

**Human agency towards digital inclusion: Implementing an international study of tech help networks / iConference Workshop Proposal / September 8, 2018 Draft by Hui Yan and Kate Williams**

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**Title:** Human agency towards digital inclusion: Implementing an international study of tech help networks

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**Organizers** (All organizers and participants will register for iConference)

1. Hui Yan, Associate Professor, School of Information Resource Management, Renmin University of China
  2. Noah Lenstra, Assistant Professor, Department of Library and Information Studies, UNC Greensboro
  3. Kate Williams, Associate Professor, School of Information Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
  4. Shenglong Han, Associate Professor, Department of Information Management, Peking University
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**Abstract.** A workshop to finalize and recruit people to an international study of technology helpsharing in the digital age. This help is crucial and ubiquitous among elites; what about ordinary people? By sharing and finalizing a field manual and instrument among scholars with highly varied access to study populations, we will be ready to implement a three year study that will shed light on human agency towards digital inclusion. Individual scholars will work in their own settings with a shared field manual and instrument, carrying out a short field study with students in one of their courses or with their research groups. The 2019 iConference with its emphasis on “Including,” its inclusion of community informatics research since 2005, and its broad membership of many country’s schools and programs, is the best place from which to launch this three-year study.

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**Description. (998 words – be careful not to add any more!)**

**Purpose and intended audience.** We propose a three-hour workshop for 24-32 participants falling under the iConference priority of “Including.” This workshop will discuss and finalize an international research study into technology help: How ordinary people in a variety of settings and demographics access and even provide help with technology in their daily lives. It is an approach to understanding human agency in the face of digital inequality.

Eleven confirmed participants come from 11 universities in the US, UK, and China. We

will attract others to learn about the study and join in as well. Anyone else interested in discovering and solving information problems in communities and among specific social groups, including marginalized groups, will be welcomed. Those scholars and students in fields of community informatics, public libraries, information behavior, and human computer interaction are urged to join the workshop and gain hands-on global research experience.

**Format.** Sessions in the half day will include 1) panel, 2) breakout groups, and 3) whole-group discussion. First, the proposers will present a rationale and review the draft field manual and interview instrument (9-9:50 am, if the workshop is scheduled in the morning). These documents will be available in advance of the workshop and that same day. Second, everyone will split up into smaller groups to share input on the drafts (10-10:50 am). Third, everyone will reconvene in a whole-group session to hear key points from the breakout groups, identify any outstanding issues, and recognize new partners (11-11:50 am). (Confirmed participants will have already shared their related past research via a workshop website.)

**Goals or Outcomes.** An expanded group of committed partner-researchers. Detailed notes for a finalized field manual and instrument that organizers will use to assemble final documents and launch the study via a project website. The major objective is a three-year coordinated research project resulting in peer reviewed publications and a higher profile for the field of Community Informatics, facilitating further support and research.

An additional objective of the workshop is to continue to expand the field of community informatics into China. This field developed first in the US, Canada and the UK. Scholars visiting the US discovered the work and introduced it into the schools of China. (Williams et al. 2012) Individual researchers have published literature reviews and empirical studies. This is an opportunity to undertake coordinated research that draws power from numbers and from an international span, acknowledging and connecting with the extensive English language literature in this and related areas.

**Relevance to iConference 2019.** The theory and subject of the workshop falls under the conference theme of Including, and so does the method. With regard to theory and subject, the proposed study emerges from community informatics, which we have helped represent at iConferences since 2005. This work has found that ordinary people seek out technology help intermittently and repeatedly throughout their lives, and this can be especially crucial for populations who are unable to access formal IT help organization through school, work, or the marketplace. The work advances our understanding of digital inequality, emphasizing human agency. Four concepts drive this. One, informatics moment: the episode of helpgetting that people often need to engage in to complete work or life tasks using digital technology. (Williams 2012b) Two, informatics lifecourse: the unique pattern of informatics moments in a person's life impacted by their life changes – job changes, household moves, and changes in social support networks. (Lenstra 2016, 2019) Three, digital poverty: a composite measurement of a person's access, use, awareness, and skills that enable

productive use of these new tools. (Wang and Yan 2013; Yan 2018) And four, social capital: people relying on their social networks to access and importantly to share tech help, rather than formal channels such as public agencies, workplaces, or the marketplace. (Williams 2012a)

‘Including’ in our method has two aspects. One, providing service along with gathering data, tech help along with each interview. Two, including LIS/IM students to carry out one or more interviews/help sessions as part of coursework with one of the researchers. Students thus learn basic social science field methods and the basics of helping others with digital technology, modeling citizenship in the digital age. These tasks are chief among those that information professionals are asked to do at reference desks and elsewhere in our information institutions. This aspect of our method can be summarized as turning the classroom from a site of knowledge consumption to a site of knowledge production.

This workshop is designed to appeal especially but not only to junior scholars (doctoral candidates and assistant professors) who are looking for research projects that complement their solo work and result in datasets and joint publications. The study design to be presented will include a field handbook and an instrument. The populations that each partner will study will vary widely, but we expect to focus on adults of various demographics with respect to age, gender, education, occupation, urban/rural, and country of residence. The driving ideas of the project from the workshop organizers will be augmented from those of the proposers to include other ideas from information behavior, human-computer interaction, library science, and internet research, depending on those who attend the workshop and join the project. So we expect to better knit together a network of scholars across the iSchools.

The study will span three years. Calendar year 2019 will be recruiting researchers and fine tuning the research design. The year 2020 will be field work. And 2021 will be data sharing and report out. We hope to see presentations and publications by individual researchers and by the entire team, facilitated by sharing of data and by a second workshop at the 2021 iConference.

**Funding.** A grant from China’s National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences will cover translation and any incidentals for the workshop. The partners will pay for their own travel, data collection, and analysis. “Classroom as site of production” means that data can be collected in one or two semesters by each researcher working with a course full of students.

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**Duration.** Half-day

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**Attendance.** 24 expected, 32 maximum.

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**Special requirements.** None

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**No room for these sections**

**Participants**

1. Wenjie Zhou, Professor and Associate Dean, Business School, Northwest Normal University
2. Xiudan Yang, Professor and Chair, Department of Information Management Engineering, Hebei University
3. Pengyi Zhang, Associate Professor, Department of Information Management, Peking University
4. Sufang Wang, Associate Professor, School of Public Administration, Zhejiang University
5. Ping Wang, Associate Professor, School of Information Management, Zhengzhou University
6. Zhenjia Fan, Assistant Professor, Business School, Nankai University
7. Yimin Zhao, Research Librarian, University Library, Yunnan University
8. Jiqun Liu, Doctoral Student, School of Communication and Information, Rutgers University.
9. Pu Yan, Doctoral Student, Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford University
10. Kyungwon Koh, Associate Professor, School of Information Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign
11. Tina Du, Senior Lecturer, School of Information Technology and Mathematical Sciences, University of South Australia
12. Aiko Takazawa. Ph.D. candidate, School of Information Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign

**Consultants**

1. Abdul Alkalimat, Professor Emeritus, School of Information Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
2. Maosheng Lai, Professor Emeritus, Department of Information Management, Peking University

**Works Cited**

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