



# What is History ‘for’ in CSCW Research?

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## ABSTRACT

This panel will host a debate about the possible roles of HCI within CSCW research. To do so, it assembles five intellectually diverse researchers who contribute to the field of CSCW, while taking divergent approaches to incorporating an historicist sensibility in their work, as a matter of design, politics, reflection, or research. Panelists will briefly answer the following prompts: What is history for? What does good historical work look like? And, what is distinct for historicism in CSCW? Then, panelists and audience will discuss and compare answers. The goal of the panel is to further hone the discussion and method of historicism, and to invite a wider cross-section of the community of CSCW into the conversation.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Collaborative and social computing theory, concepts and paradigms.**

## KEYWORDS

history, methods, humanities

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## 1 BACKGROUND

This panel follows from several activities within CSCW, and in adjacent fields such as HCI, that have successfully called for a sustained research program and wider sensibility for historicism, such as a 2019 CSCW workshop [7], a CSCW paper [6], a TOCHI special issue [1], and multiple recent papers calling for historicist sensibilities in CSCW research [2–5]. Calls for attention to history in HCI and CSCW are not new, but are currently appearing with greater frequency and acceptance.

This panel seeks to bring these insights to the wider CSCW community by provoking a debate about what counts as good historical

research, what history is ‘for’, and what might be specific about historicism for the field of CSCW. As Soden et al. [7] have argued, the turn to history may contribute understanding of trajectories of technological development, change and decline, temporal contextualization of users and life worlds, and as a source of design knowledge. We have also noted that turn is timely and provides a necessary counter to the enduring ‘presentism’ and techno-optimism of our field, and supports interest in questions of equity and justice. History may also be a source of hope, and a counter to catastrophism, situating current challenges within longer arcs of challenge and change. Still, the uses and misuses of history are diverse and unfolding. Within the academic disciplines that do historical work it is the topic of methodological and theoretical debate (‘historiography’) and in the wider popular culture, history has become a site of political contestation.

For this panel we have invited scholars that contribute to CSCW, and who draw on an historicist sensibility, but who do so in very different ways. Some incorporate history into a design practice, as a way of informing making, others as a way of reflecting on the trajectory of CSCW itself, as a political intervention or as style of empirical research. These approaches do not necessarily fit together easily, and we have asked the panelists to highlight these differences.

Soden et al. [7] have argued that historicism is the due diligence of all HCI researchers, even those who do not themselves use historical methods, positioning historicism as a sensibility that draws on diverse intellectual traditions, methods, and ideas that challenge, or at least run counter to, many of the broadly positivist assumptions in our field about what counts as valid knowledge, the possibility and importance of generalizability, and the purpose of enquiry itself. For those who adopt it, such a sensibility raises a variety of further challenges including the Challenges of Science and Technology as Historical Subjects, Silences in the Archives, and The Objectifying and Instrumentalizing Gaze of History [6]. How we respond to these challenges will frame the specific form that historicism takes on in CSCW.

## 2 PANEL GOALS AND OUTCOMES

This panel aims to convene CSCW scholars to think through what a wide historicist approach in CSCW will look like in practice. We specifically aim to begin the groundwork to develop a community of scholars working towards some of the challenges identified during the last CSCW workshop and in the intervening years.

In presenting this in a panel format, we hope to open the discussion to the wider CSCW community, simultaneously 1) bringing forth the sophistication of the discussion that has been developed in

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workshops, papers and special issues and 2) opening that discussion for others to contribute additional views, experience, or criticisms.

Reflecting these goals, the panel organizers have identified a set of panelists, some of whom have been part of the workshops and papers, and others who have not. The panelists come from different disciplinary backgrounds, are at different career stages, and each offer distinct views on historicism within CSCW. The panel will be chaired and moderated by one of the organizers, Robert Soden.

### 3 PANELISTS

- Seyram Avle (University of Massachusetts at Amherst)
- Laura Forlano (Northeastern University)
- David Ribes (University of Washington)
- Megh Marathe (Michigan State University)
- Nathan Ensmenger (University of Indiana at Bloomington)

### 4 PANEL STRUCTURE

We have assembled CSCW experts who are historically minded but come from different disciplinary backgrounds, and with diverging commitments as to what counts as good historical work. Historical research always faces the tension of being both empirical - trying to tell 'what happened', and necessarily also being political, in the sense of valorizing some points of view over others. In CSCW, we also have the additional and distinct challenge of incorporating historical understandings into the design of artifacts and systems. Our panelists reflect a range of positions on these challenges.

Our five panelists will each present a brief provocation on the topic of historical research or method for the field of CSCW. We have asked the panelists to be crisp and clear, provocative but not polemic. Each panelist will be offered three prompts to respond to; they can in addition bring an artefact that demonstrates some elements of their responses to these prompts:

- What is history for?
- What does good historical work look like?
- And, what is distinct for historicism in CSCW compared to other disciplines?

These are intentionally heated questions. For example, even asking what history is 'for' implies a kind of needed utility, an extracted value from doing research. Or, asking what counts as 'good' historical research gets at some of the most challenging questions for any field: what is good evidencing? What (if at all) is the nature of being objective? How should or should one not be political in research? We expect that some of these tensions will unfold during the panel discussions.

Following the five presentations, the moderator will pose 2-3 framing questions related to challenges or debates surrounding the adoption of historicist approaches within CSCW and allow each of the panelists to respond. With this groundwork in place will then open the floor to a moderated discussion involving organizers, panelists, and the audience.

#### 4.1 Timetable (90mins)

- Introduction (5 mins)
- Five Four-Minute Presentations/Provocations (20 mins)
- Moderated Open Discussion (60 mins)
- Closing Comments, Next Steps (5 mins)

#### 4.2 Practicalities and Resources required

Projector and screen for presentations.

### 5 WEBSITE

The panel will be advertised and documented at the website: <https://cscwhistory.wordpress.com>.

### 6 PANEL ORGANIZERS AND PANELISTS

*David Ribes* is associate professor in the Department of Human Centered Design and Engineering (HCDE) and director of the Data Ecologies Lab (deLAB) at the University of Washington. He is a sociologist of science and technology who focuses on the development and sustainability of research infrastructures (i.e., networked information technologies for the support of interdisciplinary science); their relation to long-term changes in the conduct of science; and, historical transformations in objects of research.

*Robert Soden* is an assistant professor in the Department of Computer Science and the School of the Environment at the University of Toronto, where he organizes the Toronto Climate Observatory. Robert's work draws on human-computer interaction, science and technology studies, and design to evaluate and improve the information systems we use to understand and respond to socio-environmental challenges such as climate change and disaster.

*Seyram Avle* is Associate Professor of Global Digital Media at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where she studies the situated practices and discourses of digital technology culture and innovation in the global south. This includes examining the various ways that digital technologies are designed, produced, used, and distributed transnationally in the global south, and taking a critical approach towards unpacking the socio-economic and political implications of changing techno-cultures.

*Sarah Fox* is an Assistant Professor at Carnegie Mellon University in the Human Computer Interaction Institute, where she directs the Tech Solidarity Lab. Her research focuses on how technological artifacts challenge or propagate social exclusions by examining existing systems and building alternatives.

*Phoebe Sengers* is a professor in Information Science and Science and Technology Studies at Cornell. Her group integrates ethnography, history, and design to explore rural, working-class, and Global South experiences of technologies, trace emerging entanglements between people and data, and speculate about alternative pasts and futures. Her current primary project is a design history and ethnography of rural infrastructure in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada.

*Laura Forlano* Laura Forlano is Professor in the department of Art + Design at the College of Arts, Media, and Design (CAMD) at Northeastern University. Her research is focused on the aesthetics and politics of socio-technical systems and infrastructures at the intersection between emerging technologies, material practices and the future of cities; specifically,

she writes about emergent forms of work, organizing and urbanism.

*Nathan Ensmenger* is an Associate Professor in Informatics at the University of Indiana at Bloomington and a professionally trained historian. His research focuses on the social and cultural history of software and software workers, the history of artificial intelligence, and questions of gender and identity in computer programming. He is currently working on a book exploring the global environmental history of the electronic digital computer.

*Megh Marathe* is an assistant professor in the Department of Media & Information and Center for Bioethics & Social Justice at Michigan State University. Their research seeks to foster inclusion in expert practices and technologies by centering the experiences of marginalized people. Their work critically examines classification, time, and expertise.

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