

Interviews with Volker Wulf and Myriam Lewkowicz on “The European Tradition of CSCW”

Alexander Richter · Michael Koch

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In 2015, BISE featured a special issue on “CSCW & Social Computing”. Whereas the special issue gave a global view of the field, the featured interviews with Jonathan Grudin and Jay Nunamaker were mainly focused on the American perspective on the field.

However, there is a European research tradition which is rather practice based and tries to understand and support cooperation in the real world by means of IT artifacts, in teams, organizations, or communities. This tradition which nowadays spans the whole world is institutionally represented by the European Society for Socially Embedded Technologies (EUSSET), which organizes the annual “European Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work” (ECSCW), the biannual Conference “Communities & Technologies” (C&T), and is responsible for the Journal on CSCW (JCSCW).

In this issue we want to enrich the material presented in the 2015 special issue with interviews with the current and the future chairs of EUSSET – about the past and the future of the European tradition of CSCW.



Prof. Dr. Volker Wulf
University of Siegen
Fakultät III
57068 Siegen
Germany
volker.wulf@uni-siegen.de

Volker Wulf holds the Chair of Information Systems and New Media at the University of Siegen and is the Vice-Director of the German Science Foundation Collaborative Research Centre ‘Media of Cooperation’ (DFG-SFB 1187). In addition, he heads the School of Media and Information (iSchool) at the University of Siegen and is additionally responsible for a research group at the Fraunhofer Institute for Applied Information Technology (FhG-FIT) in Sankt Augustin. After completing a double degree in Computer Science and Business Administration at the RWTH Aachen and the University of Paris VI, he gained his PhD at Dortmund University. The completion of his habilitation (from the Faculty of Computer Science, University of Hamburg) was followed by a research stay at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). As a Fulbright

Prof. Dr. A. Richter
IT University of Copenhagen, Rued Langgaards Vej 7,
2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark
e-mail: aric@itu.dk

Prof. Dr. M. Koch (✉)
Institut für Softwaretechnologie, Universität der Bundeswehr
München, Werner-Heisenberg-Weg 39, 85577 Neubiberg,
Germany
e-mail: michael.koch@unibw.de

Scholar, he spent a sabbatical at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and Stanford University, Palo Alto in 2006/7. Since 2011 he has officiated as Dean of Faculty III (School of Economic Disciplines) at the University of Siegen. He currently is the chair of the European Society for Socially Embedded Technologies (EUSSET).

BISE: Volker, one of the milestones in the history of the European tradition of CSCW was certainly the first, unofficial, ECSCW meeting in London in 1989, nearly 28 years ago. What has happened since then?

Wulf: CSCW is a community that originated from the rather dramatic change in what computing used to be. Up to the 1980s there was no personal computing. That means computers were large-scale machinery, they were rather far away from everyday life and also from every day workplace conditions. With the introduction of personal computing, and much later of mobile devices, the whole role of IT changed dramatically with regard to the support of work and other social practices in life. Against this background, ECSCW emerged as an interesting consortium, also supported by a Cost action (COMIC, a project financially supported by the European Union to hold networking events). The core group brought together people from a variety of fields, from ethnography, from participatory design, and rather traditional computer scientists who were open to what was happening in the application domain and open to interdisciplinary work with social scientists. The people who founded ECSCW were actually really bright intellectuals, so it was a movement of high intellectual energy. They managed to create a foundation over the years which is relevant far beyond the narrow concepts of computer supported work. In a way they created a tradition of thinking which is relevant to almost all fields of applied computing.

BISE: You mentioned ethnography. Is that something special for the European tradition and are there other things that stand out for ECSCW when you compare it to the international field of CSCW?

Wulf: Yes, that is a good point, and it was the reason for a lot of intellectual, organizational, and institutional struggle. The European tradition, to some extent, had some intellectual and epistemological homogeneity, in the sense that it tried to ground IT design in a profound understanding of work or life practices. In the US, the situation developed somewhat differently. The American CSCW community was always fragmented in different ways, also epistemologically. There were people that were very close to the so-called European type or approach. But other people still followed, for a long time, a rather positivist research agenda, in the beginning this was very much based on laboratory studies, 'not in the real world' types of research. Thus, the US colleagues were a little more divided. The Europeans were epistemologically more

homogenous and maybe this resulted in a larger intellectual impact. However, on an institutional scale one has to say that the US CSCW community has developed much better and attracted a much broader crowd to participate around the globe, whereas the European community was perceived over time as too close and narrow in its methods and focus, also in the way how they reviewed papers and so on. So while Europe had the advantage of a very successful intellectual movement, they could not really shape that into an institutionally attractive environment.

BISE: So, the strength and at the same time the weakness of the European tradition of CSCW was their epistemological homogeneity?

Wulf: Yes, you can argue that way. Well, on the European side we made a couple of mistakes. We did not integrate young people systematically which in the US has a longer tradition and was quite successful. Furthermore, the US community developed internally, also in discussions with the European community. Then you have to see that the Internet and social media platforms gained a larger importance, in the US specifically. So, the character of the US tradition also developed over time and still stayed broader than the European one. Moreover, I think that the industrial base is quite different. If you see what is going on in Silicon Valley: The success of Google, Facebook, parts of the Apple ecosystem is very much based on providing services and IT artifacts for a large group people, whereas in Europe, IT is very much related to work processes and practices, to the application of IT in various fields. Therefore, the funding schemes are very different in the US and in Europe. This creates different directions, foci and research styles.

BISE: Another aspect might be the role of workers' unions that are very strong in some European countries compared to the US, which had to be considered by ECSCW researchers.

Wulf: This is completely true [...] CSCW, like other applied computing domains, acts in practice. And the practice, the industrial practice or the practices in government or hospitals vary due to different institutional settings. There are differences throughout Europe, too. However, central and northern Europe have a certain shared tradition and history, also involving trade unions, at least to some extent, in co-designing work and work-supporting technologies. There are different traditions at play which gave come together in this interesting field.

BISE: If you compare the first ECSCW conferences and the recent one in Sheffield (in September 2017), are the challenges still the same?

Wulf: ECSCW had to undergo some institutional changes too, because it lost people and its participation shrank in a way that we could no longer accept. I think one of the biggest innovations was the idea to combine the

ECSCW conference with the Journal of CSCW which has a long tradition and is one of the highest rating journals in the international field of human-centered computing. By bringing these two media together in an interesting way, we were able to raise participation and also to increase the quality of submissions and specifically of accepted papers considerably.

BISE: And how did the research topics develop from 1989 until now?

Wulf: Well, CSCW comes out of office automation in a way. Office automation had the approach to automatize many parts of office work. You can understand CSCW as a counter-development or better a follow-up after the automation if it did not work as envisioned. It came up as a new paradigm which sort of looked not into automation but into support of work. When we look at the studies that have been carried out so far, we have very few studies dealing with support of work within manufacturing companies. There is a lot around offices, hospitals, and environments like that. In the last years you see a slight change. In Europe, this has also something to do with the fact that the founding schemes are developing towards the Internet of Things and Industry 4.0 type of research issues. So we see a widening of topics now in that way.

BISE: What are the biggest insights or successes of ECSCW?

Wulf: I think the biggest achievement of this European practice based tradition is to link a deep understanding of work and life practices with the design of innovative IT artifacts. Understanding and designing, bringing together those two activities, is a crucial achievement and maybe the core achievement that this tradition has brought. Those concepts have been taken over by other communities too, e.g., Information Systems, Human Computer Interaction, Computer Supported Collaborative Learning and Knowledge Management. The core success story is first of all epistemological and then, resulting from this, a research methodical stance. If you then look at what this research paradigm has created, you can point to a lot of interesting case studies which show how innovative technologies fit into practice and lead to more efficiency and a higher quality of labor. But it has also brought up some interesting concepts like awareness, expertise sharing, boundary objects, and spelt them out in a design oriented manner. So there are quite a couple of important concepts that have been developed, based upon profound empirical and design-oriented work in real-world organizations.



Prof. Dr. Myriam Lewkowicz
Université de Technologie de Troyes (UTT)
Pôle HETIC
12 Rue Marie Curie
CS 42060
10004 Troyes Cedex
France
myriam.lewkowicz@utt.fr

Myriam Lewkowicz is Full Professor of Informatics at Troyes University of Technology (France), where she heads the teaching program “Management of Information Systems”, and the pluridisciplinary research team Tech-CICO (UMR CNRS 6281). Her interdisciplinary research involves defining digital technologies to support existing collective practices or to design new collective activities. Over the past decade, the main area of application of this research has been health, with work on social support between people living in difficult situations (informal carers, isolated elderly people), and other work on the coordination between health professionals. In 2017 she was elected next chair of the European Society for Socially Embedded Technologies (EUSSET).

BISE: Myriam, you are part of the new generation of CSCW/HCI researchers and you have been especially active in the European CSCW community in the last years. How have you perceived the development?

Lewkowicz: It is interesting that in the last 10 years we have seen a number of European conferences from our field that have considerably shrunk, whereas at the same time the American conferences have flourished. Nevertheless, the European perspective on CSCW, as Volker described it in his interview, is well received. When you look at the publications, the American practice-focused research is growing. Additionally to what Volker said, I also think the American CSCW perspective was rather techno-centric before. It was dominated by the software industry. The studies in the beginning of the new Millennium rather demonstrated a system and its evaluation. Now, I see many more papers that show how the system is based on an

analysis of work practices and the use of the system is analyzed more deeply.

So, in summary, the European perspective had a big influence on how studies were carried out. But the European community was lagging behind. The European researchers were very active and published at the big American conferences like ACM CSCW, ACM CHI etc. But at the same time the European conferences were dying. No people, no money. A little desperate. At this point the decision was taken that the European community had to be renewed. We wanted to attract the young researchers.

BISE: Why should the European researchers send their papers to European conferences in the future? What is the added value of European CSCW conferences?

Lewkowicz: From a publication point of view there is no big difference. Perhaps now that ECSCW papers go into the JCSCW there is a small advantage by having your conference paper published in a journal automatically. But even more important than publishing is building a network. If you want to stay in Europe, then you need a network. And we help people build networks at the conferences. Moreover, we offer a focus. The conferences under the EUSSET auspices remain practice-focused. So participants get a good feeling for how this research is developing. ACM CHI and ACM CSCW have now become so big and so broad that it is hard to explore new things. You basically stick to the people you know.

BISE: There are not only CSCW and CHI, but also other conferences, like information systems conferences (ECIS, ICIS). How do you relate to them? What is special about ECSCW or other EUSSET conferences?

Lewkowicz: Again, we are smaller and much more focused. You will not find positivist research or a lot of quantitative research at ECSCW. At the same time, we are very interdisciplinary. We have social scientists and computer scientists. We think that complexity is nothing bad, but something interesting.

BISE: To come back to the history of ECSCW: There were times where there were academic fights between computer scientists and social scientists. There was much more work on systems, on design of systems. Today my feeling is that ECSCW is rather dominated by social sciences, one could say it has become a little bit too descriptive. What is the role of design nowadays?

Lewkowicz: Yes, I agree. Sometimes it is a bit frustrating to see merely descriptive papers that could also have gone to a social sciences conference. What is interesting for ECSCW is the mix. The current situation is based on a number of factors, such as the ways program committees are composed. ACM CHI and ACM CSCW have the same issue. What CSCW did was to create a sub-committee dedicated to systems work. We would like to see more design work. We think it is important to have the designers

and the social scientists at the same conference! They have to work together. Also very relevant in this context: funding schemes, which have a big impact here. Most of the money is coming from projects. And projects have a short life time, i.e. 3–4 years. This is too short if you really want to create an understanding, to build something, to create impact and to publish. Also, having an impact and answering the big questions is not the same. What do we want to do? Are the systems a way to understand phenomena? Or do we want to create impact, e.g., help people? These are different approaches to build systems. What is new and what is relevant is not the same. Sometimes people are not clear about their contribution, and different reviewers are interested in different types of contributions. What is a good system paper for ECSCW? We have to discuss this in the community.

BISE: In the information systems community there have been some discussions about ‘rigor’ (scientifically correct) vs. ‘relevance’ (creating impact), whereas it is not clear why it should not be both. Does this apply to this discussion about good systems papers, too?

Lewkowicz: In an ideal world it should be both. But we are suffering from a lack of systems papers and I think it can be sufficient to see an innovative, inspiring system that has not yet shown its promises. Other people could take this idea and rebuild the system in a way to create impact. Impact can also be on the long term – and that is more difficult to document in usual papers.

BISE: Openness of the community, interdisciplinarity, ... what does EUSSET do to arrive at that?

Lewkowicz: On the scientific side, I am not sure. From the organizational point of view, we for example try to stay a single track conference to bring people together and discuss. In addition, we are organizing a summer school, exchange programs and PhD courses. We want to support our people, especially young researchers, to experience different disciplines and approaches ... and yet stay focused on practices. So, the differences are not so much in the conferences themselves, but in all the side issues. At the conferences you see things you want to do, but in the other events you learn how to do them.

BISE: Is there anything we can learn from or adopt from successful CSCW/HCI conferences such as ACM CHI?

Lewkowicz: I do not think that CHI is a good example. CHI is successful as a place where everybody wants to publish. But it is not a community-building event. CHI is huge. It is so big you cannot meet anyone. But we can surely further improve our conferences. One thing I like in the conferences of other fields is that people present preliminary work that is discussed intensively at the conference. In this year’s ECSCW I think the exploratory papers presentations were quite successful in this sense. This is a

way to have a discussion during the conference and work it into the full paper afterwards. We will continue this effort.

BISE: About the content of the research – what should European CSCW try to achieve in the future?

Lewkowicz: At the same time we lost some systems work, we also lost conceptual work. We do not have a lot of papers reflecting and providing new concepts to tackle

coordination and collaboration. This is also true for new systems. Additionally, we also should look into what we could say to the world about work. Work is evolving – and the European CSCW community has a view on this that is quite different from the American and Chinese views. We have something to say and should do so.