
Across Borders, With or Without Walls

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Abstract

At a time when geographical borders are being reinforced throughout the world, thus emphasizing the divide between the developed and underdeveloped countries, there are immense opportunities for promoting a global society that is enabled by information technologies and, at the same time, strengthening national identities. Human-Computer Interaction can provide tools and methodologies for exploring such opportunities, and designing, prototyping and evaluating systems that bring people together.

Author Keywords

HCI collaboration, multi-cultural issues, social issues, HCI activism.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.2 Social Issues.

Introduction

For more than a century, technologies have played a crucial role in making globalization possible. Increasingly during the last decades, information technologies (IT) have enabled communication and collaboration, and have made it possible for people to work collaboratively across geographical borders. Information technologies are also contributing to bridge

boundaries between cultures and disciplines, thus generating richer environments and shared virtual spaces that transcend national boundaries.

Globalization can coexist with nationalism, which can be regarded as a positive notion, since it is related with values such as national identity, solidarity and self-determination. In this sense, nationalism drives the preservation of valued characteristics shared by a society, including language, cultural heritage, and accomplishments in various areas, such as science or sports.

In recent years, however, exacerbated nationalist and populist movements have resurfaced in several countries, mostly induced by leaders who take advantage of fears that citizens experience when faced with people of diverse cultural backgrounds. Unfortunately, these manifestations of nationalism are sectarian and are leading to exclusion, racism and xenophobia. As they gain political positions, nationalists are creating tensions with neighboring countries, hindering the free transit of workers and jeopardizing collaborative activities across borders.

Information technologies in general, and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) in particular, can again play a role in maintaining the benefits of a global community accessible to people in all realms of activity, while still promoting the positive aspects of nationalism. In order for this to happen, conscientious efforts are needed from the HCI community in several areas.

HCI Education

Novel issues arise when designing technologies for migrant populations and distributed communities with

reduced capabilities for face-to-face meetings. Affordability, supportiveness and usability, among other aspects, may take a new meaning when considering these user communities across borders. Modern HCI curricula should consider these issues along with the sociological impact of the so-called new nationalism, as well as the study of new contexts in which people must carry out their activities across physical borders.

Resource Sharing

The sense of community can suffer when divisions are introduced by physical or political walls. Sharing resources at the grassroots level through well-defined and organized collaborative networks can help reduce the negative impact of divisive policy. In the case of the global HCI community, sharing expertise through webinars and online courses, making course syllabi public, or connecting researchers on both sides of a physical border to remote user communities for system validation or experimentation, are examples of viable resource sharing.

Many countries have national initiatives for high-speed Internet networks, which are ideal channels to facilitate resource sharing. In Latin America, for example high-speed networks exist in Mexico (CUDI), Chile (REUNA), Colombia (RENATA), Argentina (Innova|RED), Guatemala (RAGIE), Brazil (RNP), Costa Rica (CONARE), Uruguay (RAU), Ecuador (CEDIA) and Venezuela (REACCIUN). These networks group most of the universities and research centers in each country, thus facilitating communication and collaboration with a large number of related communities.

Lobbying

The HCI research and practitioner communities are among the most visible players in the IT industry. Internally, HCI community members can lobby to promote responsible, socially committed positions both from academic institutions and corporations. Externally, recognizing policy makers that combat divisiveness has the potential to strengthen their positions.

Outreach

The HCI community cannot stay in the ivory tower, the corporate headquarters or the design labs. Relying on human-centered methodologies must be more than a claim to substantiate a novel proposal. Getting out and creating solutions for real people with real problems generated by divisive policies should give rise to a more humane discipline, which ultimately attends to its original tenets and principles.