

Where Is the Transparency of the New ACM Violations Database?

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After a summer of discussions and action about racism in our community in 2020 (see, e.g., [1]), the spring of 2021 raised further concerns about harassment and oppression. Long before this eventful year, however, I and many others have had **both** private and somewhat public conversations about the need to reckon with the trauma in our community, whether it is due to sexual harassment, bullying, racism, ableism, sexism, or any other host of harms that are experienced and perpetrated on a daily basis (see, e.g., [2,3]).

As shown in some recent *Interactions* articles and publications, we appear to be starting to take these concerns more seriously as a community. I have seen articles that start to ask questions about what institutional and informal systems and practices we need to be able to handle the trauma, and how we can reduce experiences of harm. The recently announced ACM Violations Database (published in a blog post for our SIGCHI community on May 25, 2021: <https://sigchi.org/2021/05/the-new-acm-violations-database/>) is one way of grappling with these harms. But for it to function in our SIGCHI community, which is part of the ACM, we need clear, transparent communication channels and community engagement with the database, as well as conversations about how, why, and when it is used. I, and I'm sure many others, have questions about the system, its functions, and its uses.

With this blog post, I want to start a public conversation about the violations database and how, or even whether, it addresses harms in our community. I feel it is important to establish that I am writing this piece because I have not received adequate, or in some cases any, answers to questions I have raised about the database. I will start by sharing some of my initial thoughts on the transparency, or rather the lack thereof, of the development, use, and communication of and around this new system. I hope that through public discussion, the community that makes SIGCHI, and the ACM, the prestigious body that it is, will be listened to in the continued development of the database.

I welcome the violations database as a real effort to address and change conditions, but do not agree with how it is being shared, communicated, or developed. The SIGCHI blog post introducing it included the following: "If you have further questions regarding ACM policies, please contact the person indicated at the end of this piece. For questions about the ACM's Violations Database, please contact advocate@acm.org. Questions regarding the SIGCHI process can be sent to sigchi-president@acm.org."

As a researcher who has done work with sex-work peer-alerting systems in the U.K. [4] and Canada [5], especially having looked in detail at the architecture, trust, social, and political contexts in which these databases sit; as a SIGCHI member who has experienced abuse and harassment from members of our community; and as a person who works to change our academic cultures around power and abuse, of course I had questions.

I drafted an email outlining questions I had about the use of the system in relation to SIGCHI and sent it to the address mentioned in the blog post. In the email, I tried to find a balance between 1) being supportive of this initiative and how it puts into practice some of the things

that were outlined years earlier in the ACM Harassment Policy and the ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct; and 2) asking critical questions about the use of the database, based on my personal and research expertise. My questions included ones about the methodologies of the database's creation, the role of the advocate mentioned in the post, the decision-making processes behind the database, and how its sustainable use was envisioned at the SIGCHI level.

Some of my questions were partially answered ~~by pointing toward policies~~, but most of them were not. Instead, I was directed to the ACM policies mentioned in the blog post, without an indication of where in the policies I should look, and encouraged to email Vicki Hanson, CEO of the ACM. I mustered up my courage and fed my healthy disregard for authority and sent another email.

Perhaps the most disappointing response in this whole exchange did not relate to a question, but rather to my offer of support as an expert who has done research for multiple years with databases that can be called upon to see whether someone has previously been reported for having perpetrated harms. My expertise was not acknowledged, nor was there any understanding of my knowledge as someone who herself had previously experienced abuse. Instead, I received this response: "I should note that the ACM has significant resources including their own lawyers who inform all they do." This is just one more example of how SIGCHI and the ACM do not appreciate community-driven initiatives [6].

In my opinion, a violations database is not something that should be developed solely by lawyers. It should predominately be driven by our community and the expertise that is within it; it needs to be embedded in our politics and our social structures, and, most importantly, it should center survivors and their experiences—not those who cause and perpetuate the harm. A violations database should not be developed by the same people in an organization who have repeatedly avoided difficult conversations about harms that are experienced by their members and "seem to repeatedly move in a more inclusive direction only to undermine such efforts" [6].

I find it inexplicable that the ACM should leave me and fellow members in the dark about why, how, and when the violations database was produced. But it is even more inexplicable that the (now former) SIGCHI president wasn't informed either, as was shared with me in an email on May 30, 2021: "Honestly, as of a little over a month ago, I didn't even know this database was coming." If neither members nor the executive committees of the SIGs that make up the ACM were informed of this development, whom is the violations database meant to be for?

So What Happens Now?

Since my initial questions, I have had conversations with others, realizing there are of course many more questions that remain unanswered. But since I ~~have had~~ not received an answer from the ACM CEO to any of my questions ~~at the time of writing this piece~~—I emailed her on May 31 and followed up on June 11 and the 29th and on July 19—and since the named SIGCHI contact person for questions on the blog post was unable to provide adequate responses to many of my questions, I have also been angry about the lack of

transparency—the disregard for open communication channels, or even basic information about the system.

It should not be up to me or any other SIGCHI member to contact the CEO of the ACM to get basic information about this new system that could greatly affect, both positively and negatively, how we exist in our community and at our events. I should not require the courage to email the most powerful people in “the world's largest educational and scientific computing society” [7] to learn the most basic information about this new system. Conversely, I would also argue that it should not be up to the CEO of the ACM to have to answer basic questions about such a system. This whole experience makes me wonder who is in charge of the ACM Violations Database and its uses if there is no point of contact for questions about the system.

To understand how the ACM Violations Database could function in our SIGCHI community, we need more information about it. SIGCHI members and others in the community need space to discuss its use and many potential misuses. We need more details, more context, more understanding. We need responsive infrastructures in place through which we can ask questions and have conversations about harms and violations. None of these currently exist.

This blog post is part of my work on understanding the new system and how we could make something like it work to improve safety at SIGCHI events. After talking to friends and colleagues (some of whom do research on violence and technologies; some of whom are on organizing committees of SIGCHI conferences), I decided it was important to start a public conversation about the violations database. I thank the *Interactions* blog editors for giving me space to air my concerns. I hope to see others join this public conversation by centering those who have experienced violence, who have gone through ACM, SIGCHI, or other institutional complaints processes, and those who are experts on related topics.

There is so much trauma in our community, some of which has been caused by others in our community as well as the hierarchies and infrastructures of power that govern SIGCHI and the ACM. Finding ways of addressing this harm through structural change such as the violations database are very welcome, at least by me. But for the database to work, we must have information on its intentions and uses; we must have space to ask questions and receive answers; we must center those who have experienced trauma in how we hold space for and reduce opportunities of harm in the future.

Out of professional courtesy, Interactions sent my article to Vicki Hanson prior to publication.

Professor Hanson informed Interactions that she had had technical difficulties with receiving my e-mails. Soon after, on August 24, she was able to answer my questions, and on September 2, we spoke about the violations database, its relation to the complaints process within ACM, the transparency of communication channels between ACM, SIGs, and members in relation to this development, as well as opportunities for change to current processes and systems. I'm thankful to have had this constructive conversation, and look forward to

continuing to work with others on issues related to the complaints procedure and violations database.

Endnotes

1. Grady, S.D., Wisniewski, P., Metoyer, R., Gibbs, P., Badillo-Urquiola, K., Elsayed-Ali, S., Yafi, E. Addressing institutional racism within initiatives for SIGCHI's diversity and inclusion. Interactions blog. Jun. 11, 2020; <https://interactions.acm.org/blog/view/addressing-institutional-racism-within-initiatives-for-sigchis-diversity-an>
2. fempower.tech. An open letter to first-time attendees. fempower.tech. May 7, 2018; <https://fempower.tech/2018/05/07/chi-2018-an-open-letter-to-first-time-attendants/>
3. fempower.tech. An open letter to the CHI community. fempower.tech. May 7, 2018; <https://fempower.tech/2018/05/07/chi-2018-an-open-letter-to-the-chi-community/>
4. Strohmayer, A., Laing, M., and Comber, R. Technologies and social justice outcomes in sex work charities: Fighting stigma, saving lives. *Proc. of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, New York, 2017.
5. Strohmayer, A., Clamen, J., and Laing, M. Technologies for social justice: Lessons from sex workers at the front lines. *Proc. of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, New York, 2019.
6. fempower.tech. A call for respect, inclusion, fairness, and transparency in SIGCHI. Interactions blog. Dec. 3, 2020; <https://interactions.acm.org/blog/view/a-call-for-respect-inclusion-fairness-and-transparency-in-sigchi>
7. <https://www.acm.org/about-acm/about-the-acm-organization>

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