Human-Centred AI or AI-Enabled HCI?

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Abstract

This panel will prompt the audience to discuss how AI is transforming HCI while still holding aspirations to make AI more human-centred. Like many other disciplines, HCI is facing a crisis, having to decide how, what, and when to use AI in its research and practice. The panel will begin by examining the impact that human-centred AI has had on society and technology development, and conversely, reflect on what we as a community should be doing in the face of GenAI being increasingly used in research and practice. Finally, we will ask the audience to consider the merits and dangers of a world where GenAI takes over much of what used to be done by 'hand and head'.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; **HCI theory, concepts and models**; **Interaction paradigms**.

Keywords

Human-Centred Artificial Intelligence, Interaction Design, Synthetic data, AI-enabled HCI, ethics and AI

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1 Introduction

In the early 2020s, there was a call to arms for making AI systems more human-centred. This was meant to widen the AI agenda from being largely technical in its aspirations to one that is concerned with humans and, more broadly, with societal needs. A core part of this was a move towards responsible AI, that is reliable, competent and trustworthy. However, it is beginning to feel like the balance between AI and HCI is increasingly shifting towards AI helping HCI. As many of us are discovering, GenAI can now competently perform a wide range of UX tasks and research activities that were previously handled by human practitioners and researchers. Not only can it do extensive desk research at lightning speed, it can also simulate users, run hypothetical experiments, create synthetic data, conduct thematic analysis, design new websites, write code, and even write an impressive CHI paper. The panel will address what we as a field should be doing about these developments. Do we embrace all the changes afoot or try to put our foot down and resist? Moreover, what will it mean for us as a community as our field continues to move ever more towards being AI-enabled HCI?

2 Human-Centred AI

An overarching goal of human-centred AI is that AI should augment people in their tasks rather than replace them. The Stanford Institute of HAI (human-centred AI), launched in 2019, was one of the first to publish its mission with this framing, namely, "to advance AI research, education, policy and practice to improve the human condition" through researching, predicting and understanding the human and societal impact of AI while also "designing and creating AI applications that augment human capabilities" (hai.stanford.edu). By collaborating more with AI researchers and developers, HCI researchers can generate new framings and questions, provide new models of human-AI interactions, while designing new kinds of user interfaces for AI systems. Enabling the human to remain in control of an AI system—whether it is a new automated home thermostat, a self-driving car or a complex process control system—was also considered paramount to the agenda of human-centred AI [7].

When GenAI announced itself in late 2022, everything changed. While it was clear to those who were early advocates of human-centred AI what needed to be done, it became less so once GenAI was able to achieve ever more remarkable feats by performing all manner of knowledge tasks. The tables were turned, prompting some to question how ChatGPT will change HCI in ways previously unimaginable.

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3 AI-Enabled HCI

For example, Schmidt et al. [6] published a provocative piece in the CACM about how GenAI is redesigning the very core of what Interaction Design is. They pointed out how the need for direct involvement of humans in the design process will be significantly reduced as LLMs are able to encode human experiences, feelings, propensities, demographics, findings, data, designs, while in an instant able to generate personas, scenarios, experimental designs, surveys, transcripts, statistics, and more. Another potential benefit is the use of LLMS to enhance the scalability and representation of diverse target groups, particularly in cases where authentic user data is challenging to obtain.

Elagroudy et al. [3] also note that HCI research cycles can be carried out much more quickly by using GenAI, such as in the processes of research planning, data collection, analysis, and synthesis. While these developments are in many ways inevitable and can be seen as a positive development, there has been a backlash against it. Some researchers are outraged at it being used to replace what was previously sacrosanct human skills. For example, just recently, an open letter [5] was published that was widely circulated among researchers arguing how wrong it is to use GenAI for the qualitative method of reflexive thematic analysis [2] – an approach in HCI that is commonly used for developing, analysing, and interpreting patterns within a qualitative data set, such as interviews. Given that thematic analysis involves identifying patterns in language, it would seem like an ideal candidate for GenAI. However, the core argument of the letter's proponents is that reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) is essentially a human practice involving meaning-making, which GenAI is incapable of. Furthermore, GenAI lacks human consciousness and the ability to understand in the way we humans do. Therefore, we should not use it for this purpose.

The open letter went viral, with over 400 qualitative researchers signing it, all strongly opposed to the use of GenAI in RTA. However, it led others to defend the use of GenAI in qualitative research. For example, Friese [4] pointed out in a blog how the argument in the letter is based on a false premise: namely, the assumption that GenAI is being proposed as a replacement for the researcher's reflexive sense-making role, and that "rejecting GenAI because "it cannot do meaning-making" is like rejecting highlighters because "they cannot interpret a text." She argues that instead of advocating for an outright ban on the use of GenAI, we should consider how human researchers can utilise GenAI as tools to augment their work.

For the HCI community, it requires us to reflect on how GenAI tools are currently being used. Several studies are emerging that demonstrate how they can simulate human behaviour in various ways, for example, enabling surveys and interviews to yield findings that are more human-like. Other reports are demonstrating how ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude and other GenAI tools can be used to get started on a project, speeding up the research process by an order of magnitude while suggesting ideas and methods that human researchers may not have considered. There are also companies that now provide UX services, claiming to significantly reduce the cost and time required to perform UX tasks by utilising GenAI. For example, Synthetic Users (www.syntheticusers.com/) state on their website that they will conduct user research without the need for real users, instead using "human-like AI participants" and the most advanced GenAI to generate synthetic interviews that are accurate and can inform the design process.

Another core design method that is relatively easy to augment or replace has been the development of personas. A persona is typically used to augment basic user requirements, helping designers think more concretely about what and whom they are designing for. In a nutshell, it is a description of someone who is a target user, in terms of their personality, likes, dislikes, goals, pain points, motivations, etc. It comes as no surprise to see how GenAI is being used now to generate synthetic personas for all manner of products, both current and those for the future. They can be convincing and useful. However, objections have been raised by researchers with some claiming they are harmful [1], since it is unclear how they were generated, and the extent to which they are representative – concerns which are not an issue when humans have generated them. There is the danger, too, that biases may creep in and real users may be inadvertently excluded.

Furthermore, others have expressed their anguish at letting AI do what they have spent years training themselves to become skilled at. There is also a darker side emerging as to how genAI is being used behind our backs. For example, it has been discovered that significant numbers of participants who take part in online user studies, via Prolific or Amazon Mechanical Turk, are using GenAI to help them answer the questions researchers pose in their online surveys [8] What is the researcher supposed to do when finding out this is becoming a prevalent practice, since it questions the validity of any of the findings they obtain? The future is both exciting but worrying.

4 About the Panelist

Yvonne Rogers

Yvonne Rogers will be the moderator. She is a Professor of Interaction Design and the director of UCLIC at University College London. She has been on many panels at ACM conferences, where she guarantees herself to be lively, provocative, and thought-provoking, drawing on her considerable experience as an HCI researcher in a variety of countries and contexts. Her research focuses on designing interactive technologies that empower humans, particularly human-centred AI, and developing AI tools that facilitate human thinking. Central to her work is a critical stance towards how visions, theories and frameworks shape the fields of HCI, cognitive science and ubiquitous computing. She has been instrumental in promulgating new theories (e.g., external cognition), alternative methodologies (e.g., in the wild studies) and far-reaching research agendas (e.g., "Being Human" manifesto) and has pioneered an approach to innovation and ubiquitous learning. She has received various awards, including election as an international member of the American National Academy of Engineering, the ACM SIGCHI Lifetime Achievement Research Award, and the title of Fellow of the Royal Society, as well as the Royal Society Robin Milner Medal for computer science. She was also awarded a Chair of Excellence from the University of Bremen. She is one of the authors of the definitive textbook on Interaction Design and HCI, now in its 6th edition, that has sold over 300,000 copies worldwide and has been translated into many languages.

Elizabeth F. Churchill

Elizabeth F. Churchill is Professor and Department Chair of Human-Computer Interaction at the Mohamed Bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence (MBZUAI). A former ACM Executive Vice President, SIGCHI Lifetime Practice and SIGCHI Lifetime Service award winner and ACM Fellow, her current research work focuses on human-AI interaction.

Matt Jones

Matt Jones enjoys energising, enlivening and encouraging vibrant discussions about the emerging relationships between AI and people. He is a Professor at the Computational Foundry in the UK and Chief Operating Officer of a major UK programme on responsible AI (rai.ac.uk). He has recently been appointed to a Gresham College Professorship; the College was founded in 1587 to bring "new learning" freely to Londoners, a tradition Matt continues with his lecture series on people-first AI.

Lucia Terrenghi

Lucia Terrenghi is a Senior Director of User Experience at YouTube. She brings a distinctly multidisciplinary background to her leadership, spanning design, research, and the intersection of digital and physical systems. Her extensive industry career at Google encompasses significant contributions across various domains, including YouTube, Google Travel, Shopping, Payments, and Emerging Markets. Her professional foundation lies in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Interaction Design. Her earlier research focused on designing hybrid interaction techniques for ubiquitous computing, specifically in the context of multi-display environments and large interactive surfaces. This work investigated the affordances of physical interaction and defined interaction paradigms for instrumented environments. Before her executive roles, her career included research and development positions at Vodafone and as a Research and Interaction Designer at the Fraunhofer Institute for Applied Information Technology. Applying her design and management skills, as well as her passion for community outside of technology, she has also recently founded a café and gelateria in Zürich. She holds a PhD in Computer Science, with a focus on Human-Computer Interaction, from LMU University of Munich, and a Master's degree in Industrial Design from the Polytechnic of Milan.

Johannes Schöning

Johannes Schöning is a Professor of Human-Computer Interaction at the University of St. Gallen, where he leads the HCI research group. His research examines how people engage with digital and spatial information in everyday life, with a particular focus on geographic information science, spatial cognition, mobile interfaces, and AI-driven technologies that support human decision-making. His work combines empirical studies, computational methods, and design-oriented research to create interactive systems that address real-world needs. He has developed new approaches to understanding and supporting spatial thinking, advanced novel interaction techniques for mobile and wearable devices, and contributed to interdisciplinary work that connects human-computer interaction with public health, geoinformatics, and ubiquitous computing. Currently, he is also an Affiliated Professor of HCI at the MBZUAI. His career includes positions at the University of Bremen, where he held a Lichtenberg Professorship and directed the Bremen Spatial Cognition Centre, as well as previous roles at Hasselt University and the German Research Centre for Artificial Intelligence (DFKI). He received his PhD from Saarland University and his earlier training in geoinformatics at the University of Münster. His contributions have been recognised with several honours, including two Google Research Awards, the Vodafone Research Award, the ACM Eugene L. Lawler Award and a lasting impact award at MobileHCI.

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