

Bringing in the social: A strategy to de-gender the computer science discipline?

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My presentation will focus on one of the main chapters of my dissertation thesis, which aims to contribute to a theoretical foundation of the field of “gender studies in computer science”. I will discuss an assumption, on which most feminist approaches to computer science rely: A narrow technological understanding of computer science functions as a gatekeeper that keeps not only social aspects, but also women and gender perspectives away from the discipline. Hence, a transgression of the excluding technological focus will open up room for changes in the structural-symbolic relationship of gender and technology. Can, therefore, bringing in the social be seen as a strategy to de-gender the computer science discipline?

My approach to address this question is to examine those discourses in the computer science discipline, which questioned traditional boundaries of the technological. Central arenas in which this boundary has been negotiated during the last 30 years are the debate on appropriate practices on software development, on the scientific foundation of the discipline and on the understanding of the new technology. In each of the three debates there were marked positions that either guarded the technological or argued in favour of a transgression toward the social. All of the latter have been a source of hope that the initiated shifts will contribute to an increasing participation of women and to changes in the existing gender order.

In presenting my analysis of the three historic academic debates, I will try to give answers to the question in how far feminist hopes have been fulfilled - and why.