

# Trust Me, I'm Accountable: Trust and Accountability Online

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## Panelists and Affiliations

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## ABSTRACT

We live in an increasingly wired world. According to Robert Putnam, people are spending less time in persistent personal face to face interactions and more time in pursuits such as watching TV and using the Internet. At the same time, independently measured "social capital" -- the extent to which we trust and work for a common good -- is declining. In this panel, we explore: the impacts of electronic media on trust and accountability; whether and how electronic media can be designed and used to increase deserved trust and accountability; the relationship between protecting privacy and increasing the efficacy of communication; and how people's tendency to treat computers as social actors impacts these issues. In brief, how can modern technology enhance humanity's humanity?

## Keywords

Accountability, anonymity, communication, computers and society, ethics, Internet, media effects, privacy, reciprocity, repute, social actors, social capital, social impacts, trust, value-sensitive design, wired world, WWW

## INTRODUCTION

We live in an increasingly wired world. According to Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam, people in the United States are spending less time in persistent personal face to face interactions and more time in pursuits such as watching TV and using the Internet. At the same time, independently measured "social capital" -- the extent to which we trust and work for a common good -- is declining. Similar trends, less well quantified, appear to be occurring elsewhere in the world as well. If Putnam's earlier studies [4] of Italy hold true, the decrease in social capital can be a precursor to increased violence, decreased economic vitality, and increased

mental illness and even mortality. To what degree is the observed decrease in social capital caused by electronic media themselves?

In this panel, we explore: the impacts of electronic media on trust and accountability; whether and how electronic media can be designed and used to increase deserved trust and accountability; the relationship between protecting privacy and increasing the efficacy of communication; and how people's tendency to treat computers as social actors impacts these issues. In brief, how can modern technology enhance humanity's humanity [2, 3]?

This panel consists of seven individuals who have explored issues related to trust and accountability from a diversity of perspectives and professional experiences in academia and business. These perspectives include those of people studying the issues empirically and theoretically; people designing systems to support online communities and running electronic virtual communities; people with backgrounds in communications, computer science, education, psychology, and philosophy.

## PANEL FORMAT

We will begin by asking each panelist to relate a true story about an instance in which he or she trusted another individual, company, or institution based on electronic interaction and to attempt to explain the conditions that led to that trust.

We will then ask the panelists five provocative and fundamental questions concerning electronic media and its relationship to trust and accountability:

1. What's your most pessimistic (and optimistic) vision of what the wired future might hold?
2. How can we use the electronic media to increase social capital?

3. Electronic media offer unprecedented visibility and archiving. How do these relate to accountability and trust?
4. How does the potential "fragmentation" of electronic media impact trust and accountability?
5. Is it possible to develop a deep trust of the sort that is needed for a true friendship when the only communication is through electronic media?

For the last half-hour, we will elicit stories and debate from the audience on these questions.

#### SUMMARY OF PANELISTS' POSITIONS

##### Batya Friedman

Following Baier [1], Friedman says we trust when we are at risk but have good reason -- namely, the good will of those who could keep use from harm -- to believe that we will remain safe from harm. Thus, trust presupposes relationships among persons and should be distinguished from our reliance on technical systems to perform as expected. Researchers and designers in the CHI community play a critical role in creating the conditions that can ease trust in online interactions. Such conditions include ways to (1) help users reasonably assess the type, magnitude, and likelihood of harms to which they are vulnerable; (2) in the absence of face to face interactions, facilitate the development of good will among individuals and institutions in online communities; and (3) avoid engendering in users either too much or too little trust for a given online interaction.

##### Jonathan Grudin

Technology allows us to interact across time and space. The effectiveness of these interactions depends on our ability to understand each other's contexts. In general, the more we know about others, the better we understand them. This fact brings effective communication into conflict with privacy. Over time, we have developed extensive, culture-specific conventions for dealing with this tradeoff. New technologies, however, disrupt these conventions. These issues play themselves out today in organizations around calendar and e-mail use, but the indications are that they will soon force a radical confrontation with existing practices.

##### Clifford Nass

People trust computers and hold them accountable under exactly those circumstances in which people would trust other people and hold them accountable [5]. Thus, what is already known about social psychology is an adequate guide for designing computer mediated social systems.

##### Helen Nissenbaum

Members of the CHI community have wisely turned to the issue of trust in a computerized, networked environment. A philosophical analysis, while it will not necessarily provide direct answers to the questions that CHI researchers ask, helps hone the questions and prompt researchers to face the ethical assumptions underlying their studies and the ethical responsibilities they bear in ensuring that the trust they may help engender is rightly earned.

##### Mark Schlager

Schlager's views stem from the development of a platform-independent, Web-based on-line environment designed to support an on-line community of currently over 2400 educational professionals and 14 professional development organizations. Organizations and teachers must develop trust in the technology, the concept, and in SRI as the community host. In turn, SRI holds the organizations accountable for planning and conducting meaningful on-line activities and providing high-quality resources. Most important, community members must develop trust in one another as they learn to become on-line colleagues through shared discourse.

##### Ben Shneiderman

It is essential and achievable to build systems which are reliable, secure, and preserve privacy as well as having good user interfaces. We should be agreeing on the necessary processes now to ensure that future systems have these properties.

##### John C. Thomas

How we communicate and the media in which we communicate greatly influence how we view each other [6]. In particular, the decontextualization of information is a major cause of the difficulties often associated with electronic media. However, this decontextualization is not a necessary concomitant of electronic media; rather, if properly designed, electronic media may actually make for better-contextualized communication than is otherwise possible.

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