
Tackling Environmental and Social Justice: Pushing the boundaries of sustainable HCI and I.

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Abstract

In this short essay I reflect on my research experience with regards to environmental sustainability agendas. This critical reflection aims to identify opportunities to develop dialogues between academic pursuits and Third Sector organisations.

Introduction

I am a Senior Research associate at Lancaster University who works in areas relating to environmental sustainability and through my recent work with 'life style couriers' [1] have become increasingly motivated by the lack of social justice in the gig-economy and parcel delivery industry. I am currently working as part of Freight Traffic Control 2050 (FTC2050)¹ that looks to develop new understandings of how collaboration and consolidation in last mile logistics (specifically parcel deliveries) can encourage a reduction in carbon emissions. I'm looking forward to being part of the Third Sector HCI club and developing a strong code of practice that I can apply in my current and future research. I am particularly passionate about pushing the boundaries of my own work and connecting it to organisations that lobby and take action for environmental and social justice agendas.

In previous work I've worked closely with policy and policy

¹www.ftc2050.com

makers [5, 1] but (unfortunately) have had little experience communicating my research to Third Sector organisations. I am particularly interested in developing strong links with the third sector and NGOs, to consider how academia can build tools to support and enable relationships with these organisations and work to effect practice change within SIGCHI and organisations that promote justice and unity. Given the themes of environmental and social justice in my work I am excited to discuss some of these issues at the workshop and develop a plan that can help take my research in a direction that speaks more clearly to third sector organisations and NGOs.

Critical Reflection

Sustainable HCI and I

Broadly my research revolves around using digital technology to help lower the environmental emissions of everyday life (e.g. domestic energy, thermal comfort, the demand for internet services, parcel deliveries). Throughout this body of work we often focus on understanding the carbon footprint of various ways of performing everyday activities and practices. The work is highly contextualised by the participants and the priorities and interpretations of the researcher. Having not worked closely with third sector organisations is a clear shortcoming and a tension in my own work that I'd like to challenge. This is especially important given the context of my work (we recruit via digital technology and often only within the local area) and how sustainability is often seen as only for those more privileged whilst taxation on energy and services affects those who cannot afford to change their lifestyles (cf. [6]). I see this community and workshop as a starting place for me to develop strong relationships with Third Sector organisations. As part of my own search for finding the 'good' that relates to sustainability [2] I am interested in working more closely

with organisations that resonate with my passion for environmental and social justice.

Opportunities to engage with Third Sector organisations

My current work is relevant to gig-economy [4] and "life style courier" work forces who are often under paid, lack guaranteed work and have no sick pay or insurance [1]. In the parcel and courier sector this is in part due to the pressure on parcel industry to provide cheaper services, leading to cuts which manifest in a workforce made of contractors or workers without appropriate legislative/governmental consideration or support [4].

The people my research forgot

Typically my previous research has involved time intensive mixed-methods (qualitative and quantitative) studies with a small(ish) number of participants (4-30) across periods ranging from 1 hour to 1 month. Reflecting back on previous work this process feels predatory; *we got what we wanted/needed (new understandings, a CHI paper), but... what about the participants?* I'd like to avoid this in the future by working more closely with organisations (e.g. third sector) that are better suited to sustaining longer term engagements. I also see that working with Third Sector organisations may encourage my research to reach the people that might benefit the most from it, ensuring long-term partnerships with benefits that are felt by broader communities.

Unions, Advocacy and Activism

I look forward to attending this workshop to explore potential pathways for engaging my academic research with third sector organisations that work with unions (e.g. United Road Transport Union), advocacy organisations (e.g. World Wildlife Federation) and activist groups (e.g. Greenpeace, Hope Not Hate). I see an opportunity for the "Third Sector HCI Club" to develop resources and connections directly with these organisations, to help strengthen the agendas of

Life-style couriers are self-employed in UK law, they have varied and often no guaranteed work, zero-hour contracts, or are working flexible hours dependant on employer demand (cf. 'gig-economy' and on-demand workers). Their rights and employment categorisation remain a contested issue [3, 7].

these organisations, and to develop research that is more grounded in the realities of environmental and social injustice.

Opportunities and obligations

I see an opportunity and an obligation for the Third Sector HCI Club to become an authority in upholding justice at different levels within our own institutions, the venues in which we publish, publishers and professional bodies. As part of the workshop I look forward to: 1) developing strategies on how to effect change within the SIGCHI and ACM relating to the Third Sector code of practice; 2) developing stronger ties between research communities and those third sector organisations who could greatly benefit from our methods (e.g. using digital technology, design thinking, knowledge bases, global digital networks); and, 3) developing long-term partnerships with a range of third sector organisations to both support the third sector but also to develop research procedures that are less predatory with participants.

Currently I am at a point in my career where I am looking into working more closely with organisations who can lobby government and support causes that relate more closely to environmental and social justice. I see this workshop as a fantastic opportunity to become part of an enthusiastic community who look to more deeply consider the collaboration between academia and the third sector.

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