
Time to Revisit Mobility in Mobile HCI?

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Abstract

In this panel, we discuss the relevance of the concept of mobility in current mobile Human-Computer Interaction research. Is the term still useful to understand and design for interaction with computers, or has the concept of mobility run dry and void of meaning?

Keywords

Mobility, mobile, mobile technology, mobile human-computer interaction.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Design, Human Factors, Theory.

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At the turn of the century there was a flourishing debate on the mobile life with technology within Human Computer Interaction [6]. A lot of attention was focused on understanding the role of mobility in people's lives and how this mapped to computing. This included work on defining different forms of mobility and connecting that to social practice (e.g. 2;4;5;7].

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Now this debate seems to have ceased. This is somewhat paradoxical, since at the same time, computing has found its way into many situations and practices where people are on the move and where desktops are not applicable. The 'mobile' is as hot as ever; in fact, a lot of new technology is framed in terms of its 'mobile' characteristics. It seems that HCI research has turned its focus on 'mobile' rather than 'mobility' meaning that there is an inclination towards a technological drive, rather than a practice oriented agenda. The result is that there is a continuing development of a lot of other related concepts such as location, or near field communication, in relation to new technologies, that do not feed back into the overarching field of mobility. What constitutes the mobility aspect of these practices or technologies is no longer addressed.

While mobility is receiving less explicit attention within HCI, it is put on top of the agenda within the social sciences. In recent years, we have witnessed a mobility turn in social science [1; 8]. These two lines of research could benefit from more integration, since "mobile information technologies do not just operate in space, but they are tools that serve to structure the spaces through which they move" [3].

The disappearance of the mobility topic within Human Computer Interaction might be due to the increased complexity given the almost ubiquitous availability of computer resources in the new millennium. What used to be rather separate, or bounded, practices, such as work and leisure time or desktop computing and other work practices are now intricately meshed. The emergence of such a conversion has been recognized previously, but now when it is happening in everyday life it seems to have made it more difficult to make a

distinction between what is mobile and not – thereby making the concept of mobility void of meaning.

Questions for the Panel

While mobile life is continuing, and users' engagement with mobile computing is expanding, the way mobility plays a role seems to be of little concern for current research within HCI. In the social sciences, a mobility turn has been recognized, but within HCI the topic is no longer on the agenda. The main idea with the panel is therefore to discuss:

- Is there a need to revisit the discussion on mobility, again making it a topic on the agenda, in order to distinguish the use and design issues currently at stake?

This involves the discussion of a number of related questions, e.g.

- Considering that mobile computing is so widespread, is it still relevant to talk about mobility or is everything now mobile? Has it been used too much, making it void of meaning? Has the concept been too underdeveloped to be of any use? Is there a danger involved in moving from understanding mobility practices to focusing on mobile technologies? And finally, is it possible or even relevant to make a distinction between mobile HCI and HCI?

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