Editorial

In Memoriam: John Hughes

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It is with great sadness that we note the passing of John A. Hughes who died on 15 May 2015 after having struggled with severe illness for many years.

John played a pioneering role in the formation of CSCW as a distinct research area hinging on systematic collaboration between social scientists and computer scientists. A professor of sociology at Lancaster University and a leading scholar in the British tradition of ethnomethodology, he staked his authority on the, then bold, thesis that ethnographic studies could ‘inform design’ and, indeed, play a key role in the development of collaboration technologies.

The thesis that ethnography could play such an important role in technology did not come out of thin air but was grounded in experience gained from a series of in-depth studies of work practices in air-traffic control (ATC) that started around the mid-1980s and went on for more than 5 years. Commissioned by the Central Aviation Authority of the UK, the project was motivated by the issue of understanding the possible consequences of computerizing ATC work (Hughes et al. 1988; Harper et al. 1989a, b). The initial project team involved a group of colleagues and students from the ethnomethodological community in Northern England, but by the late 1980s he had also initiated collaboration with computer scientists at Lancaster University in order to explore the issues of computerization more systematically.

The Lancaster ATC study, together with a few other studies, in particular the London Underground studies by Christian Heath and Paul Luff, demonstrated that ethnographic studies could illuminate fundamental conceptual issues in the development of computing technology. This provided CSCW with the exemplars necessary for a research program to focus and flourish. Building on these experiences, John put tremendous effort into articulating and elaborating the role of ethnography in the CSCW research program (e.g., Hughes et al. 1992, 1993, 1994), exemplifying this in a number of different domains including, for instance, retail financial services.

It is fair to say that the ‘turn to the social’ that he instigated with others facilitated the ethnographic turn, not only in CSCW and in human-computer interaction, but also in a much wider interdisciplinary context.

John played a unique role at the center of the early CSCW movement not only by virtue of his energy and intellectual capacity. His impact was very much due to his

very character: his complete lack of dogmatism and his genuine sociability. A significant number of colleagues in CSCW and elsewhere would happily acknowledge that they owe their careers to him.

With John's death, CSCW has lost one of its most influential founding figures.

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