Building Social Platforms around Affirmative Consent

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Abstract

Social platforms play a crucial role in coordination and finding like-minded people in activism. However, social platforms also can obstruct activist movements due to the problems manifesting in platforms, such as online harassment and abuse. In this position paper we argue that HCI researchers can play a role in activism by building safe and consentful social platforms with feminist values, in particular, *affirmative consent* (*"yes means yes"*). Inspired by feminist activism, we have derived the core concepts of affirmative consent from prior literature. We are also generating design insights based on our definition of affirmative consent — which we hope will inspire multiple platforms that only allow safe and consensual interactions, and further aid and empower activism.

Author Keywords
socio-technical systems; social platform; activism

Introduction
Activism consists of "efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, or environmental change" [3]. And technology plays a crucial role in realizing activist agenda [3, 16, 20, 25]. Among the technologies, social platforms play a major role in activism such as the #MeToo movement [16]. However, social platforms sometimes obstruct activism due to the problems that currently manifest

in the platforms. One major example is online harassment and abuse — activists experience trolling and abuse on the platforms they coordinate the movement [16].

In this paper, we argue that we HCI researchers can play a role in activism by building novel safe and consensual social platforms that are built with feminist values. We first review past cases where activism was empowered by, or in contrast, impeded by online harassment and abuse on social platforms. Next, we review prior work on systems and tools that have been built with feminist values. By building on prior work, we argue that it is crucial to build social platforms that are built with feminist values, in particular, *affirmative consent* — which emphasizes that *one must ask and earn an enthusiastic approval before performing an action to another person* (*"yes means yes"*). Thus, we derived concepts of affirmative consent from prior literature as: *voluntary*, *informed*, *specific*, *revertible*, and *unburdensome*. We are also generating design insights based on affirmative consent. Based on these design insights, we aim to build a novel platform that only allow consensual interactions, and further aid, not obstruct, activist movements.

Social Platforms and Activism

Social platforms are crucial for activism — and activists have been actively using them to make social movements such as the Arab Spring and #MeToo movements [16, 20, 25]. Compared to offline activism, social platforms provide an easier way to engage and connect with people on platforms as well as coordinate the movements. Especially for women or disabled people who were historically excluded from the public sphere, having a presence on social platforms and being visible is powerful [16]. Therefore, in the case of the #MeToo movement on Twitter, activists were more positive towards using Twitter for activism when asked about their overall experiences [16]. Anonymity and pseudonymity of social platforms also enable people to suggest radical or anti-governmental views or participate in activism [25].

However, there are aspects of social platforms that obstruct online activism. One major impediment is online harassment and abuse against people participating in the movements. For instance, in the case of the #MeToo movement on Twitter, participants experienced online trolling and abuse in response to their feminist values [16]. In extreme cases, the trolling and abuse took forms of "meninism" and "Men's Rights Activism" [10, 16].

Another factor that hinders online activism through social platforms is the social platform companies' design decisions and policies driven by commercial interests [25]. For instance, although anonymity plays a crucial role in enabling people to organize or participate in online activism, real identities are necessary for profit — as they are used in ads — for the companies [25]. Social platform companies also make arbitrary decisions and use their policies against activists — which are deeply related to the companies' commercial interests [25]. For example, if considered as detrimental to the company's profit, social platform companies arbitrarily remove content related to activism as they are considered as "harmful" or ban activist accounts [25].

Socio-technical Systems with Feminist Values

In this section, we review socio-technical systems built with feminist values. We do not limit ourselves to only social platforms, as there are not many platforms built with feminist values at its core from the start. A major example of a successful platform built with feminist values is HeartMob[1], a private platform for "providing targets of online harassment with access to social and instrumental support" [4].

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[1] https://iheartmob.org/

Grounded in the practice of intersectional feminism, it was designed and built by people who are most severely impacted by online harassment. Another example of a social platform built with feminist values is Archive of Our Own (AO3)[2], a fan fiction archive designed and coded primarily by women of the online fandom community [6]. Users appreciated the many design features which were driven by feminist values such as treating user identity as "fluid and user-controlled", respecting anonymity, pseudonymity and privacy [6].

There are numerous other examples of systems that have feminist values embedded in them. For instance, there are tools that detect overly gender-coded words. Kat Matfield's Gender De-Coder[3] highlights overly masculine-coded or feminine-coded words in texts. It uses an original list of gender-coded words which resulted from research on job advertisements that use overly gendered wording [8]. Textio[4], an online service company providing services for writing better ads, also takes a similar approach — it builds algorithms using machine learning to detect gender biases in advertisements [23]. Other tools focus on using visualization to give voice to oppressed populations. For instance, Feminicidio Uruguay[5], created by Helena Suárez Val — an activist and researcher—is a a digital map that visualizes feminicide cases of Uruguay [24]. It is related to #NiUna-Menos (Not one less [woman]) movement, a feminist activism against gender based violence [21]. Similarly, Feminicidiosmx[6], created by María Salguero, is an interactive map of femicides occurred in Mexico [14]. Such real-world socio-technical systems can be seen as feminist efforts to make social changes.

Building Social Platforms with Affirmative Consent

Building upon the work introduced in the previous section, we argue that an important way of making change is *building social platforms with feminist values*. As discussed in the prior sections, social platforms play an important role in people's engagement with discourses related to activist movements [3, 16, 20, 25]. At the same time however, progressive activism through social platforms can face many obstacles, including online harassment and abuse. Online harassment and abuse is increasingly becoming frequent, with vulnerable populations including women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ communities being impacted the most [5]. This can cause extremely negative consequences when such populations are organizing and leading movements.

Thus we argue that it is crucial to build safe and consensual platforms with feminist values — which can ultimately contribute greatly to activism. Just as Bardzell wrote in her piece on Feminist HCI, feminist standpoint theory emphasizes the value of using women's perspectives and experiences [1]. Social platforms like Hollaback and AO3, which were built with feminist values, only allow consensual interactions and give people more agency, safely empowering the people who use the platforms.

Why affirmative consent?
Among feminist values, we in particular focus on the framework of **affirmative consent** — "yes means yes". But first, we review one of the first influential movements in reconstructing consent, the "No Means No" campaign. "No Means No" was started by the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) in 1990s in order to increase awareness and prevent sexual assaults and rape on and off campuses [19]. How-

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[2]https://archiveofourown.org/
[3]http://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com/
[4]https://textio.com/
[5]https://sites.google.com/view/feminicidiouruguay
[6]https://feminicidiosmx.crowdmap.com/

ever, it was criticized later because it allowed sexual activities to happen as long as neither party said no, which is hard in some circumstances due to coercion, intoxication or disabilities. Furthermore, "no means no" views women as mere "gatekeepers" to their bodies, not viewing women as having desires — as they are viewed as to say no instead of enthusiastically say yes [9, 17].

Affirmative consent ("yes means yes") was part of a legal scholarship in 1980s, but it was first codified in 1991 [12]. In 1991, Antioch College passed a code in the university's Sexual Offense Policy stating that only "yes" can mean consent, a way of viewing consent as a clear and voluntary agreement [22, 12]. In other words, silence or no resistance does not indicate consent [15]. Furthermore, compared to the "no means no" principle, affirmative consent emphasizes that *one must ask and earn an enthusiastic approval before performing an action to another person ("yes means yes")* [7]. It views women as a desiring and active being, not a passive gatekeeper.

Affirmative consent has become influential in our discourse around consent in 2000s. In 2008, feminist writers Friedman and Valenti published "Yes means yes!" which made the phrase popular [7]. Furthermore, California passed legislation in September 2014 stating that only an affirmative yes can mean consent [7, 13]. As a national movement, many colleges and universities adopted affirmative consent in their sexual assault policies [11]. Inspired by such movements, we ask: *how can the practice of affirmative consent be applied to the design of social spaces online?*

Core Concepts of Affirmative Consent and Design Insights
We are currently researching what interpersonal consent means in the context of social platforms (not consent between the system and person, but consent between people). Based on prior literature, we derived concepts of affir-

mative consent as **voluntary**, **informed**, **specific**, **revertible**, and **unburdensome**.

The most basic concept of consent is **voluntary**. Voluntary means consent is an agreement that is freely given and enthusiastic [2]. "Freely given" means that consent cannot exist when someone is coerced. "Enthusiastic" means that consent is not just a lack of coercion, but a strong desire to engage in the interaction. Next, consent requires all parties to be **informed**, which means people can only consent to an interaction after being given the correct information — and the information should be accessible to everyone. Consent should also be **specific** — people should be able to consent to a particular action (or a person), and not a series of actions (or a group of people) if one wants to — a person may consent to receiving messages from strangers, but not consent to being tagged in posts by strangers. Consent is also **revertible**, which means any consent throughout an activity can be revoked at any time — e.g. a person can always change one's mind and withdraw from a group chat they initially consented to enter [18]. Furthermore, consent should be **unburdensome**, which means the costs associated with giving consent should not be so high that a person does not want to do it [18].

Based on these core concepts, we are currently deriving generative design implications to build safe and consensual social platforms. In the future, we also aim to design, build, and deploy a consensual social platform based on the design insights. For instance, what would a consensual DM (which meets all five concepts of affirmative consent) look like? How can we design posting and commenting that only allows consensual interactions?

Author Biography

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Jill Dimond is a worker-owner and co-founder of Sassafras Tech Collective and has over 15 years experience in tech in diverse roles. She holds a PhD in Human Centered Computing from Georgia Tech. Dr. Dimond's award-winning work in technologies to combat sexual harassment has appeared in the New York Times and Washington Post.

Melody Berton is a worker-owner at Sassafras Tech Collective, a tech consultancy and worker-cooperative specializing in research, design, and development of technologies for social justice. Berton has a BS in Computer Science and has led complex technical architecture implementation for large systems such as HeartMob.

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