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Spatial tensions in CSCW: The political and ethical challenges of scale

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Abstract. This workshop advances a CSCW-perspective on how scale and place relate and how we might better understand what role scale plays in the design of tools and collaborative processes. This full-day workshop is designed for up to 20 participants, to be selected based on short position papers that relate to one or more of the workshop themes: (1) the political and ethical challenges of scale, (2) modes of organizing, infrastructuring, and governing, (3) (inter)organizational aspects, and (4) place and care. The workshop builds upon the COST Action *From Sharing to Caring: Examining Socio-Technical Aspects of the Collaborative Economy* that played a key role in bringing researchers together to address issues of care and scale, as well as recent workshops and interests groups at CSCW and HCI venues that have focused on issues of scale, cooperation, and place-making. Our aim with this workshop is to provide a space for the continued unfolding of the discussions sparked through these prior activities, this time with a particular focus on the political and ethical challenges of scale.

Introduction

This workshop advances a CSCW-perspective on how scale and place relate, place being a knowable, located and localized manifestation of space and scale being one possible measure of space, but one that brings the baggage of a birds-eye view to encounters. We are concerned to understand what role discourses and logics of scale play in the design of tools and collaborative processes, how they make and unmake place and how infrastructures that scale may be managed so that localized action and decision-making is still possible. In this, we are inspired by the nonscalability theory that Tsing (2012) has called for and begun to articulate.

When it comes to the study of the political and ethical challenges of scale in CSCW, recent scholarship highlights the timeliness of these issues: For example, in a piece in the *Interactions* magazine, Larsen-Ledet and colleagues (Larsen-Ledet et al., 2022) question *scale* as a metaphor and scaling as a process in addressing the sociotechnical. The authors argue that, as researchers and practitioners, we need to reshape our vocabulary, if we are to be serious about prioritizing social and ecological values like sustainability and equity. Elsewhere, we have written about *proliferation* as one alternative metaphor that can help us to reorient and enrich discussions on impact, ambitions, modes of organising, and the use of collaborative technologies (Lampinen et al., 2022). Proliferation, as we define it in our prior work, encompasses diverse ways of transforming and spreading, which acknowledge the importance of context and place.

Given its focus on local and location-oriented sharing and collaborative economies, our recent work (Light and Miskelly, 2019; Lampinen, 2021; Lampinen et al., 2022) has made us sensitive to the spatial tensions related – they are readily visible in this domain where venture-backed digital platforms, geared for maximal growth, co-exist with local and location-oriented initiatives. Yet, spatial tensions and the challenges related to scale are, of course, relevant to a much broader range of computer-supported cooperative activities. As one example, the work of Frauenberg and colleagues (Frauenberger et al., 2018) highlights scale, dialectics, and affect in participatory design, suggesting pathways to build bridges, foster alliances, and evolve participatory design practice to proliferate democratisation in technology design. The example of federated social media shows how architectural decisions and community practices can introduce notions of "place" and local ways of knowing in the governance and content moderation of systems otherwise dependent upon scalability, such as social networking sites. In such cases, federation not only allows for a diversity of political positions to act within the system (Mansoux and Roscam Abbing, 2020), but it also engenders useful concepts, such as the notion of subsidiarity (Rozenshtein, ming; Hasinoff and Schneider, 2022), that can influence technology design towards community governance models.

This workshop builds upon the COST Action *From Sharing to Caring: Examining Socio-Technical Aspects of the Collaborative Economy* that played a key role in bringing researchers together to address issues of care and scale, as well

as recent workshops and interest groups at CSCW and HCI venues that have focused on issues of scale, cooperation, and place-making (Rossitto et al., 2020; Fedosov et al., 2019; Rossitto et al., 2017). Our aim with this workshop is to provide a space for the continued unfolding of the discussions sparked through these prior activities, this time with a particular focus on the political and ethical challenges of scale.

Workshop themes

The workshop considers spatial tensions in CSCW with the help of five broad themes. Participants are encouraged to articulate their interest in the workshop in connection to one or more of the following:

- **The political and ethical challenges of scale**. We look forward to contributions that examine and critique the role that notions of scale play in the design of tools and collaborative processes. Further, we encourage participants to explore how we might reshape our vocabulary to go beyond visions of scale and scaling as well as how infrastructures that scale might be managed so that localized action and decision-making remain possible.
- **Modes of organizing, infrastructuring, and governing**. We welcome contributions that advance and/or reflect on *different modes of organizing, infrastructuring, and governing* computer-supported cooperative activities and collectives. This can involve (but is not limited to) approaches such as federation, cooperatives, and localism in relation to platform-supported community organizing.
- **(Inter)organizational aspects**. When considering how grassroots initiatives and other computer-supported cooperative activities may proliferate and morph over time, issues of scale and long-term sustenance become entangled with questions of institutionalization, be it in the form of partnerships or formalizing the initiative/activity itself into a different type of an organization. Returning to a conversation started at CSCW 2020 (Rossitto et al., 2020), we see a number of open questions regarding engagement with and/or transformation into alternative organizational forms (public organizations, NGOs, cooperatives, etc.) so as to support the longer-term sustenance of (the aims of) grassroots initiatives. We invite participants to explore the processes and dynamics underlying such (inter)organizational transformation.
- **Place and care**. Two key threads that run through other workshop concerns are the notions of *place* and *care*. Here, we are particularly interested in contributions that address the importance of *spatial* and *care-ful* considerations in computer-supported cooperative activity and how these may come into tension – or even outright conflict – with the logic of scaling. We welcome contributions that illustrate the localized work, partnerships,

processes, and ecological relations whereby care for place is fostered and accomplished (see, for instance, Rossitto et al. (2022)).

- **Theoretical frameworks**. We encourage authors to discuss theoretical aspects that reflect both the ethics of place and the ethics of care. We are interested in the analytical relevance of these approaches, as well as their generative value in designing and assessing the role of digital technology in fostering bounded spaces of our imagining and making.

Workshop goals

The goals for this workshop include:

- Bring together researchers within (and where possible beyond) the CSCW community with an interest in the problematics of scale, with the aim of sharing ongoing research and connecting participants with others who share their research interests.
- Reflect collectively on what a CSCW perspective can contribute to the study of different modes of organizing, infrastructuring, and governing.
- Articulate future research agendas and questions that foreground the ethical and political questions of scale.
- Facilitate in-depth conversations about research during the event, while also seeking to support and scaffold collaborative efforts that exceed the short duration of the workshop.
- Discuss how participants could (and already do) collaborate not just with other researchers but also with practitioners, civic servants, journalists, and other relevant stakeholders.
- Facilitate the formation of this sub-community in CSCW and HCI, and discuss possibilities for a lightweight collaborative infrastructure to sustain it (e.g., a listserv or a wiki page for resources).

Workshop activities

The workshop is structured as a full-day event. It will consist of diverse activities, with an emphasis on in-depth conversations and community building:

- **Introductions.** The organisers will open the workshop by introducing the agenda and goals for the day. They will then facilitate a round of meet-and-greet, giving each participant a moment to introduce themselves and their interest in the topic.
- **Panel discussions.** The participants will be organised in thematic panels based on their position papers. Everyone will give a 6-minute presentation, followed by a collective discussion. The organisers will take shared notes to generate material to be worked on collaboratively.

- **Walk-and-Talk in Break-Out Groups.** Participants will split into groups of 3-4 people to further explore shared interests. The recommendation is to discuss while taking a walk, if that is feasible and desirable to everyone in the group. For this activity, groups will be encouraged to focus their conversation in particular on methodological issues. The goal is to identify key ideas and questions for discussion.
- **Summarising.** In this session, participants will be given a moment to review the collective notes taken during the day and to note down key insights and reflections. We will then go around the room so as to listen and respond to each others' thoughts.
- **Next Steps and Closing.** The workshop will conclude with a shorter discussion around possible next steps to advance CSCW research around the political and ethical challenges of scale, and to consider opportunities for further collaboration.

Participant recruitment and selection

The workshop is planned for a maximum of 20 participants (including the organisers). Participants will be recruited from the CSCW and CHI communities, and from the extended research networks of the organisers. Detailed information about the workshop will be made available at our workshop website. We will reach out to international, interdisciplinary networks by circulating the call on relevant listservs (EUSSET, AoIR, etc.) and through social media.

Those interested in the workshop will be invited to submit a short position paper (or equivalent material) that addresses the workshop themes. We encourage potential participants to discuss their interest in the themes, welcoming reports of (preliminary) empirical results, theoretically oriented pieces, as well as methodological reflections. To promote broader participation, in particular from the industry and civic organizations, we offer the option of submitting alternative material of rough equivalence (e.g., a design portfolio, white paper, or similar). Submissions will be reviewed by the organisers and accepted based on the relevance and development of their chosen topic, as well as participants' potential to contribute to the workshop.

Equipment needs

The workshop has no equipment needs beyond the usual: a room to host the event, wireless network connectivity, and a projector. Some supplies for group work, such as post-it notes, flipboard-sized paper, and pens, would be helpful.

Organisers

The workshop is organised by a group of scholars with a strong track record of working on topics of scale and care, along with a longstanding engagement with the CSCW community:

Airi Lampinen studies interpersonal and economic encounters, peer-to-peer exchange, and algorithmic systems. Her recent book *The Trouble With Sharing* addresses the interpersonal challenges inherent in peer-to-peer exchange. Lampinen is an Associate Professor in Human–Computer Interaction at Stockholm University, Sweden, and a Docent in Social Psychology at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Currently, Lampinen is the co-PI of the WASP-HS project *Ethics as Enacted through Movement – Shaping and Being Shaped by Autonomous Systems*. She is also part of the Digital Futures faculty and co-leads two projects within the centre: *Layering Trust in Intimate Digital Health Technologies* and *the Digital Futures Drone Arena.*

Ann Light is focused on the politics, ethics and agency of design, and especially co-design in communities, exploring social activism at neighbourhood level, investigating the design of sharing structures and questioning the boundaries of participation. She is Professor of Design and Creative Technology, University of Sussex, UK, and Professor at Malmö University, Sweden. Regarding the social and ecological as inextricably linked, Light has turned to consider the stress that current systems put on the planet, believing creative remaking of relations is needed for liveable futures. She is co-creator of the CreaTures Framework, prepared as part of the European Union project Creative Practices for Transformative Futures (CreaTures: https://creatures-eu.org/).

Chiara Rossitto is Associate Professor of Human-Computer Interaction at Stockholm University, Sweden, and Visiting Professor at the Centre for Sustainable and Digital Transformation, at Aalborg University. She has extensively investigated the role of digital technologies in fostering care, civic engagement, and people's participation in initiatives seeking more sustainable futures. Her research has investigated the use of digital technology to support and structure environmental stewardship and care for the environment, waste management practices, and political dialogues. Moreover, it has problematised scale as the only notion often associated with technological development and the long-term impact of technological interventions aiming at social change.

Roel Roscam Abbing is a doctoral candidate of Interaction Design at Malmö University's School of Arts and Communication. Through a combination of software studies and participatory design approaches, his research focuses on the design of federated social media.

Anton Fedosov is a postdoctoral researcher at the People and Computing Lab at the University of Zurich in Switzerland. His research interests lie at the intersection of social aspects of ubiquitous computing, collaborative economy, and user experience design of interactive systems and services. He holds a PhD in Informatics (with a focus on design-oriented Human-Computer Interaction) from

USI Lugano in Switzerland. He is a Swiss Management Committee Member in an interdisciplinary pan-European research network, COST Action 21118 Platform Work Inclusion Living Lab, investigating socio-technical aspects and alternative design models of the platform economy.

Luigina Ciolfi is Professor of Human Computer Interaction in the School of Applied Psychology at University College Cork, Ireland. She is a member of the People and Technology Research Group. She studies human experiences and practices around digital technologies through a practice-focused approach and adopting participatory and co-design methodologies. She is currently involved in a collaborative project exploring Responsibility in software and systems design and development funded by Lero - The Science Foundation Ireland Research Centre for Software.

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