

Position Paper: Workshop on SIGCHI and Public Policy

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The most basic question which we need to consider is what the role of an international professional society ought to be regarding public policy which is, by definition, nationally-defined. Should we focus on issues affecting primarily one country? An example might be accessibility and voting in the American electoral process. This is an area where we believe we have professional expertise that is relevant to providing better solutions, but should we be focused on a relatively “local” problem? Alternatively, should we focus on truly global issues (such as e-governance more broadly defined) where we may have a less focused expertise and which will almost certainly still require local solutions? We must strike a balance in this in my opinion. We need to look at international issues – but bear in mind that there are rarely single solutions that are equally applicable in all countries. Therefore, if the focus becomes e-governance as an example, we need to find ways to assist in the process more broadly than simply looking at one country’s issues.

This does, however, require a broader and more international dialogue, one which may be difficult to achieve if the participants are primarily from any one country. I would argue that we need to include our international colleagues in this discussion so that the outcomes will have truly international relevance. This requires sensitivity because our membership comes from diverse circumstances.

However, some stances may be difficult to achieve for a truly international group such as SIGCHI. For instance, many of us are concerned at the development and deployment of technical solutions to monitor, regulate, and ultimately, to control access to the communication infrastructure including the Internet. To many of us, these raise troubling ethical issues. For example, we read in the media that major American companies (such as Yahoo! and Microsoft) are cooperating with the totalitarian government in China to provide them with tools and information to allow them to crack down on democracy groups, and there are many similar concerns about the American government’s use of monitoring of email and other communications to identify patterns of activity that are presumed to be characteristic of terrorist groups. Both of these have human-computer interaction aspects to them. As a profession, we know about how to design data structures and data mining tools to help users to recognize patterns. Should SIGCHI take a stand on such systems, however? Should we encourage SIGCHI members to participate in the design of these systems in order to “make them the best they can be” to try to help governments to avoid false positives? Or should we actively oppose these systems and urge governments to abandon these efforts? Depending on the approach we take, we may make it difficult or even impossible for some of our international colleagues to participate in this professional society. For instance, the growing numbers of HCI professionals

within China may find themselves marginalized, sanctioned or even in extreme cases, put in physical danger if SIGCHI takes such a stance. As attractive as it might be to try to dissuade governments or companies from participating in this type of activity, therefore, we must be very careful as we balance our desire to have an impact with the actual impact that any stance may have on our members internationally.

This in turn raises the interesting philosophical and ethical questions of how we should approach issues where there are very real cross-cultural differences in what people see as appropriate or even ethical. Do we really have the mandate to impose American (or Western European) values? Is this simply another form of cultural imperialism? Yet how can we dismiss our own moral and ethical sense? It would seem that this requires international dialogue.

Clearly, these are all discussions which I feel we need to have before we actually go about formulating any "public policy" statements.