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# Do We Fix it or Burn it Down? Towards Practicable Critique at CSCW

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## ABSTRACT

CSCW has a rich interdisciplinary and methodological history, and our work focuses on designing and building technologies for collaboration and community as well as evaluating and critiquing these technologies. At the intersection of these interdisciplinary perspectives comes a tension playing out in formal and informal venues: is CSCW's role to fix and improve existing technologies, or is it to start over and build anew? In this panel, we address this question with an eye towards enabling practicable critique within CSCW, and help navigate this tension that arises in our interdisciplinary community. Our panelists reflect methodological diversity in CSCW and positional differences on these questions. We look forward to a lively, spirited discussion between panelists that build on three provocations and engage the community on this important and critical issue.

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## 1 MOTIVATION AND BACKGROUND

CSCW's primary focus is the design and building of technologies for groups and communities [12, 13] as well as evaluation and critique of these technologies and their role in society [8, 10]. Supported by a rich interdisciplinary and methodological history, our community and its research often intersects these goals, drawing from, speaking to, and bridging both (e.g. [5]). As the field has grown in

importance and the systems we build and study become integral to news and politics [9], social support [6], community building [15], health [2], and work [14], the stakes of maintaining and preserving these systems has also grown. When concerns like these are levied on existing systems, often an acute question follows from these conversations: is it our job to fix and improve the technological world we already have, or is it our job to start from scratch, envisioning and building new systems entirely?

There is a risk that these two complementary approaches will motivate researchers to drift apart rather than reach across the epistemological and implications ravine. In the simplified scenario, one camp juxtaposes a more incremental or revisionist position (provocatively, "let's fix it") against another more radical orientation (provocatively, "let's burn it down"). To be clear, we do not see these perspectives as necessarily antagonistic, but there are institutional and philosophical reasons that may cause gaps between researchers in the same community as they pursue these two different goals. Sometimes, this happens for intellectual reasons, such as underlying differences in worldview and theory that drive research inquiry. Other times, these reasons can also be practical, such as peer review processes and expectations, and the challenges of interdisciplinary work. However, these two foci can also turn inward, demonstrating a form of "self-focus bias" (e.g. [11]) where researchers begin to speak to those like themselves more exclusively.

Our panel addresses these two related problems directly by asking: **How can our community overcome the "fix it" vs. "tear it down" dichotomy, and (re)establish our scholarly ownership over pressing social problems at the intersection of humans and technology?** In the past few years, there have several, very prominent op-eds and scholarly articles calling for a "new science of human-focused AI" [3, 7], and growing interest in "human-centered" endeavors with computer science, AI, and ethics [4]. CSCW and its focus on sociotechnical systems seems the right place to make recommendations on *how* to do human-centered systems design [1]. How do we reconcile these two important positions within CSCW and also have field-wide visions for the future of sociotechnical systems? How do we bring critique

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into CSCW and technology, which has long been dominated by United States-centric notions of innovation and progress?

The panelists reflect multi-disciplinary and multi-methodological expertise across these “sides” and are excited to discuss and make steps towards resolving these tensions. As an open-ended discussion, we expect to spark engaging and lively conversations about the reasons why these ravines have come up, what barriers exist to their resolution, and how CSCW can reclaim its stakes in pressing social issues. Ultimately, we hope to spark an ongoing engagement within the CSCW community on a path forward, creating a practicable approach to critique that centers the best parts of CSCW.

## 2 AREAS OF PROVOCATION

Our panel is organized around three key provocations that triangulate the boundaries of this topic and problem we pose above. We expect this panel will take a free-flowing and conversational approach, and so these provocations will serve to start this conversation and scaffold follow-up questions.

- (1) **Radical vs revisionist positions at CSCW – fix it or burn it down?:** In a technology landscape where systems that are the most crucial to users and society also cause these same users and our larger society significant harm (e.g., [15]), should CSCW focus on work that attempts to reform current systems, or focus on new systems entirely? What systems are worth preserving and what others are worth burning down? What are the latent impacts of these decisions on users, communities, and groups? Can and should these orientations be bridged?
- (2) **Infrastructural and pragmatic tensions in bridging:** In addition to intellectual differences, there are also practical and infrastructural barriers and flows to this bridging effort. This provocation seeks to facilitate discussion around the core question: *What practical tensions arise from CSCW’s nature as a venue for both “burn it down” and “fix it” positions?* Are there meaningful impacts on the review process and influence in committees on decision-making? How should CSCW support a publication model that incentivizes publication across methods and these corresponding positions, even when they demand different kinds of scholarship? How should we evaluate systems and quantitative research in light of these different positions to “fix it” or “burn it down”? What achieves a productive conversation between members of the CSCW community that may not see eye to eye on the resolution for a given system?
- (3) **(Re)establishing Our “Best Selves” at CSCW:** Finally, we consider the impacts of these practical and epistemological decisions on the impact of the field outside of HCI. This provocation focuses on if CSCW should – and what it would take for CSCW to – lead on public conversations with important sociotechnical problems, while bridging both “fix it” and “burn it down” approaches. Questions here include: given CSCW’s largely Western perspective, *should* CSCW be the venue for this kind of work? Are there concrete sets of actions that our community could take towards a future of

practicable critique? How do we manage and encourage pluralism in a world where Computer Science more generally asks for clear-cut answers?

## 3 ATTENDEES

This panel invites a variety of attendees across the CSCW research and industry spectrum, given our approach to recruitment and the provocation of the topic as relevant for empirical and critical researchers in CSCW. We imagine this will in particular draw people invested in the long-term success and importance of the CSCW conference. We hope to draw attendees from across CSCW’s epistemological and intellectual areas. Our goal is to engage a wide swath of participants all of whom see value in the bridging ideas central to this panel. Rather than establish a middle-ground, our hope is that a multiplicity of positions within CSCW find common cause with our topic.

## 4 PANEL FORMAT

This panel will take place as a moderated discussion among the panelists. Co-organizer Thebault-Spieker will serve as moderator, and will regularly introduce audience feedback and questions into the conversation. This group of panelists has been chosen specifically because they often disagree on these issues, but recognizing that these issues are core to CSCW, we anticipate many other points of view being valuable to the discussion overall. As such, panelists will be asked to prepare an introductory statement of their position in no more than one minute; from that point on, the panel will be fully discussion-based. The early part of the conversation will be based partially in participant starting positions, but will also be informed by feedback and interests which we will gather from potential audience members before the conference. We will solicit this initial audience participation via a Padlet which solicits commentary and questions on the areas of provocation listed above, launched one week before the conference as part of our publicity push, and panelists’ social media accounts.

During the panel itself, we will solicit live questions via whatever live Q&A tools are ultimately selected by the conference committee (e.g., Zoom Q&A). The moderator will be responsible for working these questions into the discussion. All panelists will be advised to seriously consider audience questions, and let the audience substantially steer the discussion throughout the panel. All audience feedback will be via these text-based formats, as this will allow the moderator to integrate multiple similar questions/ideas, and will also help ensure equity in who from the audience has their ideas heard and considered. Text-based feedback will allow us to ensure that we are keeping communication with the audience as accessible as possible.

In terms of technical requirements, all this panel will need is access to the conference’s chosen technology platform, e.g., an assigned Zoom room.

## 5 PANELISTS

Our goal for this panel is twofold: to first address the radical “burn it down” vs. revisionist “fix it” tension in our community head-on; and second, to engage in a good-faith, spirited discussion to grapple with these issues. Thus, we worked to carefully identify scholars in

the field who represent the full spectrum of viewpoints within and across the two epistemological “camps” that we see as focal areas within CSCW. Specifically, we aimed to include panelists (a) who are primarily critical theory scholars and who largely represent the “burn it down” orientation, (b) who are qualitative researchers focused on understanding and critiquing the impacts of technologies, but are sympathetic to a “fix it” orientation, (c) who sit directly in the middle between ethnographic work and system building work, (d) who are quantitative researchers focused on understanding the impacts of technologies and are oriented towards the “fix it” perspective, and (e) who are squarely focused on system building and iterative progress.

**Jacob Thebault-Spieker** (he/him, *co-organizer/moderator*) is an Assistant Professor in the Information School at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. His research quantitatively and experimentally identifies the causes of systemic biases in the work humans do online, and seeks to build systems to combat the creation of these biases.

**Stevie Chancellor** (she/her, *co-organizer*) is an Assistant Professor in Computer Science & Engineering at the University of Minnesota. She builds and critically evaluates human-centered machine learning systems for high-risk health behaviors in online communities, seeking to balance computational contributions and impact with the needs of people and communities.

**Michael Ann DeVito** (she/her, *co-organizer*) is a Postdoctoral Computing Innovation Fellow in Information Science at the University of Colorado Boulder. She researches how user understandings of everyday AI systems shape overall relationships with and adaptation to platforms, and facilitates values-based design work with queer and trans communities in order to help designers better shape everyday AI systems to the lived reality of marginalized users. She currently centers her work on queer and especially transgender communities in which she is a member-researcher.

**David Karger** (he/him, *panelist*) is a Professor in the EECS department at MIT and a member of the Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory. His research interests are in developing tools that help individuals manage information better. This approach draws on whatever fields can help: information retrieval, machine learning, databases, and algorithms, but most often human computer interaction. He believes that a key to making forward progress is to build systems that can be deployed and used *right now* to demonstrate what is possible. He has recently worked to deploy a discussion platform for online courses, a system for publicly sharing one’s web-browsing activity, a tool to help people protect their friends from harassment, a social news-sharing platform to help people collectively combat misinformation, and tools to democratize access to data on the web.

**Alex Leavitt** (they/him, *panelist*) is a senior researcher at Facebook working with the company’s Social Impact and Integrity teams on societal problems like misinformation, polarization, and COVID-19 to impact cross-platform design changes and strategic product direction. Alex’s research combines diverse social science methods, from ethnographic interview and observational fieldwork to surveys, large-scale experiments, and computational log data analysis. Alex’s most recent projects have focused especially on social media use, information needs, and social harms across the Global South (e.g., Ethiopia, Cameroon, Sri Lanka, Myanmar), in

particular international survey research to inform the company’s global COVID-19 and vaccines strategy.

**Niloufar Salehi** (she/her, *panelist*) is an Assistant Professor at the School of Information at UC, Berkeley, with an affiliated appointment in EECS. Her research interests are in social computing, participatory and critical design, human-centered AI, and more broadly, human-computer-interaction (HCI). Her recent work studies questions of harm, justice, and agency in socio-technical systems. Through building computational social systems in collaboration with existing communities, controlled experiments, and ethnographic fieldwork, her research contributes the design of new and alternative social configurations online.

**Katta Spiel** (they/them, *panelist*) is an FWF-Hertha-Firnberg scholar at the HCI Group at TU Wien, Austria, where they research marginalised perspectives on technology to inform critical design and engineering. Their work is situated at the intersection of Computer Science, Design and Cultural Studies additionally drawing on approaches from Queer/Trans Theory and Critical Disability Studies. In collaborations with non-binary and/or neurodivergent people, they conduct explorations of novel potentials for technological designs, methodological contributions to Human-Computer Interaction and materialisations of speculative artefacts imagining on non-normative futures through tech.

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