
Queer(ing) HCI: Problem or paradox

Jean Hardy

School of Information
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA
jkhardy@umich.edu

Abstract

This position paper reviews frameworks and theories from queer studies and Queer HCI. It ends with provocations for the workshop.

Author Keywords

Queer HCI; LGBT; queer theory

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous

Introduction

Fortunate for many of us and thanks to many of us, there have been steadily increasing conversations in the CSCW and CHI about the role of gender and sexuality in the design of sociotechnical systems. As an attendee of the CHI 2014 workshop, "Perspectives on Gender & Product Design," and the CSCW 2015 workshops, "Feminism and Feminist Approaches in Social Computing" and "Let's Talk About Sex (Apps), CSCW," I have been privy to some of these conversations and hope to continue my involvement in these important communities of practice.

I am a second-year PhD student at the University of Michigan School of Information, advised by Silvia Lindtner and Tiffany Veinot. I am broadly interested in the ways in which identity and social systems, particularly queerness, class, and rurality, affect the

creation, transmission, storage, and access of information in social settings. My most recent research has focused on ethnographic investigation into the lives and world-making practices of rural LGBT people in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, paying special attention to the role of social media, community organizations, and generational divides in the local communities I engage with. I'll be presenting some results from my fieldwork later this week [6] and draw primarily from this work as my inspiration for this position paper.

Sensibilities in queer studies

I draw particular inspiration from scholars at the intersection of media studies and queer studies, especially Mary Gray and Michael Warner. I outline these frameworks in hopes that they may be helpful for workshop conversations.

In his article, "Publics and Counterpublics," Warner builds on the work of Jürgen Habermas's public sphere [4] and Nancy Fraser's subaltern counterpublics [2] to explicate the ways marginalized people discursively create their own alternative public sphere (counterpublic). A counterpublic positions itself against a broader dominant public sphere. In their seminal article, "Sex in Public," Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner approach conversation using a framework of world-making:

"By queer culture we mean a world-making project, where 'world,' like 'public,' differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright. The queer world is a space of entrances, exits,

unsystematized lines of acquaintance, project horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies. World-making, as much in the mode of dirty talk as of print-mediated representation, is dispersed through incommensurate registers, by definition unrealizable as community or identity" (558).

Queer culture is not solely created through official or normative publics (e.g. newspapers, non-profits, state recognition) or through private embodiments of sexuality (i.e. behind closed doors, in the bedroom). It is placed and spaced in ways that are ephemeral and concrete while still fleeting. Counterpublics and world-making take into consideration discourse and the built environments of queer culture in a way that may allow for us to better get at the intangibilities.

Drawing on Fraser and Warner, Mary Gray argues [3] that publics and counterpublics are inherently urban-biased. Specifically, the kind of queer world-making that is made possible through counterpublics necessitates a large group of queer strangers relating to the same counterpublics in the same geographic area. Additionally, access to capital, both social and economic, is required to materialize queerness in the form of shops, bars, etc. As Gray says, "Rural queer- and LGBT-identifying young people cannot achieve the kind of critical mass or amassing of capital described [by Warner]" (94). Gray proposes boundary public, which combines the work of Fraser and Warner with that of Star and Griesemer's boundary objects [8]. She defines boundary publics as "iterative, ephemeral experiences of belonging that circulate across the outskirts and through the center(s) of a more recognized and validated public sphere" (93). Boundary

publics have a “permeable and malleable consistency...that makes them simultaneously recognizable and elusive to onlookers and constituents, a quality of foggy familiarity tinged with ambiguity that proves critical to queer work in rural communities” (95). Boundary publics become/are spaces that rural LGBT people circulate through in temporary stints, from the aisles of Wal-Mart to the pages of a video blog.

Queer HCI: A concept in progress

I title this section so because I am in the middle of grappling with the (so far) short history of Queer HCI. Drawing from queer theory, Ann Light [7] proposes a study of Queer HCI that investigates resistance to computing through the process of queering wherein queering is defined as “problematizing apparently structural and foundational relationships with critical intent” (432). Queering is a complex idea fraught with conflict in the world of queer theory. As David Halperin [5] writes:

“The next step was to despecify the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or transgressive content of queerness, thereby abstracting ‘queer’ and turning it into a generic badge of subversiveness, a more trendy version of ‘liberal’: if it’s queer, it’s politically oppositional, so everyone who claims to be progressive has a vested interest in owning a share of it. Finally, queer theory, being a theory instead of a discipline, posed no threat to the monopoly of the established disciplines: on the contrary, queer theory could be incorporated into each of them, and it could then be applied to topics in already established fields. Those working in English, history, classics, anthropology, sociology, or religion would now have the option of using queer theory, as they had previously used

Deconstruction, to advance the practice of their disciplines—by ‘queering’ them. The outcome of those three moves was to make queer theory a game the whole family could play. This has resulted in a paradoxical situation: as queer theory becomes more widely diffused throughout the disciplines, it becomes harder to figure out what’s so very queer about it, while lesbian and gay studies, which by contrast would seem to pertain only to lesbians and gay men, looks increasingly backward, identitarian, and outdated” (341-342).

The transformation of queering into something that becomes synonymous with “troubling” as used in gender theory strips queer of its sexuality unless it is subversive. While I in no way see this as the intention of Light, by introducing this concept into HCI in this way without a purposeful engagement with the contentious history of queer theory, there’s a potential loss of things queer which do are not subversive or do not “trouble” normative notions of sexuality or technology. Where does that leave those queer people who work with instead of subverting? Where does that leave queer sexuality when we talk about HCI? Silvia Lindtner and myself write in our most recent work [6] that we believe that Queer HCI should account for the many different ways that queer subjectivity is experienced through technology, even if that means engaging with the status-quo. While an emphasis that we can (and should) focus on queerness at times may not be inherently intersectional in practice, I believe that it is often necessary to center certain identities in our analysis without precluding others.

Provocation for the Intersectional Futures of Queer HCI

How do we reconcile crossover in messy terms such as troubling, queering, and appropriation? Do we need to reconcile?

How do we differentiate intersectional design practices from universal design practices? In particular, if/when designers claim universal design addresses issues of intersectionality in its universalism, how do we respond?

Instead of designing for particular identities or intersections of identities, how do we harness the already existing moments of making do, appropriation, etc. and collectively educate ourselves how to exploit technology that isn't designed for us?

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Silvia Lindtner and Stephen Molldrem.

References

1. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner. 1998. Sex in Public. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), 547-566.
2. Nancy Fraser. 1992. Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. In Craig Calhoun ed. *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 109-142. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.
3. Mary Gray. 2009. *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*. NYU Press.
4. Jürgen Habermas. 1991. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans.

Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.

5. David Halperin. 2003. The Normalization of Queer Theory. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 45(2), 339-343.
6. Jean Hardy and Silvia Lindtner. 2017. Constructing a Desiring User: Discourse, Rurality, and Design in Location-Based Social Networks. In *Proceedings of CSCW '17*.
7. Ann Light. 2011. HCI as Heterodoxy: Technologies of identity and the queering of interaction with computers. *Interacting with Computers*, 23, 430-438.
8. Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer. 1989. Institutional Ecology, 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39. *Social Studies of Science*, 19(3), 487-420.
9. Michael Warner. 2002. Publics and Counterpublics. *Public Culture*, 14(1), 49-90.