

CHI 99 SIG: SIGCHI's Role in Influencing Technology Policy

Jeff Johnson

INTRODUCTION

At ACM CHI99, approximately 60 people attended a Special Interest Group meeting titled "SIGCHI's Role in Influencing Technology Policy". Jeff Johnson organized and moderated the SIG, with help from Austin Henderson, Ben Shneiderman, and Barbara Simons.

Jeff Johnson introduced the SIG by noting that one purpose of the meeting was to take advantage of the presence at CHI99 of:

- Barbara Simons, founder of ACM's Public Policy Council (USACM) and President of ACM.
- Ben Shneiderman, Co-Chair of ACM Policy '98 and member of USACM Executive Council.
- Austin Henderson, SIGCHI's newly-appointed Adjunct Chair for Public Policy.

Jeff articulated two goals for SIGCHI regarding policy:

1. Getting CHI issues and concerns into government policy.
 - when government procures systems,
 - when government funds research,
 - when government regulates industries.
2. Getting Social Responsibility into the CHI field.
 - The CHI'92 social-action session (organized by Jeff and Ben during the Rodney King riots) was a start.

- The CHI social-action posters, which were started in CHI'93, continued for several years.
- General consciousness-raising in the CHI field, i.e., getting CHI people to think about issues such as:
 - The difference between designing systems to empower workers and designing systems to automate work.
 - How to create affordable technologies and affordable access.
 - How to create technologies that are accessible by all regardless of disability.

Jeff mentioned the `chi-policy@acm.org` email list that was created after CHI98, and displayed the instructions for subscribing to the list. Those instructions are:

Send message to `listserv@acm.org` with content (not subject): "subscribe chi-policy John Smith", substituting your own name. You will be added to the list under the email address from which you send your message. After you receive a reply indicating that you have been added to the list, you will begin receiving messages posted to it thereafter, and can begin posting to the list. Post messages to `chi-policy@acm.org`. Submitted postings will be reviewed by the list moderator before being released to the list.

INVITED SPEAKERS

Austin, Ben, and Barbara then each spoke for a few minutes.

Austin Henderson explained that SIGCHI has created a position of Adjunct Chair for Public Policy, and appointed him to it. The main reason SIGCHI created the post was that "it needed to get its act together" regarding advising policy-makers on issues that have a human-computer interaction component. An increasing number of SIGCHI members have been called upon to do this, but this until now this has been done with no coordination. Most other professional organizations have explicit (in many cases even staffed) public-policy efforts, but SIGCHI has not.

Austin summarized the presentation he gave to members of Congress and their staff on March 5, 1999. The central line of argument was:

- Computers: We can't live without them
- Computers: We can't live with them
- Better "fit" is needed to reach more people

Useful, usable, universal

- Government can help
- Fund research, set an example
- SIGCHI can be a resource

Austin also set out the following issues that need addressing: development of a structure to support public policy worldwide, and directions for who can develop ideas, authorize presentation in SIGCHI's name, and make such presentations.

Ben Shneiderman began by saying that the CHI community has reason to be proud of having improved the usability of computer and telecommunications technology over the past several decades. The efforts of CHI professionals have improved commerce, education, medicine, and other important areas of our society. Nonetheless, he feels a strong need to devote part of his time and energies to *explicit* efforts to make the world a better place. For example, he worked on a system to help monitor nuclear non-proliferation treaties. Ben feels that ACM, and SIGCHI in particular, should allocate more funding and effort to public policy. He pointed out that ACM currently allocates .25 % of its budget to policy efforts, much less than the 3-5% allocated by most professional societies.

Barbara Simons said that one of her priorities as ACM President is to expand ACM's policy office, e.g., add a regular ACM staff person devoted to policy issues. She hopes that with the additional resources, together with help from ACM members in other countries, ACM will be able at the same time to create a (root) international ACM policy committee, of which USACM could be a leaf.

Barbara described one potential problem with SIGCHI contacting congresspeople separately from ACM or USACM: Congress doesn't know ACM's structure; they don't know

about SIGs. (In fact, because of ACM's name, "The Association of Computing Machinery", Congress often seems to think that ACM is a trade group -- representing computer companies -- rather than a professional society composed of individuals.) So they would perceive SIGCHI to be a separate organization. She argued that it is important that ACM and SIGCHI don't confuse Congress by appearing to speak with multiple voices. ACM should speak with one voice. It is important for people from the CHI community to be heard, because CHI issues are important. However, CHI members should coordinate their policy-advising activities through ACM.

Barbara finished her remarks by saying that USACM has been focused on policy in the U.S., but ACM, being an international organization, wants to extend its efforts internationally. However, that has proved difficult given ACM's limited staff and other resources.

OPEN DISCUSSION

The discussion was then opened up to allow other attendees to make comments, provide information, and ask questions. The discussion was lively, and ranged over several topics. The following is a summary of what was discussed.

Discussion Topic 1: Raising Awareness of Usability

The discussion initially focused on how to create more awareness of usability issues among policymakers, the press, and the public.

Sharon Laskowski from the National Institute of Standards & Technology (NIST) pointed out that the recently-passed Americans with Disabilities Act will have a large impact on computer-human interfaces. Section 508 of the law states that all technology purchased by the government (a significant percentage of the total technology purchased in the U.S.) must now be accessible for people with disabilities (e.g., sight, hearing, etc.). This will require some rethinking of the standard GUI, which will benefit all users, not just "disabled" ones.

The question was raised: In attempting to raise awareness of usability issues, should ACM act alone or work in coalition with other professional organizations, e.g., the Usability Professionals Association (UPA), the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society (HFES), the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE), ACM SIGDOC, the

Society for Technical Communications, and the American Library Association (ALA). The consensus seemed to be that working with other like-minded organizations would be more effective.

Janice Rohn, co-founder and former head of the UPA, summarized the history of UPA's attempts to influence policy. In 1996, UPA created an "outreach" program. In 1998, UPA's annual conference was in Washington DC. At that time,

UPA hired a law firm and a public-relations firm to help it determine how to publicize its issues and present them to policymakers. During the conference week, UPA held a "government day" in which UPA officers and members made 18 visits to members of Congress. The visitors were Janice Rohn, Charlie Kreitzberg, and one UPA member from each visited Congressperson's state. One of UPA's recommendations to Congress was to ask for a General Accounting Office study of the effect of poor usability on productivity. Although other such studies have been carried out, Congress is much more likely to listen to findings that come from the GAO. UPA also found from talking to members of Congress that they are more likely to listen to visitors who represent a large constituency, where "large" means thousands of voters.

Jean Scholtz reported that she is spearheading an effort to write a SIGCHI report arguing for government funding for an enhanced HCI research agenda. There was a workshop with 16 participants on the Sunday before the CHI99 conference to write a research agenda. The draft will be offered to the SIGCHI membership for comment during the summer. It will focus on useful, usable, and universal systems. [Editor's note: the draft appears starting on page 11]

Ideas raised for what SIGCHI could do to increase awareness among the public and policymakers of the importance of HCI:

- Regular CHI outreach (press releases, press briefings) to the press. SIGCHI already does this to publicize the CHI conference, but the suggestion is to go beyond that to feed usability stories to the press, both local and national.
- Work with related organizations (e.g., Human Factors Society, Usability Professionals Association) to develop a coordinated outreach program.
- Prepare an CHI-Outreach kit for local SIGCHI chapters so they can be more effective at talking with the press and state and local policymakers.
- Create a SIGCHI "experts" list of members who are willing to talk with reporters and policymakers, categorized by sub-field and location. When reporters or policymakers contact SIGCHI for advice, they can be quickly directed to a suitable expert. (CPSR has such a list of its members who are willing to talk to reporters).
- Devise standards for usability testing, and ways of measuring the quality of testing.
- Help govt agencies usability-test their public websites.
- Follow the tactic of states vs. the tobacco and firearms companies: file lawsuits against companies that sell unusable products.

Discussion Topic 2: Internationalizing Policy Efforts

A comment by Michael Muller shifted the focus of the discussion to how SIGCHI's policy efforts can be made international. The concern is that although ACM is an international organization, USACM's efforts are all directed at US policy.

Austin Henderson suggested that one way to avoid being U.S.-centric is to gather input from SIGCHI members from all nations, but then focus SIGCHI's actual policy-influencing efforts on specific jurisdictions (e.g., nations) using SIGCHI members who are constituents of those jurisdictions. He pointed out that ACM currently focuses on U.S. policy through USACM, but if SIGCHI commits to working internationally, its efforts could serve as a seed for ACM-wide international policy efforts.

Guy Boy (France) pointed out that many HCI-related issues, e.g., improving the design of airplane cockpits, should be addressed internationally. A participant from Australia pointed out that Australian CHI-members need to influence HCI-related policy efforts *in* the U.S., because U.S. policy has such a strong impact on Australian policy.

Discussion Topic 3: Licensing of Computer Professionals (HCI Professionals in particular)

Someone asked what ACM, USACM, or SIGCHI is doing on the issue of licensing of computer professionals. Texas is considering (or has passed) legislation that would require programmers to be licensed.

Barbara Simons explained ACM's position, and how it was reached. When the issue came up in Texas, ACM began to feel pressure to develop a position. She appointed a committee of notable computer scientists to study the issue and make a recommendation. The committee found that software quality does need to be improved, but there is no evidence that licensing software engineers achieves that, and so recommended that ACM issue a statement opposing mandatory licensing. ACM did.

NEXT STEPS

SIGCHI members who want to get involved can do the following:

- Volunteer to lead or help with some of the ideas raised in the "Raising Awareness of Usability" section (above).
- Subscribe to the chi-policy distribution list. To subscribe, send an e-mail to listserv@acm.org with message body (not subject): `subscribe chi-policy`.
- Sign up to receive USACM's "Washington Update". To subscribe, send an e-mail to listserv@acm.org with message body (not subject): `subscribe Washington-Update`.
- Watch for and respond to the HCI Research Agenda. When available, a pointer to it will be posted to chi-policy@acm.org.
- SIGCHI members in different jurisdictions should form public policy groups. These will be integrated into SIGCHI's public policy structure. Please keep Austin Henderson <henderson@rivcons.com> informed about any such efforts.

SIGCHI public policy groups in different jurisdictions should band together to form HCI public policy alliances through association with other existing HCI organizations. Policy should be communicated through SIGCHI's public policy structure.

About the Author:

Jeff Johnson is President and Principal Consultant at UI Wizards, Inc., a product usability consulting firm. He has worked in the field of Human-Computer Interaction since 1978. After earning B.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Yale and Stanford Universities, he worked as a user-interface designer and implementer, engineer manager, usability tester, and researcher at Cromemco, Xerox, US West, Hewlett-Packard Labs, Sun/FirstPerson (the predecessor of JavaSoft), and SunSoft. He is a longtime member and activist in Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR), and has served on its Executive Committee and as Chair of its Board of Directors. He has published numerous

articles on a variety of topics in Human-Computer Interaction and the impact of technology on society. He is the author of the book, GUI Bloopers (forthcoming, March 2000, Morgan-Kaufmann).

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