
Design and the Politics of Collaboration: A Grassroots Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This workshop aims to 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

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from other communities of people with lived experiences of politics of collaboration? Our workshop will incorporate communal practices of grassroots movement building to 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 the workshop structure.

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 [1, 6, 9, 18, 19, 22, 25]. Politics of collaboration are practiced differently in different communities. For example, a grassroots perspective highlights the role of collaboration and collective action toward questioning power and systemic oppression [24]. 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 [9].

Collaborative systems and practices around common ICTs (e.g. Slack) often end up favoring few people with certain normative privileges (based on race, class, gender etc.) [9]—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 broader society [4, 7, 12, 16]. We suggest that learning from communities with lived experiences of politics of collaboration can lead to more equitable solutions in CSCW. Our workshop 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) [24] by organizing from the margins of a society. Toward this, movement communities draw sustenance from collaboration among people in the front lines of political struggle [29]. Grassroots politics of collaboration can be conceptualized as *a continuous practice of questioning normative power structures by centering lived experiences of systemic injustices, 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 [9, 15, 24]. They range from corporation-enabled centralized technologies like Facebook to Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) platforms like riseup.net [9]—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., [9]) 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*. Moreover, issues of power and privilege around science and technology are relevant in other communities of practice beyond grassroots groups [6, 10, 12, 17, 19, 20, 23, 28]. Prior work in our field also show that often these issues are reflective of the politics of the makers and marketers of these systems [3–5, 7, 13].

In this workshop, we will bring together perspectives from a range of collaborative practices questioning power. Toward this, we have a call for short papers, asking CSCW scholars to contribute their experiences with the grassroots politics of collaboration through CSCW technologies they have either designed and/or have been affected by.

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 it 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 [4, 8, 21, 30, 31]. Scholars across the fields widely recognize that CSCW artifacts do in fact have politics [31]. The politics are not only shaped by artifacts, but by power relations between researchers and communities [11, 27], as well as wider public understandings of technology design [14, 26]. In this workshop, we build upon prior work, and further seek to generate dialogue for *how* to examine the grassroots politics of collaboration in our artifacts.

Our single-day workshop will have four sessions. We share more details on each session below.

Session I: Community-Building Exercise

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. In this session we will also collectively develop some community agreements with questions such as: what would make

Logistics and Organizers: We share the details on logistics, organizers, and call for participation in our workshop website: <http://cscw2019grassrootspolitics.wordpress.com>

The webpages on logistics and organizers are archived at the following links: <https://perma.cc/9J8Y-3FQQ> and <https://perma.cc/KF5M-FNMX>.

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, drawn from their workshop papers.

Session III: Discussion on Current and Future Strategies

Next, we will break into small groups each with a facilitator 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 [8] and design justice [4] with a grassroots lens. Each group will talk about three broad categories: *'users'*, *values*, and *community accountability*.

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. 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. 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. 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 are grounded in the grassroots analysis of power and systemic oppression.

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