Who Has an Interest in "Public Interest Technology"?: Critical Questions for Working with Local Governments & Impacted Communities

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Local governments use a wide array of software, algorithms, and data systems across domains such as policing, probation, child protective services, courts, education, public employment services, homelessness services, etc. A growing body of work in CSCW and HCI has emerged to study, design, or demonstrate the boundaries of these technologies, oftentimes working with local governments. Local governments ostensibly aim to serve the public. So, some prior work has collaborated with local governments in the name of the public interest. However, others argue that local governments primarily police poor, minoritized communities, especially with increasingly limited funding for public services such as education or housing. These tensions raise critical questions: (How) should researchers collaborate with local governments? When should we oppose governments? How do we ethically engage with communities without being extractive? In this one-day workshop, we will bring together researchers from academia, the public sector, and community organizations to first take stock of work around public interest technologies. We will reflect on critical questions to orient the future of public interest technology and how we can work with, around, or against local governments while centering impacted communities.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: public interest technology, government algorithms, child welfare, public services, impacted communities

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1 INTRODUCTION

Local governments have long used information communication technologies (ICTs) such as digital platforms and databases that have allowed them to collect cross-sector data about denizens. This extensive cross-sector data has allowed local governments to invest in algorithms that assist in making everyday decisions regarding human lives, including which neighborhoods to police [5, 23], which families to investigate by child protective services [8, 31], where and how to educate children [15, 30], who to give unemployment benefits and employment services to [2, 16, 25, 36], and which houseless people to give housing to [39]. Much prior work in CSCW and HCI on civic technologies, digital civics, and public sector algorithms has focused on improving civic participation in government or building trust between local governments and communities, e.g. [3, 6, 11, 12, 31]. Many have collaborated with local governments, oftentimes to design, improve, or demonstrate the limitations of these technologies, e.g. [8, 16, 20, 34, 41]. Much of this research in collaboration with local governments is conducted in the name of the public interest, since the work of local governments is ostensibly centered in helping people. However, other work has raised concerns that centering local governments and attempting to build trust may exclude marginalized communities who have been harmed by the state and "do not want to stay positive" [38].

Public interest technology (PIT) has gained significant momentum in the last few years, with researchers advocating for defunding Big Tech and refunding communities [4], focusing on collective action and supporting community-led organizations [33], bringing a grassroots perspective to design practices that lead to equitable solutions [14], and taking direct action through conducting audits of public sector algorithms and making them available to the public (e.g. www.ledighedsalgoritmen.dk) [37]. This momentum is also evident in the development of the Public Interest Technology University Network (PIT-UN) in the United States that seeks to advance technologies that put communities at the center of policy-making processes [17]. However, there are still critical questions that need to be reckoned with, especially regarding political questions such as: Who decides what is in the public interest? How do we balance the needs of communities against the demands of policymakers? How do we uplift the voices of marginalized communities and offer ongoing support? In this workshop, we will first take stock of work around public interest technologies in CSCW and HCI. We aim to bring together a diverse group of researchers, practitioners, policymakers, public sector workers, and community organizers to discuss these pertinent questions and help identify best practices, challenges, and solutions for engaging in research on public interest technology and collaborating with local governments.

2 WORKSHOP THEMES

Taking Stock of Public Interest Technology

In HCI and CSCW, disparate kinds of work related to local governments or "the public" have been called public interest technology, public algorithms, public sector technology, civic technology, or digital civics. Though very similar, these labels may conjure up different connotations. For example, public interest technology focuses "on social justice, the common good, and/or the public interest" [9], whereas other definitions may only require working with local governments (regardless of their commitment to justice or "the common good"). In this theme, we encourage participants to identify work that they think defines public interest technology. We then encourage them to reflect on how we should conduct work on public sector technology in the future [22]. Questions related to this theme include:

- What counts as public interest technology and who decides what is in the public interest?
- How do we center justice-oriented principles in public interest technology research?
- What methods are useful for studying public interest technology and uncovering systemic biases?

- What is missing from current or past work on public sector technology?

Centering Impacted Communities

How should we center impacted communities that have been harmed by local governments? Local governments around the world play a "dual" and often "paradoxical role" [28] of both harming and helping the public; depending on the time and the community, governments may harm more than help. Recently, researchers have drawn attention to the *breakdown of municipalities as caring platforms* [22], i.e. instead of investing in public institutions that serve citizens, policymakers are adopting harsh austerity measures that deprive these institutions of funding. Some argue that in the last few decades (in the U.S.) suburbanization, deindustrialization, and the gutting of the welfare state has pushed local governments to primarily police, surveil, gatekeep resources, and extract wealth from poor, Black, and Brown communities [40]. Mass movements to stop extrajudicial murders of Black people have put conversations around the abolition of police [13, 18, 27], child protective services [1, 29], and policing by any other name [35] at the forefront of public discourse. Yet, local governments are still one of the only places that poor, homeless, or otherwise needy people can get assistance. These tensions raise pressing questions for CSCW and HCI researchers who want to center impacted communities while working in the public sector. This theme offers the opportunity for researchers to consider their own positionality, as well as overlapping systems of oppression that many communities impacted by local governments face. Questions related to this theme include:

- If we want to serve the public interest, (how) should we work with local governments?
- (How) should we work in solidarity with impacted communities directly, even to circumvent or oppose government agencies?
- How do we ethically engage with these communities without being extractive?
- What should justice-oriented work on public interest technologies look like under carceral capitalism?

Critical Reflections on Local Government Collaboration

The previous theme focused on how marginalized communities are being harmed by local governments. It may be tempting to say that researchers should simply stop working with these governments. However, researchers may be able to work with governments in order to push them to be more supportive, or at least less harmful. Furthermore, some of the most pressing evidence of systemic injustices comes from working directly with street-level government officials in these systems [2, 7, 10, 19, 32, 38]. Researchers' discomfort and disturbing observations when engaging with public sector 'tech projects' can be turned into a resource for design, as Petersen et al. [26] demonstrate. The goal of this theme is to reflect on tensions, difficulties, and problems that researchers face when working with local governments. To this end, we will ask:

- What value conflicts may arise when researchers work with local governments?
- (How) should researchers work with public sector unions or nonprofits whose work is closely aligned with local governments?
- (How) should we decenter governments in our work (and center communities instead)?
- When should we work against the government?

3 CALL FOR PARTICIPATION

We will recruit 40-45 participants (not including the organizers) who work on, are impacted by, or are interested in public interest technologies. This may include researchers, government workers (such as social workers), non-profit workers, activists, or people who have been impacted by local governments, e.g. through policing, prisons, child protective services, unemployment services, or homeless services. We will publicize the workshop through mailing lists, social media, and organizations that work on public sector technology. Interested participants will be asked to contribute a brief statement of interest to the workshop. Submissions can take several forms, including: **1)** a short bio with a statement of motivation/interest for attending this workshop, **2)** a two-page position paper discussing one or more themes highlighted in this proposal, or **3)** a case study discussing ongoing work in public interest technology, or **(4)** other formats with content that relates to public interest technology and the workshop themes. For researchers, the point of their position papers should be to reflect on their own work on involvement with local governments. The point of community participants' contributions is to lend real-world perspective about local governments and how CSCW researchers can work in solidarity with communities in the future [24]. Each submission will be reviewed by two organizers and accepted based on quality of the submission and diversity of perspectives to allow for a meaningful exchange of knowledge between a broad range of stakeholders.

4 WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES AND GOALS

The primary goal of this one-day workshop is to bring together a community of practitioners focused on public interest technology. To address common challenges of virtual workshops, like accessibility issues, disconnect, or distraction from participants' remote workspaces, we will survey participants before the workshop to ask about participants' timezones, accessibility needs, and workshop constraints. We will use the results of these surveys to guide the exact logistics of our workshop. However, we plan to organize the workshop around the following activities -

- **Keynote** *(30 minutes)*: A keynote speaker who has experience working with local government agencies and community advocates will share their insights on critical issues in public interest technology.
- **Lightning talks** *(1 hour)*: Participants will introduce themselves, their work, or their position papers.
- **Breakout room discussions** *(1 hour)*: Participants will break into rooms organized by workshop themes and use a Miroboard to map out key ideas, themes, challenges/questions, and resources specific to the respective theme.
- **Plenary discussions** *(1.5 hours)*: All participants will reconvene to share what they discussed in breakout rooms, including key ideas, challenges, opportunities, resources, and takeaways to allow for ongoing engagement after the workshop.
- **Closing remarks** *(20 minutes)*: Organizers will synthesize key takeaways from discussions, identify next steps for building a stronger community on public interest technology, and open a Discord server for all to join.

We will invite a keynote speaker and begin the workshop with a 30-minute keynote followed by participant introductions. We will alternate between smaller group activities and plenary discussions throughout the day to allow participants to engage with a different groups of attendees. There will be 15-minute breaks between sessions and a longer 40 minute mid-day break. We plan on using a website (https://sites.google.com/umn.edu/critical-public-tech), a Discord server, Zoom, Miro boards, and a Google Drive shared with participants to coordinate activities before, during, and after the workshop. We will use a website to distribute information, including the workshop description and proposal, relevant related work and media, call for participation (with instructions and deadlines), workshop agenda, and participant information. We will create a Discord server to allow for participants to interact with each

other asynchronously, as well as to share updates and reminders with them (alongside the information shared on the website) throughout the workshop. The workshop will primarily be held on Zoom, where participants will engage in conversation, socializing, talks, presentations, and breakout room discussions. Throughout the workshop, we will also have a designated note-taker(s) who will take notes on a shared Google Doc, to support accessibility and ongoing documentation. We will share all workshop information, including any materials that participants allow, in a shared Google Drive and smaller breakout activities will also utilize Miro boards. We include a variety of video-, audio-, and text-based ways of engaging to support participants with a diversity of visual, hearing, speech, and cognitive abilities.

5 WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

The expected outcomes of this workshop are as follows –

- **Community building.** Bringing together a community of researchers, practitioners, and community organizers will allow for an exchange of knowledge and build collaborations on projects centered in public interest technology.
- **Compilation of resources.** Informed by contributions and discussions during the workshop, we will put together a compilations of resources on a virtual whiteboard for a wider audience to engage with beyond the workshop.
- **Sharing insights.** We will summarize and share notes and with the broader CSCW community through the website, blog posts, or potentially an academic publication
- **Ongoing interactions.** We will keep the Discord server open to workshop participants to continue to develop a larger community of public interest technology researchers.

These outcomes will help people engage in public interest technology and use each other's expertise to develop a deeper understanding of opportunities and challenges when working with local governments and impacted communities.

6 ORGANIZERS

Logan Stapleton is a Ph.D. candidate in the GroupLens Lab at University of Minnesota and a visiting student at Carnegie Mellon University. His current work focuses on how machine learning algorithms perpetuate discrimination and surveillance, as well as how technology and data science can support families impacted by the child welfare system.

Devansh Saxena is a PhD candidate in the Department of Computer Science at Marquette University. His research focuses on studying algorithmic systems used in the public sector, especially the child welfare system. His current work examines collaborative child-welfare practice where decisions are mediated by policies, practice, and algorithms.

Anna Kawakami is a Ph.D. student in Carnegie Mellon University's Human-Computer Interaction Institute. Her work focuses on understanding whether and how we could achieve human-AI complementarity in real-world, social decision-making domains. She is interested in using mixed and participatory methods to address questions related to model, interface, and organizational design.

Tonya Nguyen is a Ph.D. student in University of California, Berkeley's School of Information. Her work is in the field of human-computer interaction, social computing, and new media. She has conducted research on public school assignment algorithms and mutual aid organizations.

Asbjørn Ammitzbøll Flügge is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Computer Science, at the University of Copenhagen. His research interest is in algorithmic systems in public services, in particular employment services. His current work focuses on how algorithmic systems impact caseworkers' practices, as well as elderly job seekers perspectives on these technologies.

Motahhare Eslami is an assistant professor at the School of Computer Science, Human-Computer Interaction Institute (HCII), and Institute for Software Research (ISR), at Carnegie Mellon University. She earned her Ph.D. in Computer Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Motahhare's research goal is to investigate the existing accountability challenges in algorithmic systems and to empower the users of algorithmic systems, particularly those who belong to marginalized communities or those whose decisions impact marginalized communities, make transparent, fair, and informed decisions in interaction with algorithmic systems. Motahhare's work has been recognized with a Google Ph.D. Fellowship, Best Paper Award at ACM CHI, and has been covered in mainstream media such as Time, The Washington Post, Huffington Post, the BBC, Fortune, and Quartz. Motahhare's research is supported by NSF, Amazon, Google, Facebook, and Cisco.

Naja Holten Møller is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Computer Science, at University of Copenhagen – and founder of the Confronting Data Co-Lab (www.confrontingdata.dk). Her work centers on how data-driven technologies introduce continual forms of change to public sector decision-making processes, impacting citizens and non-citizens and other stakeholders who engage with these processes.

Min Kyung Lee is an Assistant Professor in the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin and directs a Human-AI Interaction lab at UT Austin. Her lab aims to build more just and empowering workplaces and cities by creating technology that strengthens individual and collective human decision-making. Dr. Lee has conducted some of the first studies that empirically examine the social implications of algorithms' emerging roles in management and governance in society. She has extensive expertise in developing theories, methods and tools for human-centered AI and deploying them in practice through collaboration with real-world stakeholders and organizations. In her work, she developed a participatory framework that empowers community members to design matching algorithms that govern their own communities [21]. She has also worked with gig workers to co-design different ways to leverage data and AI to improve their well-being [42]. Workers' design ideas included personalized recommendations that balance financial, physical, and psychological well-being, incentive designs co-created by workers and companies, and collective sense-making and auditing platforms.

Shion Guha is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto where he is part of the Critical Computing Group and directs the Human-Centered Data Science lab. His work centers on algorithmic decision-making and public policy with focus on child welfare, criminal justice and healthcare.

Kenneth Holstein is an Assistant Professor in Carnegie Mellon University's Human-Computer Interaction Institute where he directs the CoALA Lab. His work explores human-AI complementarity, as well as how the design, development, evaluation, and oversight processes for human-algorithm decision systems can be improved in practice.

Haiyi Zhu is an Assistant Professor in Carnegie Mellon University's Human-Computer Interaction Institute, where she directs the Social AI Lab. She is a social computing researcher and her research lies at the intersection of human-computer interaction, machine learning, and social psychology.

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