

Brian Lamb School of Communication and Cyber Center Lecture

Agents beyond control? How distributed social control in computational institutions can increase organizational fidelity and reduce corruption



**Howard T. Welser, Associate Professor
Dept of Sociology and Anthropology
Ohio University**

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Speaker Bio

Howard T. Welser (PhD, University of Washington) is an associate professor of sociology at Ohio University. His research investigates how micro level processes generate collective outcomes, with application to the diffusion of innovations, development of social roles, the emergence of cooperation, and network structure in computer-mediated interaction. His current work applies agency theory to the design of digital institutions in order to increase organizational fidelity and reduce corruption.

Presentation Abstract

Organizational agents are continually tempted to use their authority to serve their own interests. They can cultivate loyalty with a small clique of elites, subvert the mission of their organization, and take organizational resources as their own. This corruption by powerful organizational agents arises due to the seemingly inescapable concentration of power, privilege, and asymmetries in the capacity to monitor and sanction. However, we are no longer limited by the organizational systems of the 19th century nor by constraints of face to face interaction. Partial examples of alternative organizational structures can be identified among effective contemporary firms, online communities, and large scale collaborative projects. This talk describes the organizational challenge in terms of the principal-agent problem and identifies the set of attributes necessary for distributed social control in computational institutions. This set forms an ideal type that can be applied to extant organizations to reveal problems and suggest solutions that can be integrated from current online systems of interaction. In conclusion, I advocate for researchers and designers to propose, develop and to implement systems that will allow organizations to bring organizational agents under control.