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# Transparency in Qualitative Research: Increasing Fairness in the CHI Review Process

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## Abstract

Transparency in process and its reporting is paramount for establishing the rigor of qualitative studies. However, the CHI conference receives submissions with varying levels of transparency and oftentimes, papers that are more transparent can be inadvertently subjected to more scrutiny in the review process, raising issues of fairness. In this panel, we bring together researchers with diverse qualitative work experiences to present examples of transparency-related initiatives and their corresponding review responses. We aim to work towards setting standards for transparent reporting in qualitative-work submissions and increasing fairness in the review process. We focus on the challenges in achieving transparency in qualitative research and current workarounds to overcome frictions in the reviewing process through engaging discussions involving panelists and the audience.

## Author Keywords

transparency; qualitative research; peer review; open research

## Introduction

Until recently, efforts towards increasing research transparency within the CHI community have primarily focused on quantitative, hypothesis-driven research [11]. Transparency, which refers to “*honesty about the research pro-*

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CHI '20 Extended Abstracts, April 25–30, 2020, Honolulu, HI, USA.  
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ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-6819-3/20/04.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/3334480.3381066>

cess” [9], is also key for assessing the rigor of qualitative studies. Earlier this year, a group of qualitative researchers crafted a set of guidelines<sup>1</sup> for a successful qualitative-research submission for CHI2020. This type of guidelines has largely been overlooked and signal an effort to define best practices for transparent reporting in qualitative research and increase fairness in the review process.

Following the posting of the guidelines on the CHI2020 website, there was an outpouring of responses on social media (Twitter and Facebook) from researchers in the community. While the effort was appreciated and there was concurrence on the need for such guidelines, many valid concerns were also raised, and the responses indicated that researchers passionately care about this topic. The CHI Steering Committee decided to take the guidelines down and instead, instilled a process in which the larger research community has the chance to comment on the guidelines before revising and ultimately approving them, so that they can be adopted as official CHI guidelines.

The purpose of this panel is to spark discussions surrounding transparency and contribute to the refinement of the guidelines through an engaging debate. We invite qualitative researchers with diverse backgrounds and stances to discuss some of the key concerns with achieving transparency in qualitative research, share examples from their experiences, and present views on if (and how) these concerns can be addressed. The discussions will involve interactions with the audience and cover perspectives from the standpoints of both authors and reviewers. Coalescing the arguments made during the discussions can help us outline a more broadly-applicable set of guidelines for transparent reporting with the end goal of improving the review process.

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<sup>1</sup><https://transparentstatistics.org/2019/08/01/updates-to-chi-submission-and-reviewing-guides/>

## Need for Transparency in Qualitative Research

Human–Computer Interaction (HCI) borrows methods from various disciplines such as the natural sciences and design [3], and tailors them to suit its own needs [7]. These methods come with their own values and traditions, which HCI sometimes struggles to consolidate and relate to each other. While transparency is a quality of research valued across our discipline, we still struggle to form a unified view of how to enact transparency, as we have diverse and sometimes opposed views across our field on what transparency entails, its value, its suitability and on guidelines that can be used across the various methods we use.

Transparency in reporting is necessary to understand, interpret, and also to further employ these methods. There is a growing call for researchers to make the full research process, from the design phase to how the findings are reported, transparent and available for critique in their submissions [6, 8].

We can view transparency as consisting of two facets: (i) *process transparency*, where the various decisions made during a study, including the methods employed, are communicated in detail and (ii) *data sharing*, which entails sharing of any collected data or evidence at different levels (for instance, raw or summarized). There can be genuine hindrances to achieving either or both of these aspects, such as publication page limits and protecting identities of participants [4, 5]. A recent study [10] also identifies a less-discussed obstacle—that authors do not share additional details and data because they do not see sharing as beneficial and/or do not consider seeking relevant permissions to share from the respective Institutional Review Boards.

Given the varying levels of transparency across submissions, those that make efforts to be transparent can be subjected to more scrutiny in the review process and certain

papers can receive more criticism without any apparent reason, raising issues of fairness. To alleviate this imbalance in the review process, we need to set the same standards for all such submissions. Research transparency can provide reviewers with a more complete picture of the research process and enable them to construct more robust arguments grounded in these details. This was the spirit behind the formulation of the CHI2020 transparency guidelines.

We aim to start constructive conversations towards the refinement of the guidelines through this panel. We will also build on and discuss the issues raised during a workshop on qualitative research methods organized at the last CSCW conference [2], which one of the panelists (Mike DeVito) attended. We present the key concerns with transparency raised in the social media responses in the next section and intend to discuss them in this panel.

### Panel Format

In the days leading to CHI2020, we will announce via twitter and other social media how to engage via sli.do, in order to review and summarize people's concerns before the panel. The panel will follow the following format:

- 3 minutes: the moderator presents the issues to be discussed, as to give an overview of the topics to approach;
- 24 minutes: (4 × 6 min) each panelist has 5 minutes (max 6) to give their stance on any subset of the four core issues, and;
- 48 minutes: the moderator engages the audience in discussion, going first through each of the core issues. We have two extension topics prepared for if discussion moves beyond the core topics. Panelists are prepared to optionally speak for 2 minutes on any of these topics, as they become active in the room.

The core issues to be discussed are:

1. **Defining Transparency.** What does transparency entail in the context of qualitative research? Even though the meaning and assessment of rigor depend on the qualitative study in question, can we define the *criteria* for assessing rigor and transparency for qualitative research more broadly? Given the delineation of transparency into *process transparency* and *data sharing*, what are their respective benefits and which aspect is more instrumental in the review process?
2. **Protecting Participant Identities.** The impracticality of fully anonymizing collected data is a major concern with data sharing [5] and this can be especially injurious when studies involve sensitive data and participants from marginalized or vulnerable populations. How can we assess such *risks* involved in a study so as to set more appropriate standards for transparent communication based on the risks involved? Furthermore, even if prior permissions are sought for data sharing, participants may not be very inclined to share information if they think the data will be openly shared [5]. Would communicating the benefits of data sharing to the participants and clarifying that they are the potential beneficiaries of the studies (where they are) help in mitigating this challenge?
3. **Limited Overlap in Researchers' Experiences.** Qualitative research in HCI encompasses a myriad of approaches with various theoretical, empirical, and epistemological underpinnings. Researchers often have experiences with a subset of these approaches and may be assigned papers outlining approaches they are not familiar with. In such cases, how can transparency help in communicating the *distinctiveness* of the research more clearly to the reviewers?

4. **Supplementary Materials.** Even when authors endeavor to elaborate on their research processes, publication page limits can hinder the inclusion of such details. While additional details can be included in the supplementary materials and other venues, the paper might still be the most perused document and viewed as the main artifact of the submission. How can we help authors decide what details to include in the paper and in the supplementary material? How can we encourage weighty consideration of supplementary materials in the review process?

The additional issues to be discussed are:

1. **Additional Burden on Authors and Reviewers.** It can be an arduous task for authors to include additional details and data with their submissions and also for reviewers to review these details. How can we define criteria for transparency such that the benefits of providing these details outweigh the additional burden they place on the authors and reviewers and overall, improve the review process?
2. **Transparency as Value, not Risk.** When it comes to increasing a submission's transparency, how can we move our thinking from risk-taking to value-making? We have seen many authors reporting on social media about their frustrating experiences when receiving negative reviews about their efforts to increase transparency. We aim at bringing attention to these stories and discussing what can we do to move from viewing transparency as a risk in the review process to viewing it as added value.

## Panelists

The panelists support the initiative of crafting guidelines for transparency and are open to refining them towards the betterment of the review process. They bring different perspectives to the discussion in terms of the definition of transparency, what it entails, how it relates to their own research, and the consequences (positive and negative) they can have. Together, they bring a large and diverse set of concerns to the discussion.

**Mike DeVito** is a doctoral candidate in Media, Technology, and Society at Northwestern University. They research user and marginalized community understanding of and adaptation to algorithmic systems via qualitative methods, and work on transparency issues in forums such as the Qualitative Research Methods for CSCW: Challenges and Opportunities [2] workshop at CSCW19.

**Tawanna Dillahunt** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan's School of Information (UMSI). Her research interests are in HCI, ubiquitous computing, and social computing. She has conducted numerous qualitative studies paying special attention to populations from resource-constrained areas.

**Joanna McGrenere** is a Professor in the Department of Computer Science at the University of British Columbia (UBC, Canada) and is an Inria & Université de Paris Sud International Research Chair (France). Her research focuses on universal usability and personalized user interfaces, where she has conducted numerous qualitative studies that explore the needs of a broad spectrum of people that guide the design of everyday technology. As TPC for CHI2020, she brings insights on the submission process of CHI.

**Max Wilson** is an Associate Professor at the School of Computer Science, University of Nottingham. His research focuses on the use of brain-data in human-computer interaction, using primarily quantitative methods. He ran a series of events at CHI on RepliCHI, including a panel [14], a SIG [12] and workshops [15, 13]. 10 years later, Max now considers the earlier RepliCHI work as naive and biased, and is concerned that more recent developments are subject to similar limitations. Max acts as a Deputy Editor of IJHCS, and serves on the CHI steering committee.

### Acknowledgements

We thank Dr. Aaron Striegel and the *Transparent Statistics* group [1] for their support of this endeavor.

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