Southeastern Ethics and Philosophy of Technology

Second Annual Workshop

Saturday, September 10th, 2016
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, City Center Campus
Organized by Gordon Hull (UNCC) and Ashley Shew (Virginia Tech)

Schedule for the Day

9:30am: gather and drink coffee, get excited.

10:00-10:25am: Presentation 1: MaryCatherine McDonald

10:30-10:55: Presentation 2: Joe Pitt

--BREAK--

11:15-11:40am: Presentation 3: Andrew Garnar

11:45-12:10: Presentation 4: Yvette Peterson

--LUNCH--

1:00-1:25pm: Presentation 5: Bono Shih

1:30-1:55pm: Presentation 6: Robert Rosenberger

--BREAK--

2:15-2:40pm: Presentation 7: Matt Duncan

2:45-3:10pm: Presentation 8:

--BREAK--

3:30-3:55pm: Presentation 9: Sam Fried

4:00-4:35pm: Presentation 10: Dylan Wittkower

Thank you

Many thanks to Pam Eudy for her help in arranging food, parking, and space for this event. Thank you, presenters, for sharing your work, and thank you, all participants, for coming to engage in ethics and philosophy of technology in our region.

MaryCatherine McDonald, Old Dominion, "Returning to the Lived Experience"
In this paper, my goal is to think critically about the ways that technology impacts the diagnosis of PTSD. It is largely assumed that new technologies - fMRI scans, for example - improve our understanding and treatment of mental disorders. Without a phenomenological lens, we can lean on these technologies too much and reduce complex human experience to simple scientific explanations (i.e., here is the location of PTSD in the brain, or this is the part of the brain that is solely responsible for making ethical decisions). Without the return to the lived experience that a phenomenological viewpoint focuses on, new technology can actually hinder our understanding and treatment of PTSD. This does not mean that we need to eliminate these new technologies from the diagnostic horizon, just that it is crucial to figure out ways to integrate new technologies into diagnosing and treating mental disorders rather than relying on them as singular, flawless techniques. As we create new instrumentation for medical knowledge, we must not neglect the experiences of people targeted by these technologies.

Joseph C. Pitt, Virginia Tech, "Pure Bred Technologies"
Domesticated animals are a wonderful and ancient, but overlooked example of human technological artifacts. There is nothing "natural" about a domesticated cow or dog – they are created by human beings for specific tasks. I will examine breeding practices as examples of animal engineering to further the argument that our animals are us.

Andrew Garnar, Clemson, New Media and Old Pragmatists: Meadian Sociality in the Infosphere"
In this paper I demonstrate the usefulness of classical pragmatists to understanding contemporary information and communication technologies (ICTs). To make this case, I explore how George Herbert Mead's writings on sociality illuminate communication via ICTs. Mead's core insight is to approach society as an objective action nexus rather than emphasizing the subject experiences of individuals. This insight recasts ICT communication as inherently social acts involving social objects. By framing this sort of engagements in this way, the criticism that ICTs lead to a weightless, unreal world becomes problematic. My Meadian analysis proposes that while this sort of communication involves different possibilities because of the role of social control, it is still an extension out of other modes of social action.

Yvette Pearson, Old Dominion, and Jason Borenstein, Georgia Tech, "The Ethical Impact of an Increased Presence of Robots on Human-Human Interaction (HHI) within Aging Populations"
This paper examines ethical issues related to the use of robots as companions or caregivers for older adults. While so-called doom scenarios that depict myriad negative effects of increased robot presence and expanded human-robot interaction (HRI) raise engaging concerns, this paper seeks to diffuse some of those concerns and examine the potential impact of an increased robot presence and HRI on human-human interaction (HHI). Dystopian scenarios that

focus almost exclusively on HRI neglect to acknowledge that humans will likely continue to interact, perhaps in novel ways, and fail to incorporate the possible beneficial effects of robot presence on HHI. The importance of supporting HHI must be kept in view when speculating about the future of HRI.

Bono Shih, Virginia Tech, "Yet Another Pragmatic Turn of Philosophy of Technology? The Pragmatism of Philosophy of Technology to Engage with Stakeholders in Engineering"
My paper argues that in higher education, engineers are the single largest group whom philosophy of technology should engage with. I therefore call for a "pragmatic" turn of philosophy of technology through the research, teaching and outreach of engineering ethics in both engineering education and the engineering workplace. To further my points, first, I perform a brief literature review from various (inter-)disciplinary traditions on the studies of engineers and engineering and give a conceptual foundation as to the relations among engineers, technology and the society as a whole. Despite my view and justification that engineers are the most relevant group we should engage with, I will also reveal limitations of my perspective and the caution we can exercise to avoid the serious pitfalls associated with such view. Second, I distinguish the key difference between the social pragmatism in engineering philosophy of technology, as referred to by Carl Mitcham (1994) in Thinking through Technology, and what I call the pragmatism of philosophy of technology for the stakeholders in engineering. The underpinning of the latter will place necessary priority on any interdisciplinary empirical studies of engineering, including research agendas that study daily activities of engineers, college engineering education, work and organization of the contemporary engineering workplace, and the role of professional societies, etc. Third, I exemplify what philosophers of technology can do when we want to engage with the healthy growth and circulation of knowledge of engineering ethics and make our research, teaching and service relevant beyond our fields to the society. My examples include my review on an engineering ethics textbook, and research from other scholars who navigate the intersection of engineering ethics and engineering practice.

Robert Rosenberger, Georgia Tech, "Standpoint Theory, Hostile Design, and Trump Tower"
I suggest that there are important connections just waiting to be made between two theories: feminist standpoint theory and postphenomenology. Where postphenomenology has tools for investigating the ways technologies are open in specific ways to multiple uses, standpoint theory has tools for investigating the ways that large-scale biases in mainstream culture place limits on what members of that culture can know. They can be put together to form an illuminating account of the politics and epistemology of technology. The example I will focus on here is anti-homeless design, the pervasive use of what is sometimes called "hostile architecture" to push the homeless out of public space. One specific example we will consider is the use of these strategies in Trump Tower, Manhattan.

Matt Duncan, Clemson University, "Marginal Subjects: The Epistemic Hegemony of Digital Methods"
The paper will explore the ways in which distant reading and data mining guard the subjectivity of the human subject as opposed to expanding it. I will hold the present trend against prior critical interventions (poco, feminism, queer theory, etc) to demonstrate that categorization and falsification represent a neoliberal turn in the construction of knowledge that does much to erase the progress of the last few decades. I will then point to a methodology that employs digital tools as a means of exploring the marginal rather than excluding it.

Samantha Fried, Virginia Tech, "Picking a Peck of Pickled Pixels: Validity and Remote Sensing"
Remotely-sensed images (in this case, images captured by earth-looking satellites) are often treated by remote sensing researchers as neutral, objective representations of earth's terrain that can be validated by physical sampling data. In this presentation, I argue that satellite design, image capture, and image analyses are all highly technosocial processes. I draw particular attention to the designation of pixels, the base unit of remotely sensed imagery. Pixels are generally not "pure." That is, these square units, tens-to-hundreds of meters wide, are not singularly comprised of asphalt, grass, forest, etc. However, through statistical analyses, remote sensing data scientists seek to apply a collapsed identity to pixels. In a field where validity is held in high regard, this singular identity can be fraught. After all, not all scientists reading and analyzing these images have the same training or foci, or like to use the same statistical methods. I offer multiple situations where validity cannot be reached, because remote sensing scientists offer conflicting -- yet equally plausible -- interpretations of their imagery. I argue that this paradigm, seeking a singular validity, exists because of an instrumental, or goal-oriented, approach to ecological research. A scientific culture that reimagines the importance of validity, not as a singular truth but as a decided-upon set of multiple possibilities, could potentially solve this problem.

D.E. Wittkower, Old Dominion, "Teh Intarwebs: Maed of Cats, Akshully"
 In his Reddit AMA, Tim Berners-Lee, often called the inventor of the WWW, was asked what was one of major uses of the WWW that he did expect to come to define the web, he responded "Kittens. I never expected all these cats." While it is a truism that "the internet is made of cats," the role of online cats and their derivatives, featuring other animals, remains seriously understudied. In this presentation, we will look across the variety of kinds of cat-based internet communications—cute animal pictures; lolcats and lolspeak; viral cat trends, such as breading; internet cat celebrities, such as Maru and Grumpy Cat; cat gifs; and even non-feline 'internet cats' like Boo and the Lolrus.

I seek to articulate what "cats" are insofar as the internet is made of them by looking at cats both as content and as medium in viral and memetic communications, offering multiple and non-exclusive suggestions about why there are "all these cats."