

# Social Responsibility & the SIGs

*Time for a Paradigm Shift?*



Photograph by Peter Essick

Discarded shells of computers and monitors float in a drainage canal in Accra, Ghana.



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# Background

First I wanted to thank the organizers and attendees for giving us time to speak and for considering our suggestions. I also wanted to thank SIGCAS board — Mikey Goldweber, in particular for suggesting that we ask for some time at this meeting— and our members.

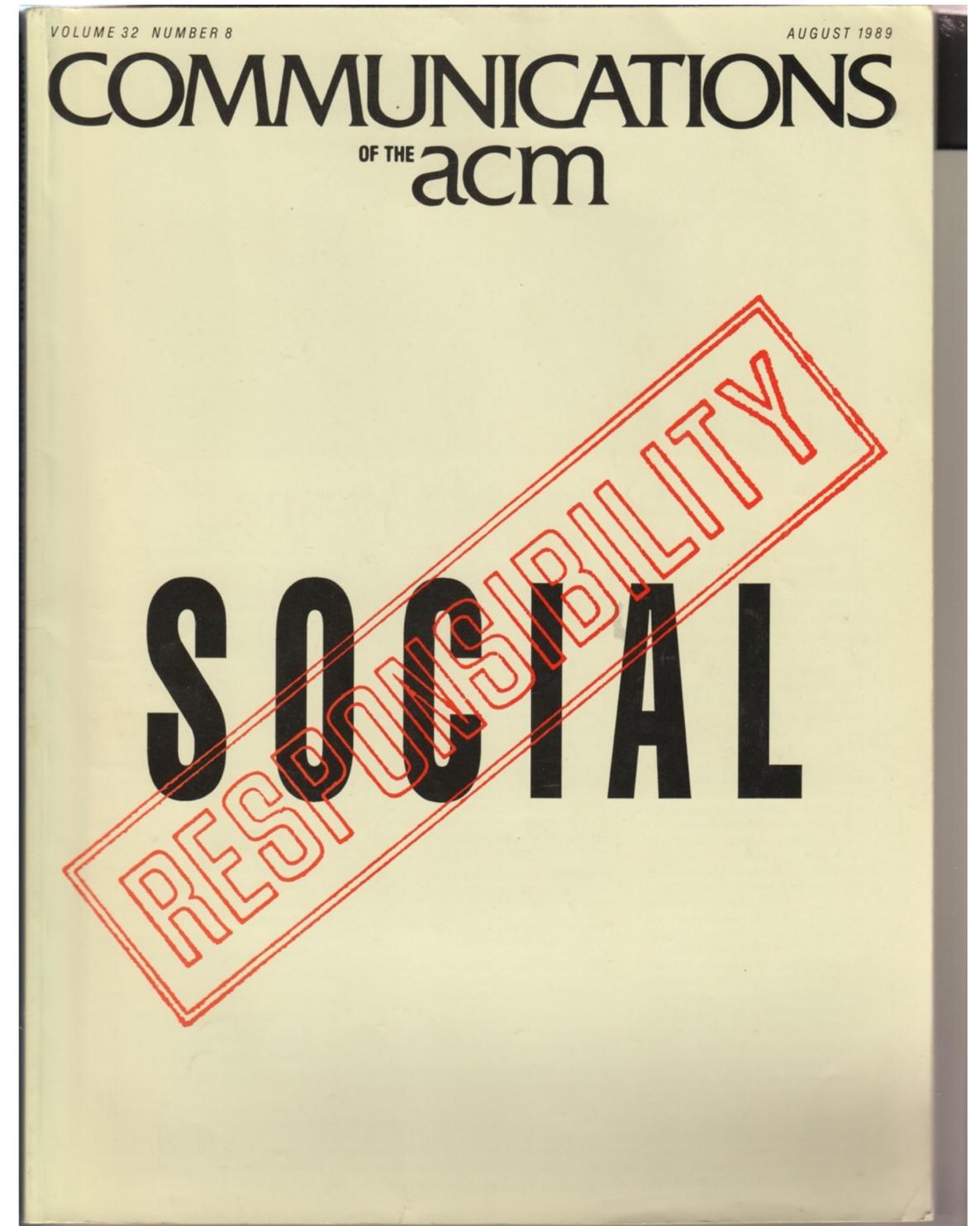
SIGCAS, the Computers and Society SIG, is one of the smaller SIGs but I suggest that it has the broadest mission. Thus we probably have one of the most extreme member-to-mission ratios!

I'm relatively new to SIGCAS, but I've been working on Computer and Society issues since the mid 1980s.

Qualifier: Since I'm (still) a relative newcomer to SIGCAS and to the workings of ACM It's possible (if not likely) that I'll make claims or have opinions that aren't well-founded.

# Bottom Line

We (SIGCAS) are eager to explore ideas related to cross-SIG collaborative projects that address Computers and Society and Social Responsibility.



Special section, CACM, August 1989, edited by Jon Jacky and Douglas Schuler

# Situation / Context

Things have changed a lot since ACM was founded 75 years ago. Computerization of the world has now reached such a point that "computers and society" issues are everywhere we look. They are part of the air we breath. Have we now entered the *Cybercene*?

Lots of good things, but the downsides (See appendix) are huge, existential, and, obviously, in the news every day.

It seems that the SIGs and the profession is now at least aware of these issues, but our collective ability to address them seems to be insufficiently mobilized — at least at the moment.

All citizens have social obligations, but as computer professionals we have especially significant roles. Computer professionals designed these systems and they are the people who know most about them. (Realizing that we didn't reach this point by ourselves and we won't solve these issues by ourselves)

# What would this mean for the SIGs?

- Continue our work (e.g. research) but we broaden our scope and acknowledge our responsibilities and consider the social and environmental implications of our work.
- Legitimize socially responsible work within the profession
- Be more involved with formal education, but also general, open "public" education
- More focus on policy — what we're building are *socio*-technical projects after all...
- Focus on making an actual impact

# Challenges and Obligations

I can't even pretend to think that SIGCAS could do any of this by itself. We're not the only SIG, nor the only organization working in this space. We need and want to work with other SIGs.

Social Responsibility must be integrated with our work, baked in! (interdisciplinary lines are interfaces, not fortified borders; porous interfaces that build on knowledge and actions on all sides.)

Building diversity, equity, solidarity, efficacy in our SIGs

Increasing the legitimacy of this work and bringing in resources

I'm calling for a paradigm shift but incremental changes are OK by me.

But, this is not a business as usual moment, Not a spectator sport moment.

# Ideas for Collaboration

Cross-SIG Event on Social Responsibility in Computing

Cross-cutting SIG work, issue-based working groups on, e.g., Climate Change, Fair Algorithms, or Civic Technology

Cross SIG Social Responsibility Task Force or Initiative

SIGCAS liaisons — would it help? (Mikey)

SIGCAS as broker? (Patrick)

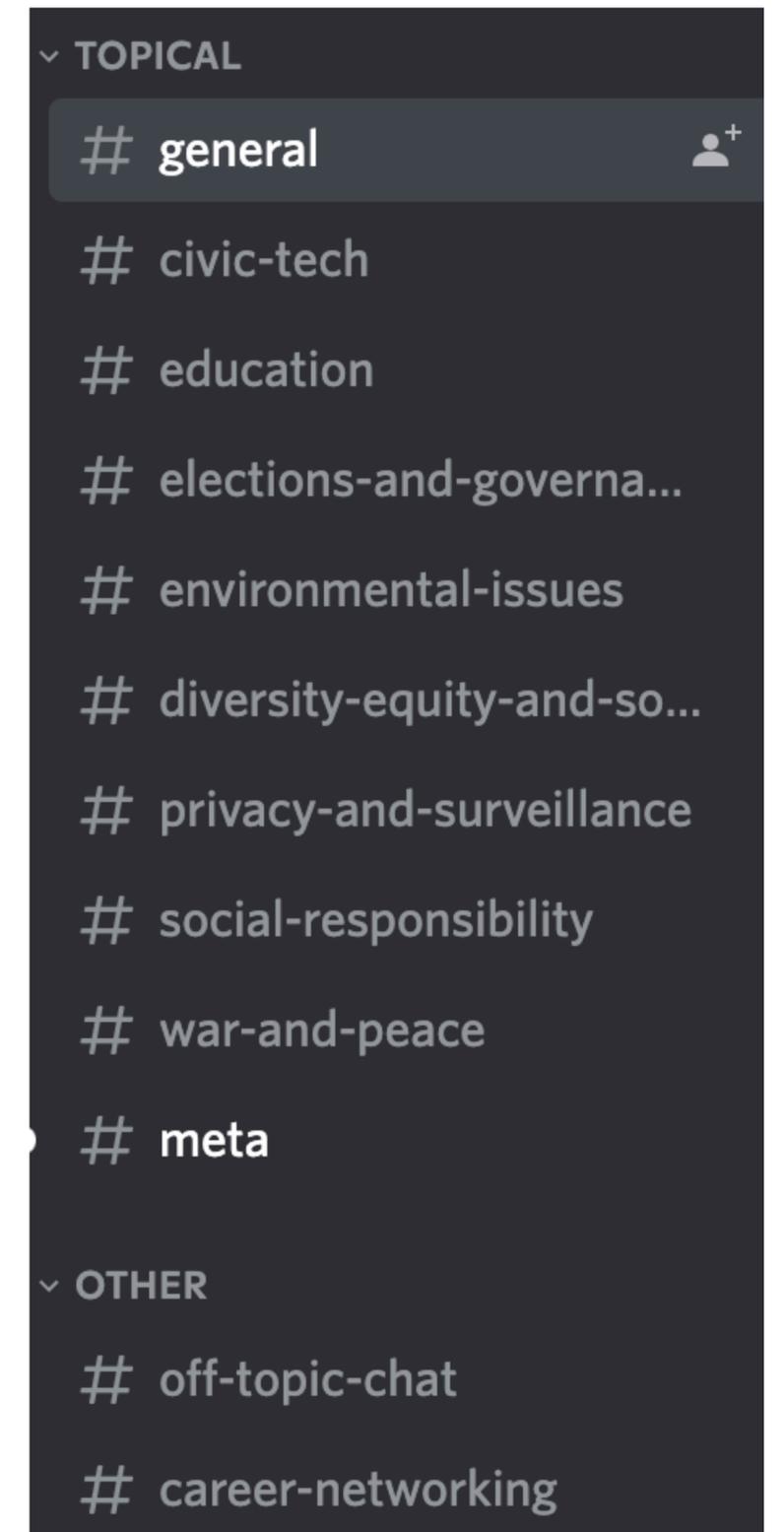
- SIGCAS+SIGx promotes teaching and learning materials
- SIGCAS+SIGx promotes "doing" social good (not just learning about it)
- SIGCAS+SIGx develops resource packets related to large-scale initiatives
- SIGCAS+SIGx aggregates, develops, and publishes data on computer and society issues

Join our Discord server

Others!?

Please share your thoughts! Now or later... [chair\\_sigcas@acm.org](mailto:chair_sigcas@acm.org)

## The SIGCAS Discord Channels



# Appendix: Your Actual Issues May Vary

Articles in *Journal of Democracy* (January 2019) under the title of "The Road to Digital Unfreedom"

“postmodern totalitarianism” (Diamond)

“personal-data surveillance economy” (Deibert),

dangers posed by the proliferation and abuse of AI (Feldstein)

advanced digital technologies to build a comprehensive system of monitoring and control in China (Xiao).

Computer systems are seen by many as being out of control.

They are often viewed as serving the interests of monopoly, surveillance capitalism, and state power.

The institutions that should provide some steering are not.

Computing systems are becoming more and more influential — but this is often in the wrong directions.

It seems that everywhere that there could be trouble, there is trouble.

And the magnitude is historically unprecedented.

Deadly uses of computing in war and policing

Ignoring bonafide global crises (such as ecocide) while pursuing short term gains.

Mass data collection and surveillance, digital addiction

Objectification / gamification / instrumentalization

Algorithmic autonomy, non-transparency / buried & hidden, especially with deep learning and AI; For example, *How High Tech Tools Profile, Police and Punish the Poor* — Virginia Eubanks

Too much concentrated wealth and power; Two Seattleites own as much as bottom 50% of the US

Effects on the environment and climate, the work force, not realistically considered

Damage to the zeitgeist, democratic spirit, civic intelligence, normative infrastructure

Extreme hype, solutionism, flim-flam, false promises, hubris, toxic optimism from industry

These are taken from a Delphi survey I conducted in 2019 from approximately 40 people including noted computer scientists, technology critics, and students.