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Abstract

In this panel, social scientists and computer scientists who have been involved in different ways in the work of challenging traditional understandings of abstraction in software design and development discuss the tensions between narratives and abstraction, metaphors and models, moods and modes – and more.

Keywords

Multiple perspectives, IT design, ethnomethodology, accountability, abstraction, situatedness.

Description of Panel

Ethnographic methods of studying work settings and work practices have been used for quite some time as a way of informing software development. This has not been uncontroversial. On the one hand, software developers tend to be sceptical of the value of ethnographic reports for design, because of their rich messiness and specificity. On the other hand, ethnographers tend to be sceptical of how the result of their work is made use of in software development. The generalisation and abstraction processes necessary for developing a computer program, they claim, are inadequate translation processes for accounts of the social organization of work.

It may not be possible to develop software without resorting to abstraction, but the abstraction processes, viewed as situated action, and as translation processes, are worthy of further analysis and discussion. Thus, some scientists argue that the abstractions embodied in software should be made accountable to the users through the interface (Button & Dourish 1996, Dourish 2001). Abstractions embodied in software are understood as generative of computer action in presumably predictable ways. Abstractions as understood by social scientists, on the other hand, are analytical, not generative, explanations of social action.

Ethnomethodology, a sociological approach often informing ethnographic field studies, focuses on the organized activities of everyday life, the methods people use for making their actions "*visible-and-reportable-for-all-practical-purposes, i.e. accountable*" (Garfinkel 1984 [1967], p.vii). Membership and *ad hocing* practices, the inescapable indexicality of language and action, are central here. Accountability, in this sense, is a constantly on-going accomplishment of everyday accounting practices and accounts, so ordinary and ubiquitous it becomes difficult to focus. Yet through these very ordinary practices, people embody their lives and constitute themselves as subjects.

Researchers working in the areas of User Centered Design and Participatory Design have developed alternative approaches to traditional design procedures and processes where *ad hocing*

and the importance of recognizing how membership affects representations are taken seriously. Concepts such as "situated use", "cooperative design", "co-construction" etc are usually grounded in an ethnomethodologically informed approach to IT design, with roots going back to Garfinkel and his understanding of accountability (Suchman 1994). Other ways of addressing the contingencies of situated action and taking them into account in design, development and management of IT is by using metaphors such as "drifting", " gestell' and "moods" to challenge the wisdom of computer systems and find alternative ways to understand how IT is actually used by people in everyday work in organizations (Ciborra 2002).

Panelists

Claudio Ciborra	London School of Economics, UK
Antonio Cordella	London School of Economics, UK
Silvia Gherardi	Università di Trento, Italy
Gianni Jacucci	University of Trento, Italy
Peter Axel Nielsen	Aalborg University, Denmark
Ina Wagner	Vienna University of Technology, Austria

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