Designing for the politics of artifacts?

A panel at the [Philosophy of Human Technology Relations Conference](#)

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General panel abstract

We now know for quite a while that artifacts have politics. Langdon Winner famously made that point under the heading of a rhetorical question, by showing how technological things and systems are not just useful tools but powerful means of settling social affairs and shaping the ways we live and do things together.

Winner's point is not just a reflective one. It is also a call to action, to actively design technologies in ways that are just and that support the forms of life we prefer. However, designing for preferable forms of life is far from straightforward. Preferable for whom? What and whose interests should be prioritized, and how and where should these be negotiated? Are there behaviors so clearly socially beneficial that citizens should be 'nudged' into performing them?

These issues sit squarely at the intersection of philosophy of technology and design: trying to understand the role of technologies in experience and society, and finding ways to design and configure them so that they have socially beneficial consequences. In this panel we address emerging concerns in this space through the lens of the politics of (new kinds of) artifacts, as critical as Langdon Winner, but now directed to design.

Contribution 1:
Designing the Technologies We Humans Want

Pieter Vermaas
Philosophy, Delft University of Technology

The merger of philosophy of technology and design invites us to combine the best of both worlds. Philosophy of technology stands out in analysing the impact of technologies on human existence and society. Design excels in finding meaningful applications of technologies. Their combination offers us the opportunity to do it right by designing technologies and applications for the impact we want: Langdon Winner analysed how artefacts have politics, Jeroen van den Hoven argues for designing technologies for the politics we want, and design offers a powerful toolbox to do so.

In this contribution I critically review this joining forces of philosophy of technology and design. Designing technologies for the impact we want need (i) not necessarily lead to morally or socially good impact, need (ii) not necessarily be feasible, and (iii) may violate earlier commitments for directing technology and design into morally good directions.
Winner's cases of Robert Moses and Cyrus McCormick II give evidence to the first point. About the second point: designing for the impact we want makes explicit possible conflicts between the interests of groups. It is claimed that design can resolve such "wicked problems" conflicts, yet a proof thereof cannot plausibly be given. Third, social design and nudging sometimes only works when designers do not reveal the values or targets designed for, violating earlier calls for transparency, informed consent and participation.

Caution is needed when designing technologies for the impact we want; analysis of its impact on human existence and society remains called for.

Key words: politics, design for values

Short bio:
Pieter Vermaas is associate professor at the Philosophy Department of TU Delft, the Netherlands. One of his research lines concerns the structure of design processes and their applications in engineering, architecture and society at large. A second line focusses on the emerging quantum technologies and ways to explore their future impact on society. Vermaas is editor in chief of the book series "Philosophy of Engineering and Technology" and "Design Research Foundations", and President of the Society for Philosophy and Technology.

Contribution 2:
Human-Technology-Human Relations, or Politics by Other Means

Heather Wiltse
Umeå Institute of Design, Umeå University

Work in philosophy of technology, and specifically postphenomenology, has highlighted the role of technologies in mediating perception and action; and information and communication technologies have clearly shaped the ways in which people now interact and do things together. Yet there is another sense of human-technology relations that is currently coming into view in the case of connected things. These kinds of things typically produce data about people through use that is primarily for the benefit of others, who are able to process behavioral data in service of massive profits based on surveillance for purposes of prediction and control. The exploitation and non-transparency of this arrangement strongly echoes that of the industrial-era cases that Winner used when making the argument that artifacts have politics. Specifically, in these cases it is not human-technology relations that are the most central, but what might be called for emphasis *human-technology-human relations*: or politics by other means.

In this contribution I will use the lens of technological mediation and analysis of a few small case studies to examine the ways in which data-producing things mediate human-human relations, and the use of some people for the benefit of others. These dynamics, along with the increasing agentive and learning capacity of technological things, foreground the relational dimensions of connected things as central to what they actually are and do. Caring for these constitutive (political) relations must be the foundation of a new kind of design practice adequate to the current sociotechnical condition and its more hopeful possibilities.

Key words: politics, design, behavioral data

Short bio:
Heather Wiltse (PhD) is currently Associate Professor at Umeå Institute of Design, Umeå University (Sweden). Her transdisciplinary research centers around trying to understand, articulate, and critique the role of digitally connected, responsive, and data-intensive things in experience and society in ways that can inform response-able design. Building on a background in human-computer interaction, science and technology studies, design, and communication and culture, Heather's research focus is currently on doing design philosophy at the intersection of critical design studies and philosophy of technology. Her recent books are *Changing Things:*

The Future of Objects in a Digital World (with Johan Redström, Bloomsbury 2019); and (as editor) *Relating to Things: Design, Technology and the Artificial* (Bloomsbury, 2020).

Contribution 3:
Designing for 21st Century Digital Well-Being

Matthew J. Dennis
TU Delft

Over the last decade, online users have begun identifying problems with the digital products and services that are offered by major tech corporations. Chronic distraction, screentime fatigue, overt political manipulation, and deception by pernicious algorithms have all contributed to a growing concern about the effects of prolonged immersion in the online space. Major tech companies have responded to these concerns by launching products that aim to help users utilise their services in ways that are more compatible with their well-being. Google launched its own well-being site in 2018, and most major social media companies followed suit shortly afterwards. Nevertheless, despite these long-overdue attempts to safeguard digital well-being when designing future online products, integrating ethics with commercial institutions and engineering sciences typically encounters problems on multiple fronts. Not only are corporations often structured in a way that requires them to prioritise profit over ethical concerns, there has even been kick-back from would-be future engineers themselves. Designers often complain that the ethical training they receive at under- and post-graduate level is otiose (if not actively inimical) to their ability to prosper in the entrepreneurial environment in which tech start-ups have to live and breathe.

This presentation explores how to prioritise digital well-being in our design of online architecture. I suggest that this process offers UX and UI designers a unique and powerful way to improve the digital well-being of those who use their products.

Key words: Design, digital well-being, online architecture

Short bio:
Matthew J. Dennis is a philosopher of technology, whose work focuses on the ethics of digital well-being. He is currently a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow in the Department of Values, Technology, and Innovation at TU Delft. Prior to this he was an Early Career Research Fellow in Innovation at Institute for Advanced Study, University of Warwick, where he completed his PhD in 2019. He specialises in how technology can increase human flourishing, as well as writing on the ethics of emerging technologies. Most recently, he has published articles on how online technologies can actively improve the digital well-being of their users. He is currently writing on how we can better incorporate intercultural perspectives on this topic

Artifacts have Politics, But We've Been Designing for Apathy.

Holly Robbins
Eindhoven University of Technology

Indeed, artifacts have politics, and politics are implemented through artifacts. However, the ways in which contemporary technological artifacts and services are designed breeds apathy among their users towards the politics of these artifacts.

One of the tenants of designing contemporary technologies is the centrality of the human in its relation to the artifact. Within the field of design and human-computer interactions, this is referred to as "human-centric design." Under this tennant, design decisions prioritize the smooth and pleasant experience of the user. This comes with the benefit of making these technologies available and accessible to a wider audience. However in practice, this human-centric approach functions as a human-indulgent approach with nefarious consequences. This indulgent approach minimizes or completely obscures the politics behind contemporary technologies and further, this approach limits the user's agency. For example, the design of most contemporary artifacts do not communicate the energy impact of data transmission, nor that a user's personal data may be used to financially benefit other parties. Instead, design seeks to motivate users to use their technology more.

With such a pervasive tenant of design that chiefly seeks to indulge the user, there is little incentive or opportunity for users to engage with the political systems behind their artifacts. Instead, users become complacent and apathetic. To challenge this apathy, I argue that a human-centric design approach must be replaced with a posthuman design approach. This has the capacity to hold designers, users, and developers accountable to the myriad of agents that constitute these technologies, as well as their politics.

Key words: Design, human-centric, apathy

Short bio:
Holly Robbins is currently a postdoctoral researcher within the department of industrial design at the Eindhoven University of Technology where she explores posthuman design research and design methodologies within the context of the transition to renewable energies. Robbin's blends design research with anthropology and philosophy of technology to explore how to make the complexity behind systems legible.