

IN SEARCH OF UX TRANSLATORS

Analyzing Researcher-Practitioner Interactions on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

Interest in the nature of HCI practice has increased in the past decade, particularly in relation to the role and existence of “translators” that may bridge the gap between research and UX practice. At present, there is insufficient research to appropriately define and identify the activities of translators, and we hope to provoke additional interest in this area by documenting the UX-focused interactions on Twitter. In this work-in-progress, we identified and visualized interactions among a stratified set of UX practitioners and practitioner-academic hybrids on Twitter, analyzing their interactions to understand what relationships and roles may exist. We found few potential translators, and none from a primarily academic perspective. We identify implications and provocations from this visualization and Twitter analysis approach for future practice-led research.

BACKGROUND

Since the 1980s, the HCI research and practice communities have grown steadily apart, resulting in challenges in communication and dissemination of knowledge between academics and practitioners [1,2,3].

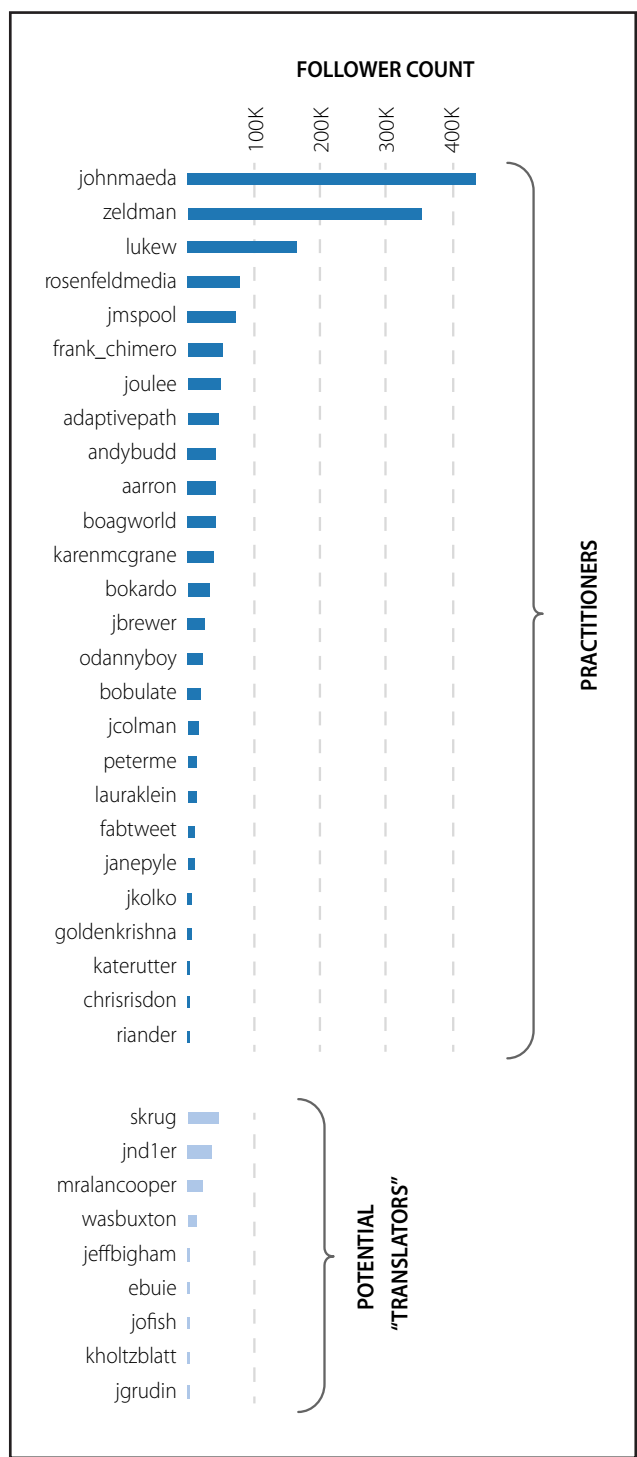
Norman [2] has proposed that this disconnect and lack of knowledge transfer could potentially be bridged by a new type of practitioner that plays the role of translation or translational developer. However, little research has been performed to document how a translator role may appear “in the wild,” or if such individuals exist. We also know little about what knowledge or methodologies practitioners rely upon to do their work, and many in the academic community have expressed frustrations about the low impact or lack of accurate translation their research has in industry settings [1,4].

In interactions amongst experienced practitioners, there lies a wealth of knowledge about successful design methods and techniques that can be used to further both practice and academic research, but at present, there are no strong lines of communication back to the academic community that would give HCI researchers the opportunity to improve their work in hopes of further supporting practice [5]. While there is a history of small-scale practice-led research, in this work-in-progress, we use a sampling of UX practitioner interactions from Twitter to describe a broader view of relationships and thought leadership in the UX community.

METHOD

We created a list of influential UX celebrities on Twitter, comprising stratified groups of practitioners and practitioner-academic hybrids who may potentially be taking on the role of translators. We took into consideration speaking engagements at practitioner and academic HCI/UX conferences, book publications, and related Twitter followers, among other identified influencers. In all, 35 Twitter accounts were selected (see sidebar), and these accounts became the seed nodes used to construct a network data visualization.

For each account, we collected approximately 3200 tweets, including all metadata (n=98541; M=2815.45; SD=833.35). We also documented retweets and @ reply interactions between accounts. We identified all the tweets where non-seeded user accounts were involved in an interaction, and narrowed that set of secondary nodes to include those with a minimum of 50 mentions by any combination of seed nodes. This set of 645 nodes represent other potential thought leaders that may have been missed in our initial selection process. After collecting this data, we used the D3.js visualization library to generate a force-directed network diagram that visualized the interactions among the seeded nodes and seed or secondary nodes.

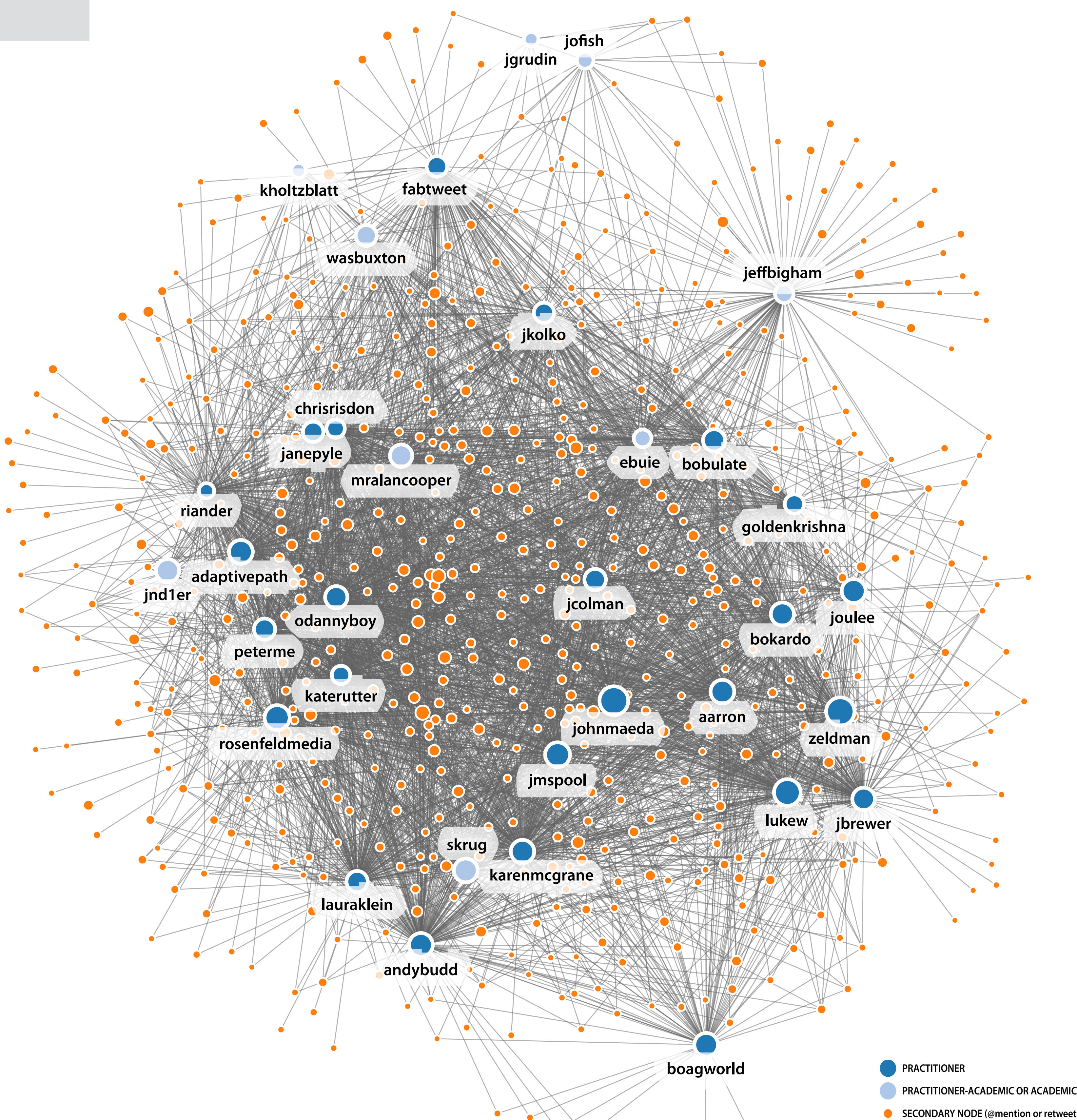


FINDINGS

The centrality of the seed and secondary nodes indicates that UX practitioners tended to dominate interactions in the sample, producing higher volume interactions that were more connected to other seed nodes (and thus, more central). In contrast, accounts that we initially identified as potential practitioner-academics or academics were located primarily along the periphery of the network diagram, showing less shared interaction and less frequent interactions.

- » While we did not directly sample HCI researchers, with the exception of **@jeffbigham**, there seem to be few academics involved in regular Twitter interactions with UX practitioners, and none could be considered central to the UX practice conversation on Twitter.
- » Among those most central in the network graph were well-known UX practitioners that regularly speak at practitioner conferences (e.g., **@johnmaeda**, **@odannyboy**, **@jcolman**).
- » In addition, we note a somewhat central role for two practitioner-academics that may prove useful in understanding the elusive “translator” role: **@mralancooper** is well known for his work in practice, as well as his pioneering text used in UX education and practice; **@ebuie** is a pioneering practitioner in the HCI community that has more recently joined the academic research community.
- » While being a well-known author may have been a contributing factor to being central, it was by no means a direct link; well-known authors such as **@kholtzblatt** and **@jnd1er** were still relatively peripheral to the conversation, potentially because of less active patterns of tweeting and retweeting of others in the community.

❗ Little research has been performed to document how a translator role may appear “in the wild,” or if such individuals exist. ❗



PROVOCATION & FUTURE WORK

Our analysis leads us to believe that traditional academics are often at the fringes of the UX conversation on Twitter, rarely central to conversations that practitioners have about UX topics. This implies a continued need for translators, yet there is an unclear and potentially problematic set of criteria needed to attain such a role. Further research is needed to define and model the knowledge-transmission and community building activities of translators. Based on this preliminary study, Twitter may be an ideal environment to further this goal. Future work may include documenting pathways of knowledge dissemination that further HCI knowledge across research and practice contexts and defining the interaction patterns of these individuals within practitioner networks. Both of these aims may be accomplished by performing more detailed analysis of conversations among Twitter accounts, including the topics being discussed, and the dominant players in each type of conversation.

We conclude with a provocation to the academic HCI community, calling for more substantial and sustained research that explores how practitioners build community and share knowledge using social media. This research should include and build upon the single-sited qualitative work that has already been done, but expand to allow practice-led research to engage with broader knowledge sharing practices that account for national and international perspectives that may easily be lost in single-sited research. Understanding how practitioners build community and share knowledge has the potential to the discursive aspects knowledge-sharing practices in UX, and lead to a greater awareness of how translators may bridge the research-practice gap in productive ways.

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