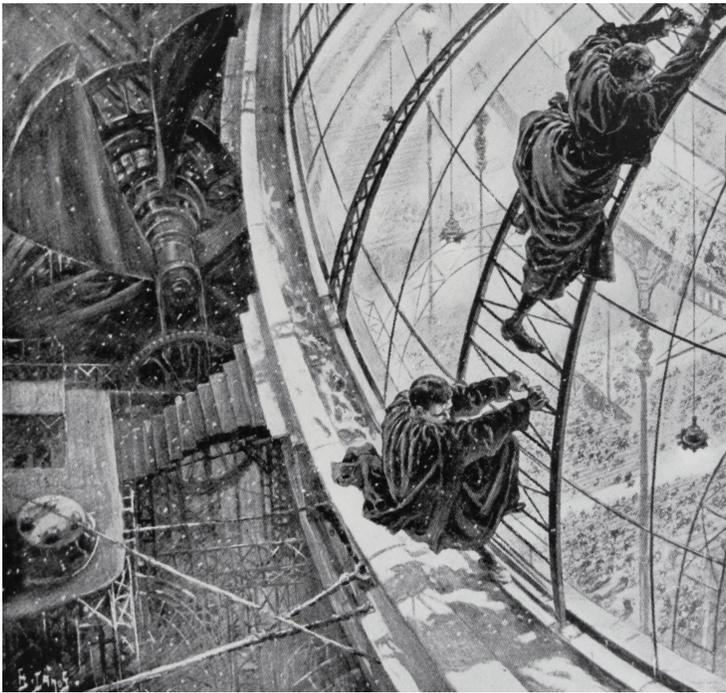


## Steering or Sleepwalking? The Strange Disappearance of Social Responsibility



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Many of you have read Moshe Vardi's recent column in the July 2022 Communications of the ACM entitled *An Association of the Members, by the Members, for the Members*. In the column Vardi discussed the need for a more transparent and accountable ACM and he used the example of the strange disappearance of social responsibility. In January 2018, Vardi's column "Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility," argued that "ACM must be more active in addressing social responsibility issues raised by computing technology." In response to that column, he was asked "to convene a task force and formulate recommendations on how ACM can become a leading voice on social responsibility of computing professionals." I along with several others was invited to discuss this initiative with ACM leadership in February 2019 at ACM's headquarters and the short article I prepared for that meeting is included below. Vardi presented the task force recommendations to the ACM Executive Committee in April 2019 and, in his words, the response from ACM leadership was a "thundering silence." I had been very optimistic about participating in the meeting on this critical topic and disappointed when it was shelved. In July 2019 all of the participants in the April meeting received the note that basically said not to worry: other groups were doing similar things in relation to out of control tech (rendering any work ACM would undertake as redundant) and that ACM itself was already involved in several activities that could be seen to fall under the heading of "social responsibility."

I salute the critical work that Vardi has initiated and is pushing forward. I'm certainly happy to see the social responsibility meeting that many of us attended in New York brought out into the light — maybe we can get more traction the next time around. One of Vardi's April 2019 slides — even more relevant today — helps to capture the spirit of the effort:

“I believe ACM must be more active in addressing social responsibility issues raised by computing technology. An effort that serves as a central organizing and leadership force within ACM would bring coherence to ACM's various activities in this sphere, and would establish ACM as **a leading voice** on this important topic. With great power comes great responsibility. Technology is now one of the most powerful forces shaping society, and we are responsible for it!”

And Vardi suggested that ACM convene a *Summit on Tech and Social Responsibility* which would lead into a *Year of Social Responsibility*.

And although there are now a variety of groups working to cultivate social responsibility in tech, I see no reason to believe that their efforts would be adequate to provide a viable counter to the negative trends in computer-assisted authoritarianism, surveillance capitalism, AI in war and policing, etc. etc. If the counter effort were magnitudes greater there might be more of a chance. If ACM is intended to exist more of a professional organization, and less of an industry association, I'd like to think that it could be mature enough to tackle the negative implications of computerization — even in the face of inevitable and well-resourced resistance.

Addendum: I'm happy to note that on July 7, 2022, the ACM, with their announcement of the *ACM Journal on Responsible Computing*, made a significant step forward in relation to social responsibility. Kenneth R. Fleischmann of the University of Texas at Austin, the editor-in-chief, seems particularly well-suited to this endeavor and I'm pleased to serve as a member of the Advisory Board. In my reading of the call for contributions I see no evidence of the invisible fences that often artificially hinder contributions that question or criticize the powers-that-be or, in the case of computing may encourage the grand, but often erroneous, slogans of our time about the deployment of computing systems. How the journal plays a role in these discussions will obviously depend on the work of the authors and the editors but it represents a significant and hopeful sign. Is it enough to dampen my call for increased attention on social responsibility within ACM, other professional organizations, governments, and the computing industry? No.

*The following is a very lightly edited version of an article (or manifesto) that I prepared for the Social Responsibility Task Force meeting at the ACM headquarters on February 22, 2019.*

## **Introduction**

Modern deployment of computing systems has exploded exponentially into all facets of life. And it shows no signs of abating.

The biggest actors in this deployment are now vast corporations and national governments and there is widespread belief that the interests of the public are being disregarded. There is a common feeling that the insatiable drive for profit for a handful of gigantic corporations with their billionaire CEOs and for more control by governments are largely unchecked and the systems they develop are likely to get worse: they will become more deeply embedded into all facets of our lives. They will become more demanding and obtrusive and thoroughly intractable.

Dystopian futures are no longer only found in science fiction. The media brings new stories of privacy scandals and manipulation every day, often accompanied with unqualified hype and promise of a glowing

tech future for all. Academics are now routinely writing about vast systems that are, and will continue to be, insinuated into media, discourse, politics, economy, employment, behavior, our bodies and our minds. In a recent issue of the *Journal of Democracy* (January 2019), for example, four articles under the broad title "The Road to Digital Unfreedom" describe "postmodern totalitarianism" (Diamond), "personal-data surveillance economy" (Deibert), dangers posed by the proliferation and abuse of AI (Feldstein) and advanced digital technologies to build a comprehensive system of monitoring and control in China (Xiao). And this doesn't really touch on many of the other scary propositions we face involving computers and war, autonomous vehicles, toxic determinism / optimism, big data & AI mythology, treatment of workers, monopolistic practices, too much power, education, determination of research directions, moving all resources to tech, false promises.

The new computer systems are already taking their tolls on the most vulnerable. These groups include economically disadvantaged people, indigenous people, people of color, children, etc. In addition to the problems above, there are vast issues such as climate change and other "wicked problems" that are not receiving the resources, including time, that will be required if we as societies and stewards of the planet are to make any actual progress.

### **Acknowledging the Need and Answering the Call**

*The following is a draft which has not been approved or reviewed by the ACM or anybody in any official capacity. It reads somewhat like a mission statement, however non-succinct, which was part of the idea: It contains elements of the work that I believe need to be acknowledged and vigorously pursued.*

As the world's oldest and largest association of computer professionals ACM must acknowledge its debt to society, its potential influence, and its responsibility to face today's vexing social and environmental issues. ACM also acknowledges that many of these issues are now *global*, representing a historically new, qualitatively different, stage of human history.

Unfortunately many of the problems facing us are enabled through computing systems. Many risks are exacerbated by computers — with the aid of computers we can do more damage faster.

While maintaining the faith that information and communication technology provides significant opportunities, we acknowledge the grave challenges presented by contemporary computing systems. The speed, reach, unexpectedness, and increasing autonomy of computerization, and the difficulty of influencing these powerful and well-resourced enterprises make special demands on this profession.

To fulfill its obligations, ACM must be more involved in asserting the need for social responsibility and working to ensure that this work incorporates discussion and action.

Computer scientists have unique roles to play but there are also important caveats. As computer scientists whose interests and livelihoods revolve around computing, we may underestimate the threats, assume they will go away on their own, or believe or hope that somebody else will take care of them. Moreover, if computer scientists speak only among themselves or are encouraged to think they have the authoritative perspective, they may not respect people or approaches with perspectives that differ from their own. The hubris of computer professionals and corporations — at least some of them — can be stunning. Some number of them feel obliged and informed enough, for example, to advocate for wholesale "transformation" of education, democratic processes, the economy, etc. based on hazy and uncertain

promises of next-generation technology. Far-fetched claims along these lines are legion and represent a somewhat one-sided public marketing blitz against a somewhat naive public.

ACM has the vital responsibility to also give voice to people who are most affected adversely by computer systems. This often includes the economically disadvantaged, people of color, indigenous people, minority populations, people with disability, children and others.

ACM has the responsibility to have give voice to credible critics of computing deployment; it is not a cheering section for the tech industry or for technology as a cure-all.

ACM, as an organization of computer professionals, many of whom are connected to influential and well-resourced organizations and institutions, faces inherent challenges which must be acknowledged. In a legitimate pursuit of social responsibility related to computing ACM will need to face — and even help cultivate and develop — strong critiques of these powerful players. It may also be true that ACM inadvertently promotes practices that are harmful — that discourage social responsibility. This may happen because ACM is intertwined with a broad academic, research, corporate, government ecosystem. This means that considering the entire sphere of computing, including education, ACM conferences and resources, livelihoods and work practices related to research and development, distribution of resources, research directions, and, even, ACM's basic mission, might require reconsideration.

ACM not only needs to collaborate in work to prevent damage to the social fabric (fake news, surveillance, etc.) but to help pursue solutions to the vast problems that face us including, for example, social exclusion, economic injustice, environmental degradation and climate change. This could include supporting the development of new public deliberation platforms or non-surveilled public media.

In addition to facing already existing threats, due to the speed and the possibly immense effects of digital systems we will also look ahead with eye towards impending disruptive issues (possibly relating to privacy, body and brain interventions, media and cultural ecosystems, norms, identity, employment, power, land use and misuse, among others). To this end we will convene, participate in, or help facilitate citizen boards, participatory technology assessment, workshops, forums, and other activities that further understanding of computing in society and the issues we face.

We acknowledge the broad areas in which we have influence and our awesome social responsibility which is more critical than ever before. At the same time we also realize that there are limits to our influence which behooves us to envision our role as one among many. ACM must be an active discussant in the broader community worldwide. This should include collaboration with other professional associations in technology and outside of technology. These groups potentially know more about particular issues but computers draw many of the issues together and enable / cause them.

Finally, social responsibility is not something that can be accomplished in totality or overnight, let alone through isolated and disconnected actions or events. Social responsibility must be a permanent, collaborative, and sustainable enterprise.

ACM alone cannot bring about social responsibility for the uses of computing in society, but as an organization that benefits from computers and helps to usher in these systems, we must accept the challenge of fully engaging in the dialogue surrounding their use.

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## Graphic

"Graham's Escape." Art by H. Lanos for "When the Sleeper Wakes" by H. G. Wells (1899). Public Domain.