

Utopian Thinking or Business as Usual: Pondering Next Steps for SIGCAS

By DOUGLAS SCHULER

With the advent of a new year and the impending end of my term as SIGCAS Chair it seems just about the right time to share some thoughts on SIGCAS, its mission and where we all stand in relation to it. I'd love to hear your thoughts and reactions to this, either directly via email, or on the SIGCAS-Talk distribution list or our Discord server.

The mission of the SIG raises some of the most critical tasks facing humankind and the earth today. I really would rather not sound so melodramatic but this is the situation I believe we are in. The world is replete with dangerous threats and computers are at the core of many of the problems as well as the possible remedies. As an example, yesterday I ran across the literature on ethics and human enhancement which is quickly coming into prominence and is guaranteed to introduce issues that we have little experience dealing with.

It's been a privilege to serve as the chair of this SIG and to work with the executive committee, Lisa, Alison, Mikey, and Rick, and with many of you in various ways. I've enjoyed the role including the myriad tasks that come with it. I had been thinking that I'd run again this time but around the time of my 70th birthday it dawned on me that I'm supposed to slow down. It wasn't just one thing that informed my decision but the two social media fiascos that happened on my well-meaning but ill-equipped watch likely factored in there somewhere. I'm hoping to continue working with SIGCAS as a volunteer helping where relevant to continue to build the organization and address its mission after my term is up in July. Besides believing in the mission, I firmly believe that SIGCAS will not get to where it ought to be without strong volunteer support and leadership that goes beyond the executive committee.

I'm sorry that I didn't get to know more of you over my tenure. It's not obvious how that would have happened but the COVID pandemic certainly prevented most chances for in-person encounters. The self introductions that many of you provided when the SIGCAS talk list was first used provided some of the most exciting and rewarding experiences I've had as chair. I was incredibly impressed with the wide range of interests and the passion, intelligence, and creativity in the introductions. In fact I am still hoping that we can try once more with that as it seems like an important building block in creating a stronger SIGCAS community.

Our Resources

As part of the look at the SIG we can note the various social media we're involved with. The two main platforms at the moment are Discord and Twitter, even though Twitter is seen by many as a fast-degrading platform (which, in fact, raises lots and lots of issues that are directly relevant to SIGCAS) and many people and institutions including ACM and our SIG now have accounts on Mastodon at the ready. We also have several mailing lists, and Zoom and LinkedIn accounts.

We also have two events that we can call our own,

the SIGCAS Showcase which we have hosted for the last two years and the monthly, less formal, Works in Progress, in which one or more people present their work. We also sponsor two conferences, GoodIT Computing for Good and COMPASS (along with SIGCHI), the Conference on Computing and Sustainable Societies. Also, there is now an ACM Journal that almost has our name written all over it, the Journal of Responsible Computing. And our financial situation is surprisingly strong. Seems like we've been earning more than we've been spending for some time. The question to me is how do we best use these financial resources.

SIGCAS may be the only international organization that is solely devoted to these issues, especially one whose membership is open to all at an affordable rate. The organizational structure within ACM is incredible and our members are an enormous if largely untapped (at least by us) resource.

What Should We Be Doing?

We are a SIG like other ACM SIGs, but (at least to me) our guidelines don't seem to be as straightforward as the ones in other SIGs. For one thing, developing and encouraging critique is absolutely required by our mission — we are looking at the relationship between computers and society but not just for our edification. This often means calling out powerful entities; our boundaries are indistinct and crossing them is critical; we need to raise issues even if we don't have the power to address them. For example, my article on "Computing as Oppression" (<https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3568400>) which discusses the rise and spread of oppressive software systems and their adoption by authoritarian governments, which was just published in ACM's journal Digital Government: Research and Practice, explicitly challenges ACM and other professional organizations to take up these alarming developments which is directly related to the work computer professionals do. I would also maintain that our SIG also has that task before it, the remit to take these issues to the public. This, of course, is not a trivial undertaking but I believe that it's incredibly important and should at least be something we would look at.

Increasing the diversity of SIGCAS is critical. Currently the membership is mostly male, white, and based in the US, Canada, or western Europe. Increased diversity in the SIG should provide benefits for the new members, but also of great importance, it would enrich SIGCAS in many ways. Broadly I see other tasks fitting into program support and development, organizational development, and, ultimately, impact on the world. And at the same time we need to remember to provide services to our members — and this, of course, helps fulfill our mission. Some ideas that have surfaced along these lines include mentoring, providing opportunities (paid and unpaid) to put into action goals of the organization, and to help legitimize and support computers and society work in education, industry, and beyond.

To me all of this comes down to this: developing tasks and projects — to be taken on by board members and by (not-so) ordinary members. This also means institutionalization, a word that I also fear and dislike! But that's what we need to do — build processes that assist and persist. This can be accomplished (I believe) more-or-less organically around gathering volunteers around tasks and projects, such as volunteer development, newsletter production, and event convening. It can also coalesce around new projects such as developing white papers, op-eds, public debates, or, even software.

Our member survey of a couple of years ago helped to identify the interests of our users and these were used to organize our Discord server, itself a result of user activism. Then, to my way of thinking, these areas of user interest could be thought of as predecessors or incubators for Interest or Working Groups that focused on the specific issues that are part of the broader mission. These groups would begin to think of what type of work could or should be undertaken by that group — and this has already happened when Discord participants launched a curricular project. As another example, I am interested in how groups of all sizes and demographics address shared challenges such as climate change and am interested in a Civic Tech working group, perhaps to help build networks of collaboration, maybe even using the pattern language approach I presented in our first WIP session.

Utopian Thinking?

I used the term "utopian thinking" in the title of this essay to contrast it with "business as usual." I hope that didn't stand in the way of any would-be readers. "Utopia" literally means nowhere and, obviously, there are no such places on earth — and there likely will never be one. More, as Immanuel Wallerstein observed, "utopias are breeders of illusions and therefore, inevitably, of disillusion." But to my mind, utopian thinking is another thing entirely. It means thinking about what can be done to make things better, a bit closer to utopia, whatever that might be. I submit that thinking about computers and society means engaging in this type of thinking — but we don't have to call it that.

Obviously, the new leadership team, whose identities are unknown at this time, is not beholden to follow these suggestions. At any rate, I'm eager to help out wherever possible, as SIGCAS moves forward. The topic is beguiling to me intellectually — in addition to it being urgent — and I'm very interested in discussing the ideas here within or outside the SIGCAS perspective.

Thank you — and Happy New Year!

Douglas Schuler
SIGCAS, Historian
Public Sphere Project
Seattle, Washington, USA
chair_sigcas@acm.org