

SIGCHI CARES's Complicated Relationships to Activism by Selves and Others

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ABSTRACT

SIGCHI CARES was created in 2019 as a volunteer committee to support members of SIGCHI who are experiencing harassment or discrimination. CARES' knowledge and sense of purpose have developed relationally with SIGCHI members, their needs, and their courage; ACM's actions or lack of actions; and changes among the many civic societies, natures, and cultures in our research community. Our work is change, but is it activism? And how, within organizational limits and constraints, can we be activist, can we be action?

INTRODUCTION

Nothing can keep still. Only the wind.

– Galway Kinnell, “Tree from Andalusia,” 1964

SIGCHI CARES addresses harms. CARES was founded with a limited remit that is still written into our Bylaws [1]. However, neither our communities nor the world exist in the ways that were assumed at the time of our founding. The needs of SIGCHI members have changed, and the boundaries of “membership” appear less and less relevant to the people we serve. In this pictorial, we briefly address some of the tensions in this work.



Most people who volunteer for SIGCHI CARES are motivated by concerns for caring, and for fairness and social justice as integral parts of caring. We want to help our colleagues. We want to help each other. We want to help ourselves.

We also want to engage in peer-protection for our colleagues, each other, and ourselves. Some of us come to the work with our own trauma. Some of us come to the work after witnessing harms done to distant associates, or colleagues, or friends, or loved-ones.

We are passionate about change. There is little other reason to serve – although some of us see change as support for others, and some of us see change as more of a political or policy-affecting activism.

We do not go “looking for problems.” When people come to us, we listen actively and (to the best of our abilities) non-judgmentally. We try to help people to find their ways through complex organizational (ACM), institutional, and legal structures.

People come to us with many concerns. Some need advice. Some are in the midst of crisis. Some request our action. But which concerns are we chartered to address? And which concerns are explicitly *beyond* our remit? And how do we act (or not act) in the face of injustice and pain? How do we stay within the limits of the role that ACM has given to us, when we see so many unmet needs?

And if we think of ourselves as activists, what should we do when our organizational role *prohibits* us from acting? If we think act as individuals, can we use any private information from CARES work if we decide to act as individuals?



While our role is constrained by ACM's rules and by our own Bylaws, many of us want to do more. Official complaints can take a long time in the ACM system and the investigation process is black-boxed. ACM wants to ensure fairness to all parties, but we are aware that an abuser has not yet been banned from conferences. Whom else will they harm while the slow ACM process grinds on?

Do we have broader ethical responsibilities – to survivors, and to the community?

And suppose that ACM comes to a conclusion, and bans someone. The ACM rules say that each institution makes its own criteria for what constitutes an offense. ACM does not communicate outcomes to the abuser's home institution – or any institutions which they might visit.

Do we have broader ethical responsibility – to survivors and to the community?

One way to take action would be to pass our information along to a whisper network on a confidential or anonymous basis. However, that would break the ACM rules. We ourselves could be in violation if we break those rules and expose someone's information without ACM's permission to do so. We ourselves could be banned.

Being banned might become a necessary ethical action for one or more of us. However, once banned, we would no longer be able to serve on CARES. Our passion could take away our ability to act (in certain ways) according to our passion.



And meanwhile, while we try to sort the ethical and legal issues, and make sense of our roles, responsibilities and limitations, people are being hurt, and they are coming to us to see what we can do to help them, and to protect the community.

REFERENCES

[1] Anonymous (n.d.). *SIGCHI CARES Bylaws*.
<https://sigchi.org/resources/sigchi-cares/bylaws/>



While we try to find our ways through these issues, people need to talk with us...

