

'British HCI and UK SIGCHI Chapter' Town Hall meeting

Notes compiled by John Vines

Lincoln, UK - 16th July 2015

Overview:

The Town Hall was run with two purposes in mind. First, it was positioned as an opportunity for anyone attending British HCI 2015 to come together and share their views and feelings about the event itself (what worked well, what didn't) and the UK's HCI community as a whole. Second, the town hall offered an opportunity for discussion of the role the proposed ACM SIGCHI Chapter for the UK might play in facilitating or responding to some of these issues going forward. It was also, therefore, an opportunity to discuss the very notion of setting up the SIGCHI chapter, and what concerns or opportunities this might present.

The meeting was chaired by John Vines, who opened with a short overview of what the purpose of the meeting was, followed by an introduction to the initial motivations for initiating a ACM SIGCHI Chapter in the UK. The remainder of the meeting was an open discussion between those attending the event, focused around: what works, what doesn't work, and what could be done differently within the British HCI community going forward¹.

The main points from the meeting (detailed more extensively in the following)² were that the UK HCI community could benefit from:

- Events that focus less on traditional "paper presentation" conferences and more on promoting discussion, networking, collaboration and learning.
- Events (be these workshops, meetings, sandpits) that are more deeply tied to HCI funding opportunities and policy work.
- Events that are focused on opportunities for skills development, training and learning, and provide a space for young and new researchers to participate in events and even propose and organise them.
- Events that are very affordable, resource-light and accessible to a wide-range of people.
- Stronger advocacy of what is special and unique about UK HCI research, and the running of events that support making the most of these strengths and respond to weaknesses.
- Ways of making sense of the differences between HCI as researched in Universities and HCI as practiced in business and industry, and mechanisms to come together in meaningful ways that appreciate these differences.

¹ Of course, a disclaimer here is that the views aired at the meeting were just those attending the meeting, and should not be taken as representative of the UK HCI community.

² Be advised that the discussion at the Town Hall was unstructured, and these notes are my own interpretation of the many opinions and ideas that were expressed. I have written the notes in a way that I hope provides some contextualization to the points expressed yet does not attribute comments to specific individuals.

- Mechanisms for greater awareness of what HCI research goes on across the UK, and ways of exchanging what's going on that doesn't privilege only collocated events.
- Accredited undergraduate and postgraduate degrees that are based on criteria of greater relevance to contemporary HCI research and practice.
- Stronger advocacy from a group of UK-based HCI researcher to impact on policy and process (especially in light of the REF) and for the representation of UK research(ers) within the international ACM SIGCHI community.

Overall, there was a sense of support for initiating an ACM SIGCHI chapter in the UK, albeit with a view to identifying more precisely initial activities in the future based on some of the above suggestions. However, there were some concerns expressed about whether such activities need to be under the SIGCHI banner. At the same time, it appears that discussing what such a chapter could do gives purpose to discussions around the forms of events, advocacy and support UK HCI needs now and in the future.

Less conferences, more networking, learning and funding events

A number of the points raised at the meeting were about what role events like British HCI play in supporting the 'HCI community'³. One point raised was that the primary value of an event like British HCI was that it provided an opportunity to meet people, rather than listening to lots of talks. The workshops, doctoral networking event and the early career researcher lunch sessions were seen to be very valuable for this reason.

It was suggested that we look at SICSA (<http://www.sicsa.ac.uk/>) as an example of good practice for running a range of networking events, career development activities, doctoral conferences, and mini-sandpits that act as the starting point of funding applications. While SICSA has a remit to cover a whole range of computer science areas, HCI is one of its core research themes and it supports a range of HCI-specific activities such as an annual doctoral consortium and regular "all hands" events. Being funded by the Scottish Funding Council, SICSA events also support dialogue between policy, funding and action. While it was acknowledged that events like those that SICSA run are successful in part due to its significant support from the SFC, the involvement of EPSRC representatives in British HCI 2015, and the running of an event targeted specifically to Early Career Researchers, highlights that there are opportunities for increased overlap between community events and funding.

Other points raised at the meeting suggested running events less like conference and more like workshops, where those attending engage more deeply, interactively and reflectively around a specific topic. The AAAI Spring Symposia⁴ were suggested as a model that might promote a sense of lots of people gathering in one

³ I have placed HCI community in inverted commas to reference my own hesitation with using this term given the diversity and interdisciplinary nature of the field, and also to illustrate some concerns expressed throughout British HCI 2015 in regards to the sense of community felt across HCI.

⁴ <http://www.aaai.org/Symposia/Spring/spring-symposia.php>

place with more focused discussions (people can submit proposals for symposia, which are then run in parallel at a venue over the course of two and a half days, and at points during the event delegates report back on the discussion in individual symposia in plenary and networking sessions). It was further suggested that similar day-long events could be run on specific issues and themes within HCI, or that a conference might be a series of parallel SIGs and workshops rather than typical presentation sessions.

It was also noted that for small or under resourced groups, the BCS provides funding to seed organising events, especially for local and regional events. There was an acknowledgement however that these funds have been underutilised in the past. It was also noted that with a host of HCI oriented Centres for Doctoral Training in the UK, there is a chance to talk to Centre directors and the EPSRC to support doctoral student focused events.

A venue for training and learning

Building on the points raised around what the main purpose of events like British HCI could be, there was a common feeling at the meeting that one of their primary benefits was also a place for learning and training for younger researchers. One attendee explained how one of their most valuable experiences at British HCI in the past was it provided their first opportunity to publish their research and present to a research audience as an undergraduate. It might be that conferences like this could even more explicitly support future researchers, for example students at undergraduate and Master's level, to meaningfully publish their project work and have opportunities to present it to a national audience. This in itself might also provide a way of better promoting HCI to undergraduates, particularly those interested in research careers (be that research in academia or industry).

Another feature of the 2015 conference that was seen as working well was the doctoral networking event. Many traditional doctoral colloquiums follow a traditional model of students submitting their work for review, being accepted (or rejected), then on the day presenting their work for feedback from an expert panel. The main aim for the doctoral event this time however was to get lots of people together and got them working together in small groups instead. It was notable just how much the doctoral students interacted with each other throughout the rest of the conference having spent this time with each other. But also it was a learning event, and from the discussions within and following the doctoral event students were remarking on publishing routines within HCI and the critical role of "the reviewer".

A further point raised here was that the events themselves could not just be learning events, but that greater opportunities are given to doctoral students and post-docs to organize and run events. This requires a research community where those early in their research careers feel able to propose events in the first place, and if they were to organize them that people would come.

Affordable (i.e., very cheap) and accessible events

A further positive attribute of the 2015 conference was the cheap accommodation provided on the Lincoln campus. It was noted that many of the large conferences in HCI have considerable expenses attached to them, and that while British HCI is cheaper for people living in the UK to attend it is still not a cheap conference (2015 was £300 early bird, while previous conferences were £400-450), with accommodation costs on top. Going forward there was a suggestion to develop cheap and resource-light events that had cheap registration fees (following an arts and humanities model of conference fee) and cheap associated accommodation.

Championing and advocating 'UK HCI'

A number of points reflected tensions in how HCI is defined, and what is meant when we use terms like 'HCI community'. It was noted that within the UK there is often confusion about what the difference is between "digital economy" research and "human-computer interaction", and this is an issue that is one of perceptions from people outside of HCI and also a challenge within funding organisations (for example, confluences between the "digital economy" challenge theme and the "human-computer interaction" ICT theme within the EPSRC). On this latter point, there was seen to be substantial benefit in engaging the EPSRC pro-actively in a discussion around what is and what isn't HCI.

It was also raised that there is a perception that a lot of HCI research in the UK is rather different than that conducted elsewhere. One concern raised was that very often American reviewers and conference chairs don't always understand the approaches and concepts taken in "British" HCI research. The 2012 report on the EPSRC HCI theme day⁵ was brought up as it highlights a range of perceived strengths (and weaknesses) of the UK HCI research community, noting that a large amount of UK HCI work is interdisciplinary in its nature, increasingly conducted 'in the wild', design oriented and increasingly tied to participation and social action. There was a feeling that events like British HCI and other community oriented activities could provide a means for better articulating what these strengths are, identifying what differentiates us from other regions, and highlights the need for venues that are substantially different from CHI etc. These events might also be a way of responding to the perceived weaknesses of UK HCI research, including a lack of industry engagement or exchange (if that is the case).

Finally, there were a set of considerations offered that it would be worthwhile setting up an ACM SIGCHI UK Chapter to increase the advocacy of HCI in the UK. Having a collective who are open to being approached by funders, representatives of industry and organisations, being aware of who is doing what in HCI community in the UK and linking people together.

⁵ <https://www.epsrc.ac.uk/newsevents/pubs/report-of-the-epsrc-human-computer-interaction-theme-day-and-survey/>

It was also felt that a SIGCHI chapter in the UK would provide a means for championing UK researchers and practitioners within SIGCHI. It was noted that the number of events supported by SIGCHI that occur in the UK are still relatively limited given the presence of the UK within that community, and even more stark is the lack of UK representation on the SIGCHI committee.

HCI in Universities, in practice, and as a profession

A further set of more critical questions were raised at the meeting regarding what we (at the meeting) meant when we talked of the "HCI community". It was notable how absent practitioners were at the conference, and that at previous years there might have been a practitioner track or opportunities for demos of products from industry. There was some concern that if the focus of a conference like this and any SIGCHI Chapter were to be on issues to do with research skills and funding, publishing, reviewing and assessment exercises such as the REF, there is a danger of becoming irrelevant to the wider community of HCI practitioners. It was also noted that there increasing numbers of 'practitioner-researchers' in the UK who are employed by industry and agencies to conduct fieldwork and user experience studies around digital products and services but struggle to find a home in industry-oriented UXD conferences. With what seems to be a growing market for these hybrid researcher-practitioners around HCI, there might be opportunities here to link in with industry more strongly.

There were some counterpoints to the above views, however, where some felt that these are tensions common across all fields and disciplines, and that a conference that meaningfully supports the needs of 'academia' might be very different to one that supports the needs of 'practitioners'⁶. Despite this, there was some agreement at the meeting that in other fields there is greater engagement between professional bodies and practitioners in those fields.

Furthermore, there was also a desire to see HCI, UX and Interaction Design become more professionalized. Some concern were raised over the ways in which HCI courses gain accreditation and are defined as generalist or specialized degrees depending on whether it meets the criteria of the BCS Chartered Information Technology Practitioner. This led to a discussion around how much of the good work done in research is often not filtered into industry, and how many aspects of what is required to meet the CIPD are not so relevant to contemporary HCI. There was a further discussion here about the role the BCS plays in supporting contemporary HCI as a whole.

⁶ Following the town hall meeting, a number of us discussed Stuart Reeves' current research on HCI and UX research and practice, which discusses results of a survey targeting UX practitioners on how their work relates to HCI research. Some discussion of his results are on Stuart's blog here: <http://notesonresearch.tumblr.com/page/2#113160834753>