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EDITORIAL

Liam Bannon in Memoriam

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Liam J. Bannon died on 22 September 2024 after a long illness. With Liam's passing, the CSCW community lost a pioneer in the formation of CSCW as a field of scholarly study. Many of us, especially in the European CSCW community, also lost a cherished colleague. The *CSCW Journal* lost its 'First Founder', and I have lost a dear friend.

Liam's scholarly interests were wide-ranging and ever developing, but throughout remained concerned with the human condition in an age of automatic machinery. That was his focus, the axis of his studies, and what drove him.

Given the scope and richness of his scholarly interests, I will here abstain from even trying to give an overview, let alone an assessment, of his contributions. Not only am I too involved with parts of it, I am also not qualified to assess most of it. And in any case, this is not the place. Instead, I will concentrate on his role in bringing this journal to life and to success and the origins of the intellectual orientation he brought to bear on collaborative computing and the *CSCW Journal*.

His academic path began in 1971 when he entered a study program at University College Dublin in Computer Science and Psychology. His path first took him to cognitive psychology (he did his post-graduate studies with Zenon Pylyshyn in Western Ontario in the second half of the 1970s). However, at the same time, by end of the 1970s, the microprocessor had acquired practical import. Obviously concerned with this, and evidently qualified for the task, he began to explore the potential societal impact of the 'microprocessor revolution', especially its effect on working life. Thus, on his return to Ireland, he joined National Board for Science and Technology (NBST), acting as liaison with the program of the European Communities on 'Forecasting and Assessment in Science and Technology' (FAST) and co-chairing a conference in Dublin on Information Technology sponsored by NBST and FAST (Bannon, Barry and Holst 1981).[1]

[1] It is a further indication of Liam's standing as a peer in the European Socio-Technical community at this early stage, that he (according to Bannon 2004, p. 137) served on the program committee for the FAST Information Society conference (Bjørn-Andersen et al. 1982), held in January 1982 in London.

These were early days, of course; empirical studies of computing and information technology in daily use were sparse and forecasting a precarious undertaking, so in their introduction to the proceedings, the editors, Liam and his co-chair, Ursula Barry, focused on articulating the key research issues in forecasting and assessing 'the social impact of the new information technologies', and the methodological challenges they posed. As topics of particular concern, the authors highlighted the transformation of 'the role of human labour in production itself' with the integration of computer control in processing machinery; the development of computer networks that allow for 'the collection, collation, integration and dissemination of information on an unprecedented scale', and 'the development of highly complex, distributed processing systems that can support "the integrated office", whereby all office procedures are co-ordinated and rationalised, with continuous monitoring of all transactions' (Bannon and Barry 1981, pp. 1–2).

In concluding their reflections, the authors noted that the 'impact of information technology on particular classes and class factions' had received relatively little attention in the conference contributions, and therefore cautioned the Socio-Technical community against the observable predilection for linear projections based on examinations limited to 'different segments of daily life', as this might make them miss the

> 'countervailing tendencies […] influenced by a wide range of factors, including governmental policies, corporate strategies, the level of public involvement in the decision-making process, social movements and overall economic developments. […] Such issues as the content and organization of work and leisure activities, and the scope they allow for creativity. are of crucial importance in our society and will ultimately be determined by society at large, at all instances of social and political organization.' (Bannon and Barry 1981, p. 16).

The methodological sophistication demonstrated in these few pages underpins Liams whole intellectual career. His next move was a clear manifestation of that.

Interactive-computing technology began to unfold around the same time. The Xerox Alto prototype was built in 1973, the Xerox 8010 Star workstation was launched in 1981, and the Apple Macintosh was launched in 1984. In hot pursuit, a research program addressing these technologies, their design and use, began to take shape around the same time. The first CHI conference was held in 1983. Well aware of these developments, Liam put his now well-seasoned socio-technical competencies in his suitcase and moved to the primary center for the budding research in human–computer interaction, settling in 1983 as a post-doc researcher at the Institute for Cognitive Science at UC San Diego, which had been founded in 1979 by Don Norman. However, Liam was seemingly not impressed with the direction

taken by the new research field. The fact is that Liam, in 1985, *Extending the Design Boundaries of Human–Computer Interaction*, expressed misgivings about the conceptual constraints of the mentalist paradigm underpinning both cognitive science and the new research area of HCI (cf. Bannon 1985).

In fact, his 1985 tract reads like a manifesto from a member of the European Socio-Technical community intervening in the discourse of HCI. Noting that the field of human–computer interaction was developing rapidly on a number of fronts, he explicitly states that the report was 'an attempt to broaden the scope of the kinds of issues the field might encompass' (p. 3).[2] But it also reads like a manifesto from the future, from CSCW:

> 'By focusing exclusively on the human-computer dyad we miss out on the importance of social support networks in both the accomplishment of many work activities and the development of a sense of community that facilitates these work activities. […] The argument here goes beyond a simple call to take into account the "social context" of computer system use. Rather, […] we should provide many hooks where human help can be solicited either in the immediate work environment or through the computer, and this should be an integral part of the total support package that we design.' (Bannon 1985, pp. 18 f.)

Consequently, he used his stay at UCSD to engage with Californian research milieux that could help him enrich his understanding of the social organization of human activities, such as cultural anthropology as represented at UCSD by Michael Cole and others, and ethnomethodology as represented by Lucy Suchman and Eleanor Wynn at Xerox PARC. At this point, with these insights and his manifold contacts in the baggage (and after a two-year-long sojourn in Asia), Liam relocated back to Europe by the end of 1987.

In January 1988 he landed in Copenhagen, reconnecting with a pioneer of the socio-technical research community in Scandinavia, Niels Bjørn-Andersen, at the Informatics Department at Copenhagen Business School (CBS). Later that year, he joined the computer science department at Aarhus University. With that move, he landed himself in the middle of a computer science milieu of young scholars like Morten Kyng, Lars Mathiassen, Susanne Bødker, and Pelle Ehn who were exploring the theoretical foundations and methodological issues of engaging workers into the design process as active and responsible agents.

[2] Liam once told me that his 1985 piece was not received with enthusiasm at ICS. This would explain why his contributions (1986a, 1986b, 1986c) to the *User Centered System Design* volume, edited by Norman and Draper (1986) are noticeably muffled in comparison. (The 1986 book was published after Liam had left California for Europe and his contributions give UCD as the affiliation).

Liam hit the ground running. Already when visiting CBS in January 1988, he took the initiative to organize the first European workshop dedicated to CSCW. It was held as part of the Eurinfo'88 Conference in Athens in May 1988. The paper that served as a call for participation not only gave an introduction to what was happening on the collaborative computing scene in North America, but at the same time offered a sweeping critical discussion ('appraisal and critique') of what CSCW might be and could become (Bannon, Bjørn-Andersen and Due-Thomsen 1988). The workshop was a success. Almost a hundred people attended and at some point the discussion turned into something close to a riot, with participants arguing loudly whether or not CSCW was anything new and important. The excitement was not just an understandable manifestation of reluctance on the part of the Information Systems and Systems Development communities, skeptical that this was just another bandwagon; it was also an expression of keen interest from the many European researchers that had already by then been engaged in research on the same tracks but under labels such as 'Tele-Informatics' but had begun to have serious reservations about the 'message-passing' model of Computer-Mediated Communication (as discussed in Pankoke-Babatz 1989).

Barely landed in Europe, Liam had initiated a chain reaction, or so it seemed. Liam certainly played no little role in it. I experienced this first hand. Early 1988, when he was at CBS preparing the workshop and writing the 'appraisal and critique', Liam contacted me out of the blue. I was then working at a computer science research lab (Dansk Datamatik Center) in Copenhagen, tasked with the methodological challenges of conducting requirements analysis for the new application domains emerging with distributed computing in organizational settings ('office automation', 'engineering work stations', 'computer-aided design', 'shared repositories', etc.). It was a question I, a sociologist in the tradition of Marx, had approached by conceiving of 'cooperative work', not as an ideal, but as technically contingent and historically emergent practices. Anyway, at some point during that winter, Liam, having heard of my work from Bjørn-Andersen, contacted me at DDC and encouraged me to submit a short paper to the upcoming workshop in Athens (which I duly did, cf. Schmidt 1988). To me, this turned out to be 'the beginning of a beautiful friendship'. Liam and I eventually wrote several papers together, some of which, I'm grateful to see, have been rather influential (Bannon and Schmidt 1989; Schmidt and Bannon 1992; Bannon and Schmidt 2013).

After having arrived in Europe in 1988, Liam seemed to pop up everywhere. Shortly after the Athens conference, as researchers in the European Tele-Informatics community, represented by scholars like John Bowers, Paul Wilson, and Steve Benford, took steps to organize the first European conference dedicated to collaborative computing, they adopted the acronym 'CSCW' and invited Liam to join the conference committee. The conference was eventually held in Gatwick, UK, in September 1989 (Wilson, Bowers and Benford 1989). Keeping

momentum, Liam, now teamed up with Mike Robinson (who also had been on the organizing committee of ECSCW 1989), undertook to organize the second ECSCW conference in Amsterdam (Bannon, Robinson and Schmidt 1991).

The rest is history. Not only did research on collaborative computing in Europe quickly become institutionalized, with a growing network of pan-European researchers (fostered by the EU Commission's COST-14 CoTech initiative, 1989–1996, cf. Schmidt 1996), with a host of national and international projects such as the COMIC and EuroCODE projects, and, bringing it all back home, with annual conferences in Europe (ECSCW, COOP, etc.), from 2016 organized under the EUSSET umbrella (EUSSET 2009).

In the course of this, collaborative computing research in Europe developed a distinct research profile, later dubbed 'practice-centered computing' (cf. , e.g., Wulf, Schmidt and Randall 2015; Wulf et al. 2018), characterized by an emphasis on ethnographic and similar in-depth studies of cooperative work practices as the basis for the development of collaborative computing technologies. This is of course not a research program limited to the European scene but it found, in a Europe in the wake of the social upheavals of 1968–1991, reverberating with workers' demand for industrial democracy and shopfloor control and in general by demands for participatory democracy and elementary rights, a fertile ground for a CSCW research program with an outspoken emancipatory commitment, insisting on systems design in respect for the dignity of practitioners 'at the coal face'. Liam's role in articulating this research program cannot be exaggerated.

At this early point in the development of CSCW as a research area, in the fall of 1990, Liam was contacted by a publisher at Kluwer Academic Publishers in The Netherlands, Simon Ross. He had the wits to suggest that it would be timely to launch a scholarly journal devoted to CSCW. Liam responded positively and promptly involved John Bowers, who had been the program chair of the first ECSCW, Mike Robinson, and me, in developing the proposal. To the key question from Ross about the proposed 'scope' of the journal, Liam replied:

> 'yes, both practical and theoretical ...case studies, empirical work, design work etc ok as well. Make it Theory and Applications (with the -s) focus on the actual products..i.e. we could look at specific products/systems in case studies, even though it is not a pure practice type of journal …..' (Email dated 18 September 1990).

Several meetings ensued. By November, the plans had begun to take shape, by February 1991 Susan Leigh Star had been enrolled, and a little later Randy Trigg and Tom Rodden, too. I can see from my copy of the correspondence with Kluwer and among the editors, that Liam remained a key driver during these years in making it happen.

A contract was signed in March 1991, but the first issue did not hit the newsstands until September the year after, two years after Liam's initial and preliminary response. At that time the profile had become much clearer:

> 'We want to encourage contributions which are mindful of the relations between social scientific studies of cooperative work and the computing support requirements of cooperative work. In many respects, we want to encourage hybridism in each contribution! For example, we would urge social scientists who have made a study of a workgroup to spell out clearly what the implications of their findings are for design of appropriate computer support. Equally, we would urge a computer scientist reporting on a technological innovation in, say, meeting room support to spell out clearly how this work is motivated by studies of meetings or what new studies of meetings it suggests. […] A CSCW journal not committed to such a policy is in danger of becoming a repository for weak computer science alongside weak social science. That would be a disservice all round.' (Bowers et al. 1992, pp. 1 f.).

In addition to his essential role as the First Founder of the journal, he also played a central role in making the journal the venue where the different schools of thought in CSCW would meet and debate. A prime example of this was the debate he organized on the basis of Lucy Suchman's paper 'Do categories have politics?' presented at ECSCW 1993 in Milano (Suchman 1993). In that paper she offered a critical discussion of the key issues defining CSCW's research program, namely, the problematic nature of 'the inscription of formal representations of action in technical systems', that is, the construction of computational models of social relations and their use to mediate and regulate social conduct. In particular, her discussion focused on the use of speech-act theory as a generic model of communication in The Coordinator by Winograd and Flores (1986). At Liam's initiative, Suchman revised her intervention for the second volume of the journal and Winograd wrote a rejoinder for the same issue (Bannon 1994; Suchman 1994; Winograd 1994). Insisting on the centrality of this debate, Liam went on to convince a significant number of CSCW scholars to engage with the questions raised by the Suchman-Winograd debate. The commentaries were published in a special section the following year (Bannon 1995). In hindsight, some thirty years later, this debate can be seen as defining of CSCW as a distinct research area. It was also defining of the journal's central place in CSCW as an international field of inquiry.

The journal's foundation saga ended as it had to. It was becoming a going concern, and Liam's energy found other outlets. It was, from the very beginning, the ambition of the editors that the editorial board should work as a 'collective', with responsibility for individual issues rotating. But it soon became evident that

the idea of having collective responsibility for continuous copy flow did not work (unsurprisingly) and was chronically causing actual publication to fall behind schedule. In view of this, we wised up, and I was asked to take on the task of 'coordinating editor' and eventually the standard role of editor-in-chief. By that time, Liam's initial role as the First Founder and the linchpin of the journal had receded. Liam's service to the journal as associate editor ended in January 2004, but his support did not (the work he put into editing the special issue celebrating CSCW's 'first quarter century' bears witness to that, cf. Bannon and Schmidt 2013). In any event, I would surely have stumbled if Liam had not stayed on for many years as a member of the Editorial Advisory Board (until 2020) and as a colleague I could turn to for advice.

Looking back, finally, on the life and work of Liam, it seems clear to me that what gave unity to Liam's life and work was his persistent concern with human life and work and the ways in which computing technology might — just might! — become a useful and enriching part of it. This concern was his point of departure in human factors research and his critique of the automation paradigm and remained the axis of all the twists and turns of his life and work, from human factors to cognitive psychology to human-centered computing to CSCW to participatory design.

In all that, Liam's life and work remained strikingly unified at another level too. He lived his way of thinking: exploring intellectual connections by making personal connections, and making personal connections by exploring intellectual connections. This was something of which he was quite conscious. In an interview with Alvise Mattozzi, Liam put it this way:

> 'My role has often been the one of an interpreter for different communities of other communities' work.' (Mattozzi and Bannon 2015, p. 134).

His devotion to weaving the fabric of the scholarly communities he touched and pushed will be sorely missed. So will, for me, his friendship.

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