computing at Georgia Tech. Sucheta has been embedded in grassroots social movements in the United States—both as a researcher and as an activist—for the last three years. Her work focuses on studying how grassroots social movements in the United States use technology, and making tools for and with them. She was formerly employed as a Software Engineer at the Wikimedia Foundation (the organization that operates Wikipedia and its sister sites)—built several tools for Wikipedia and worked on building a community of Wikipedians in India.

Andrea Grimes Parker

Andrea Grimes Parker is an Assistant Professor in the Khoury College of Computer Sciences and the Bouvé College of Health Sciences at Northeastern University. She is also a Faculty Scholar in the Institute for Health Equity & Social Justice Research at Northeastern University. Parker's research spans the domains of HCI, CSCW and public health, as she examines how social computing systems can reduce barriers to wellness for vulnerable, marginalized populations. Her research examines how interactive systems can empower communities to enact positive change in microsocial and macrosocial contexts. Through this work, she collaborates with many community-based organizations to engage members in the design and evaluation of technologies that seek to reduce disparities in health. Parker

received a PhD in Human-Centered Computing from the Georgia Institute of Computing.

Christopher Le Dantec
Christopher Le Dantec is an Associate Professor in the Digital Media Program in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication at the Georgia Institute of Technology. His research is focused on the area of digital civics where he works with a range of community-based partners to explore new forms of civic participation through community-centered design inquiry at the intersection of participatory design, digital democracy, and smart cities. He received his Ph.D. in Human-Centered Computing from the Georgia Institute of Technology in 2011. He is the author of Designing Publics (2016, MIT Press).

Lilly Irani
Lilly Irani is an Associate Professor of Communication & Science Studies at University of California, San Diego. She also serves as faculty in the Design Lab and the Institute for Practical Ethics and sits on the Academic Advisory Board of AI Now (NYU). She is author of Chasing Innovation: Making Entrepreneurial Citizens in Modern India (Princeton University Press, 2019). Her research examines the cultural politics of high-tech work and the counter-practices they generate, as both an ethnographer, a designer, and a former technology worker. She is a co-founder and maintainer of digital labor activism tool Turkopticon. Her work has appeared at ACM SIGCHI, New Media & Society, Science, Technology & Human Values, South Atlantic Quarterly, and other venues. She has a Ph.D. in Informatics from University of California, Irvine.

Carl DiSalvo
Carl DiSalvo is an Associate Professor in the School of Interactive Computing at the Georgia Institute of Technology. His research draws together theories and methods from the arts, social sciences, and the humanities to explore the political qualities of contemporary design. DiSalvo received his PhD in Design from Carnegie Mellon University. He is the author of Adversarial Design (2012, MIT Press).

Amy Bruckman
Amy Bruckman is Professor and Senior Associate Chair in the School of Interactive Computing at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Her research focuses on social computing, with interests in online collaboration, social movements, and online moderation. Bruckman received her Ph.D. from the MIT Media Lab in 1997. She is a Fellow of The ACM and a member of the SIGCHI Academy.

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