esdit ethics of socially disruptive technologies

Workshop Program

Conceptual Engineering and Socially Disruptive Technologies
31 March – 1 April, Online

Central European Time (CET, Amsterdam/Brussels; two afternoons)
Zoom: https://zoom.us/j/92106634031?pwd=d05kMEM4R1BDZ2FmekpJL2phemI0UT09
Meeting ID: 921 0663 4031
Passcode: A2fHv9

March 31, 2022 (moderator: Guido Löhr)

1:15 – 1:30pm	Zoom open	
1:30 – 1:35pm	Welcome and Introduction of the Workshop	Guido Löhr (TU Eindhoven)
1:35 – 2:00pm	Introduction of ESDiT, Socially Disruptive Technologies and Concepts	Philip Brey (University of Twente, program leader ESDiT)
2:00 – 3:00pm	First keynote: The Alignment Problem in Human-AI Communication	Rachel Sterken (University of Hong Kong)
3:00 – 3:15pm	**Break**	
3:15 – 3:45pm	Contributed Talk #1: Contextually Sensitive Concepts: Can we engineer Concepts that last?	Björn Lundgren (Utrecht University)
3:45 – 4:15pm	Contributed Talk #2: Conceptual Engineering and Technology: Between Amelioration, Adaptation and Disruption	Jeroen Hopster (University of Twente) & Guido Löhr (TU Eindhoven)
4:15 – 4:25pm	**Break**	
4:25 – 4:55pm	Contributed Talk #3: The Disruptive Potential of the Artificial Womb	Lily Frank (TU Eindhoven), Julia Hermann, Naomi Jacobs (University of Twente)
4:55 – 5:25pm	Contributed Talk #4: Humanoids: Changing Human Ways of Grouping	Valeria Martino (University of Torino)
5:25 – 5:30pm	Closing of Day 1	Guido Löhr (TU Eindhoven)

April 1, 2022: (moderator: Jeroen Hopster)

1:15 – 1:30pm	Zoom open	
1:30 – 1:35pm	Welcome, Recap, Introduction of day 2	Jeroen Hopster (University of Twente)
1:35 – 2:05pm	Contributed Talk #5: Agents as impactful entities: redesigning a technologically disrupted concept	Klaudia Klonowska, Sadjad Soltanzadeh (T.M.C. Asser Institute & University of Amsterdam)
2:05 – 2:35pm	Contributed Talk #6: Disruption of what, where, and by whom? On the Disruption of Nature through Technology	Ben Hofbauer (University of Delft)
2:35 – 2:45pm	**Break**	
2:45 – 3:15pm	Contributed Talk #7: Pragmatic Methods to Engineer Concepts and Technologies	Irene Olivero (Polytechnic University of Milan)
3:15 – 4:15pm	Second keynote: Conceptual Engineering: Why do we need it? How can we do it?	Amie Thomasson (Darthmouth College)
4:15 – 4:30pm	**Break**	
4:30 – 5:00pm	Contributed Talk #8: Engineering Privacy: How Surveillance Capitalists Changed Our Understanding of Technology, Privacy, and Oversight	Aleksandra Samonek (University of Louvain)
5:00 – 5:15pm	Summary and Discussion of Workshop Findings, Closing of Day 2	Jeroen Hopster (University of Twente)

We welcome non-presenting participants. Registration is appreciated: please send a message to esditworkshop22@gmail.com

For troubleshooting during the workshop, please contact the organizers:
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To learn more about the ESDiT-project, please visit https://www.esdit.nl/ or listen to the ESDiT podcast: www.esdit.nl/podcasts

First Keynote
The Alignment Problem in Human-AI Communication

Rachel Sterken

The Alignment Problem in its general form is the problem of ensuring that AIs act in accordance with human values, interests, and preferences – or at least that they're cooperative in their maintenance. An interesting and important version of this problem can be applied to conversational norms and dynamics in Human-AI communication. There are several important traditions in philosophy and pragmatics that see conversations as governed by norms. Grice's conversational maxims are, at least on one construal, norms that govern conversational behaviour. The literature on speech acts, e.g., assertion, is very often framed in terms of competing norms: the knowledge norm, the belief norm, etc. Lewis understands communication as fundamentally involving norms of truthfulness and trust. Finally, according to Stalnaker and Roberts, a core aim of conversation is inquiry – to find out about the world – so that conversation is implicitly governed by various norms of inquiry. The general questions we wish to highlight and make theoretical progress towards are these: 1. If human conversations are governed by a set of norms, how can we ensure that AI communicators are aligned with these norms? 2. Is there some reason to think that we might need to change these norms, now that we have a new kind of conversational partner, i.e., AIs?

#1 Contextually sensitive concepts: Can we engineer concepts that last?

Björn Lundgren

In ethics, there has always been a sense that terms must be purpose-aligned. Although ethicist often use terms from colloquial language, their definitions rarely aim to define the terms of ordinary language. In recent years, so-called 'conceptual engineers' aimed to change ordinary language concepts based on normative considerations. Parallelly to these developments, people working on philosophy of technology and related areas argue that emergent technologies, in particular, can disruptive our conceptual frameworks (see, e.g., Hopster 2021). The basic problem is that new technological developments create potential counterexamples, vagueness, ambiguity, or uncertainty about the viability of current concepts.

Irrespective of whether one is interested in conceptual engineering or normatively motivated analyses of concepts within ethics (of technology), this raises the question of whether we can create 'stable concepts'; that is, concepts that are resilient against or insensitive to disruption and normative critique. I will argue that we can, but that this—to some extent—pushes the issues to the application of the concept.

To achieve this aim I will look to a genuine example from Lundgren and Möller (2019), who sets out to define information (system) security. Their definition is on a high abstraction level (analyzing security in terms of *appropriate* access to the security object, relative to the needs of a stakeholder), which means that the definition must be applied in context (i.e., what they call the 'operationalization'). In this talk, I will discuss their definition in detail to argue that it is a stable concept.

Arguably a future technology can only challenge the definition if it can challenge the fundamental analysis—that is, that security is about appropriate access—for example, by establishing some sort of ambiguity. However, Lundgren and Möller have already considered the possibility of security dilemmas, in which an agent both should and should not have access (p. 432, fn. 39). The definition also makes normative criticism difficult, since it defines security in relation to someone's needs, not as an objective stakeholder-neutral concept. For examples, critiques along the lines that security for NSA makes the private citizens data insecure does not work, because that truth is fully compatible with the definition. However, it is not difficult to imagine how a future technology may challenge the *application* of the definition, since what *is appropriate relative to some stakeholders needs* is highly normative and such normative considerations may change over time and technologies effect how we should operationalize these normative relations.

In this paper, I will spell-out a detailed analysis of these questions and defend the creation of stable concepts, based on a detailed analysis of Lundgren and Möller's of information security.

References

Hopster, J. 2021. What are socially disruptive technologies? *Technology in Society* 67: 101750.
Lundgren, B. & Möller, N. 2019. Defining Information Security. *Science and Engineering Ethics* 25(2): 419-441.

#2 Conceptual Engineering and Technology: Between Amelioration, Adaptation and Disruption

Jeroen Hopster & Guido Löhr

Conceptual Engineering (CE) is generally understood as aimed toward conceptual amelioration or conceptual improvement. On this understanding, the conceptual status quo is assessed as undesirable and CE is employed to improve it. In this paper we outline a complementary account of CE, understood in terms of conceptual adaptation. On this understanding, the conceptual status quo is assessed as unstable; CE is needed to prevent our conceptual frameworks from degrading. We argue that this complementary account is specifically apt to capture an important *desideratum* for non-ideal theories of CE: to respond to the conceptual pressures and disruptions provoked by Socially Disruptive Technologies (SDTs).

#3 The disruptive potential of the artificial womb

Lily Frank, Julia Herman & Naomi Jacobs (alphabetical order)

The emerging technology of the artificial womb has the potential to cause not only societal, but also *conceptual* changes and disruptions. In this talk, we explore the possible disruption of the concept of mother. To this end, we create a detailed techno-moral scenario in which human babies can develop fully from conception in an artificial womb ("full ectogenesis") (Swiestra et al. 2009). In this scenario the use of artificial wombs is projected to be accompanied by changes in what it means to be a mother, including, for example: the rights and duties associated with the role, the expectations that people have of mothers, the self-understanding of mothers, the phenomenology of motherhood, and the relationship with other concepts, such as *father*, *parent*, *pregnancy*, and *birth*. The anticipated changes and disruptions in the techno-moral scenario is informed by a comparison between the artificial womb and predecessor reproductive technologies such as the ultrasound, in vitro fertilization, and oocyte cryopreservation (egg-freezing). Although full ectogestation is not currently possible, there is a plausible trajectory of innovation from the artificial wombs (in preparation for clinical trials for premature neonates) and full ectogenesis (see Zimmer 2021). This talk engages in conceptual engineering in the sense that it evaluates the fittingness of existing concepts in light of this technological innovation, and it considers the possibility of need for entirely new concepts "from scratch" (Chalmers 2020). It moreover takes into consideration two roles that technologies can play in processes of moral change (see Hopster et al. forthcoming): (i) destabilization of entrenched norms; (ii) operating as instruments of empowerment or repression. Moral change is crucial to conceptual change in this context because many of the concepts involved (e.g. motherhood) are thick, loaded with normative as well as descriptive meaning. Our anticipation of the changes of the concept *mother* is inspired by ongoing collaboration with a speculative designer through a series of co-design activities, including stakeholder workshops in which prototypes are co-created.

Chalmers, D. J. (2020). What is conceptual engineering and what should it be?. *Inquiry*, 1-18.

Hopster, J. et al. (Forthcoming). Pistols, Pills, Pork, and Ploughs: The Structure of Techno-moral Revolutions. *Inquiry*.

Swierstra, T., Stemerding, D., & Boenink, M. (2009). Exploring techno-moral change: the case of the obesitypill. In *Evaluating new technologies* (pp. 119-138). Springer, Dordrecht.

Zimmer, K. (2021). Artificial Wombs are Science Fiction: But Artificial Placentas are on the Horizon. *IEEE Spectrum*, *58*(4), 22-29.

#4 Humanoids: Changing human ways of grouping

Valeria Martino

As citizens of a transforming digital world, we can notice a huge implementation of our daily interactions with robots. Such interactions could lead to the formation of joint actions between humans and robots. Stating such a possibility, however, asks for a reconceptualization of the notion of "joint action" and related concepts, such as "sociability", "common knowledge", "sharing intentions" – to list only the core ones. For instance, we should elucidate to what extent, and in which sense such an interaction can be defined as social and, thus, give birth to genuine joint actions. We can wonder if it is needed for a group to exist before it can engage in social actions (Schmid 2014; Tollefsen 2002; Tuomela 1992) and if it is even possible for a robot to engage in such a kind of action (Hakli 2014). Usually, artificial intelligence's behaviour is understood through the so-called BDI model (Segerberg, Meyer, and Kracht 2020), inspired by Michael Bratman's philosophy according to which individual agency is explained by beliefs, desires, and intentions – as the name says. If robots' behaviour can be understood through the lens of intentions, we can ask ourselves if there could be shared intentions as well – where shared intentions are not an attitude in someone's mind. but a state of affairs, which primarily consists of attitudes and interrelationships (Bratman 1993). Still, shared intentions need that people involved have common knowledge (against a summative account of collective intentionality, Tollefsen 2004). But what does it mean to have common knowledge between robots and humans? Is it sufficient to have shared information to have common knowledge? The answers to such questions could be found in the way in which we understand social interaction. Indeed, if interactions are meant as interrelations among roles (Miller 2001), it could be easier to replace people with robots – saving the meaning of our traditional concepts. Moreover, to deal with "smooth joint actions" (to use the words of the European Parliament's Resolution on Robotics of 16th February 2017, paragraph 50) we should adjust the meaning of agency, as well. We could define "agent" anyone (or anything) able to use information to achieve a purpose, according to a minimum definition of agency, regardless of the degree of competence or understanding achieved. Following Seumas Miller's account (2001), we can question whether the level or type of intelligence is a necessary element to describe the agent-type who can engage in joint actions. Living with robots and humanoids, then, requires us to wonder: Is our feature of grouping changing? Can we mean social groups as constituted by humanoids and social robots too? Are new forms of sociability possible? These are some of the questions we seek to answer.

References

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Miller, Seumas (2001). *Social Action. A Teleological Account*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Segerberg, K., Meyer, J.-J., and Kracht, M. (Summer 2020 Edition). "The Logic of Action," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/logic-action/>.

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#5 Agents as impactful entities: redesigning a technologically disrupted concept

Klaudia Klonowska & Sadjad Soltanzadeh

Traditionally, the line between agents and non-agents has been drawn based on intrinsic capacities assumed to be possessed by agents only. This capacity-based approach results in a binary and universal identification of agents and often limits the domain of agents to humans. The focus on capacities prevails in fundamental ethical and legal theories, and influences design and regulatory requirements of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI). Due to the centrality of the notion of agency to our societies, any disruption to our current conception of agency would be significant, as it would have practical as well as theoretical ramifications. Potential impacts of such a disruption could be of great depth, range, valence and ethical salience. While acknowledging the merits of the capacity-based approach for conceptualising universal values such as human rights, we argue that modern technologies disrupt this conception of agency for at least two reasons.

First, the capacities of AI systems to receive, store, access, process and analyse information and to recognise and generate patterns far exceed the cognitive abilities of humans. This has led to a continuously deflated set of capacities that are possessed exclusively by humans. Second, with the growing sophistication of technologies, their impact on human decision making, perception, moral reasoning, and action, and consequently on human agency has markedly increased.

In the context of AI regulation, the capacity-based approach simply assumes that the presence of a human agent that possesses certain cognitive capacities would ensure ‘meaningful human control’ over machines. Ideas such as the human-in-the-loop and the human-on-the-loop are illustrative of this approach. However, this approach overlooks phenomena such as deskilling or automation bias, which show that humans may not be able to exercise their full capacities when they are teamed up with AI systems. Thus, the capacity-based approach is inadequate to conceptualise the dynamics and trade-offs of agency in the context of human-nonhuman hybrids.

Here we propose an alternative, a relational approach towards agency. In this approach, the status of entities as agents is determined in relation to their impact on the context in which they are operating. Agents are impactful entities.

Reconceptualising agency based on the notion of impact has various merits. First, this theory leads to the inclusion of entities of different kinds in the domain of agency. This means that (i) humans, nonhumans and human-nonhuman hybrids can be agents, and that (ii) agency can be conceptualised and evaluated at different levels: from the micro-level of individual agents to the macro-level of complex socio-technical systems. Second, in this approach, agency is a matter of degree. The degree of agency is determined by the extent to which each agent impacts the context. For example, a military commander who sits on-the-loop and has the role of pressing a button has a lesser degree of agency than the AI system which gathers and processes multiple inputs and determines the severity of a threat with a high level of precision. The relational approach re-engineers the concept of agency. This re-engineered concept addresses and responds to the challenges of modern technologies and can contribute to better regulation of emerging technologies.

#6 Disruption of what, where, and by whom? On the Disruption of Nature through Technology

Benjamin Hofbauer

This paper reflects on the disruptive impact of commonly shared concepts through Socially Disruptive Technologies (*SDTs*). Specifically, it explores how and to what degree we can speak of a "disruption" of the concept of nature through such technologies based on three main questions.

The first question it addresses is what societal disruption entails. SDTs can undermine existing concepts, and force the creation of new concepts. An example for this is the case of the mechanical ventilator (Nickel 2021; Baker 2020). Through the introduction of this new technology, a medical state was made possible that could not be adequately described with existing concepts such as "death". In order to appropriately describe the situation, the mechanical ventilator forced the introduction of a new concept, i.e. "braindeath". Similarly, technologies such as geoengineering could potentially undermine the concept of nature as the fundamentally "non-human" realm (Mill 1873), and force a new way of understanding "nature". From this first question I draw that SDTs are disruptive with regards to the function and applicability of existing concepts.

The second question and third question are where disruption manifests, and who puts it into motion. I argue that these two aspects are essentially intertwined, and propose three possible levels of nature being disrupted. One, SDTs can lead to change on how nature is understood on an institutional level. This includes the changing of laws, the interpretation of said laws, as well as the changing, disbanding, or creation of institutions.

Two, SDTs can cause a shift in the public debate about the concept of nature, forcing political action. For example, GMOs have led to increased public resistance, given their perceived "unnatural" character, and a general reverence for anything "natural" (Levinovitz 2020). Similarly, the research of geoengineering technologies raises the question of whether the climate itself will fall victim to ever-expanding control fantasies of the eco-modernists (Hamilton 2017), or whether geoengineering actually represents a form of earth stewardship (Steffen et *al* 2011). This is fundamentally a question of whether nature is conceptualized as a resource for exploitation or an inherently valuable entity beyond human use. Geoengineering as an SDT could force push perspective (Hofbauer, forthcoming).

Finally, SDTs influence our everyday lives, "mediating" our experiences (Verbeek 2011). Directly connected to the political aspect of disruption, the introduction of new technologies might change how individuals view their own lives, what goals they deem desirable, and what they allow themselves to imagine for the future, influencing the shared "socio-technical imaginaries" (Jasanoff & Kim 2015). Technology changes society's individualized relationship with nature, be it through advancements in veterinary medicine, the construction of parks in urban dwellings, the destruction of natural habitat for technological expansions, or geoengineering.

The paper thus proposes three anchor points from which to investigate the conceptual disruption of nature through new technologies. First, concepts are being disrupted in terms of their function an applicability: SDTs might undermine old concepts, make them obsolete, or force the introduction of new concepts. Second, disruption is a societal phenomenon. It manifests itself on a political, institutional, and everyday individual level. Third, the disruption is carried out by the members of the different societal levels, through which it also gains a hold.

#7 Pragmatic Methods to Engineering Concepts and Technologies

Irene Olivero

Socially disruptive technologies are increasingly present in our lives and transform them not only on an ontological level but also on the conceptual level. Suffice to think about how artificial intelligence is reshaping our concepts of home (due to voice assistants), teaching (increasingly delivered through creating smart content), driving (from Google Maps to the Tesla), to mention a few. It seems crucial, then, that conceptual engineering gets more engaged with this field. On the other hand, given their impact on our lives, we must be concerned about the ethical and ontological implications of these socially disruptive technologies. There may be a way for the two areas to help each other. Amie L. Thomasson's approach (2020) to conceptual engineering takes the "engineering" metaphor seriously by drawing her view about how we ought to "engineer" our concepts from the method adopted in the engineering and construction of artifacts and technologies. Thomasson advocates for adopting a pragmatic approach to conceptual engineering that takes "the function of our (ranges of) concepts as playing a central role (2020, 440). Taking the work in concrete engineering as a neat example about how to reshape our concepts goes on with listing the passages that we should take to do so. We should employ reverse engineering, i.e., looking at the genealogy of the concept under examination (cf. Plunkett 2016) and trying to determine what it does and can do; identifying the function (if any) the concept in question should serve and is to serve, given the goals and purposes we have; finally, constructively engineering the concept at stake given the function we need it to serve. Interestingly, the philosophy of technology may want to take inspiration from this pragmatic method to "engineer" the ontology and metaphysics of the emerging socially disruptive technologies, also taking into account the ethical concerns they bring about. For example, one may ask: what is the proper function (if any) of deepfakes? What function (if any) do we want deepfakes to serve? Answering these questions may help decide how to re-engineer our emerging disruptive technologies (or whether to eliminate some of them, e.g., were they not to serve the function we want them to serve). It may help us see what we should and should not keep about these technologies. Take the following parallelism. We legitimately keep the concept of marriage because of its purposes, but we reshape it to include same-sex relationships to serve those aims better. Similarly, we may want to keep the artificial intelligence that makes possible the creation of something like Microsoft's Rembrandt and Kennedy's speech (cf. Floridi 2018), but also re-engineer that technology so to limit its scope and avoid using it for criminal or evil purposes (e.g., as it happens with deceptive, unauthorized deepfakes). On the other hand, conceptual engineering can further improve its method by drawing lessons from methods employed with disruptive technologies. A system like a blockchain may be used as a model to create a public, transparent harvester of the history of our concepts, which may help conceptual ethicists better do their job.

Second Keynote
Conceptual Engineering: Why do we need it? How can we do it?

Amie L. Thomasson

Socially disruptive technologies may disrupt not only our social practices, but our linguistic and conceptual scheme itself, in ways that provoke the need for conceptual engineering. But conceptual engineering is a field that is in its infancy. Here I aim to lay out a view of conceptual engineering suitable and fruitful for understanding why it conceptual engineering is needed (particularly when socially disruptive technologies are introduced), and how we can do it in a way that is clear, systematic and non-arbitrary. I will argue for thinking of ourselves primarily as engineering language, and for thinking of language as a kind of abstract cultural artifact, serving a variety of human purposes, subject to norms of use, and subject to change over time. Within that framework, it is easy to see how conceptual engineering is possible, and why there will always be some need for conceptual engineering. We can also highlight a range of circumstances in which conceptual engineering is particularly called for, and how these can be prompted by socially disruptive technologies.

But how can we engage in conceptual engineering? In the last section of the paper I lay out a pragmatic framework for engaging in conceptual engineering, in which the idea of linguistic functions plays a central role. I sketch an approach to understanding linguistic functions, and suggest how this can help make work in conceptual engineering more transparent, and systematic, while providing the needed standards to ensure that the conceptual engineering we do in response to socially disruptive technologies is appropriate and non-arbitrary.

#8 Engineering Privacy: How Surveillance Capitalists Changed Our Understanding of Technology, Privacy, and Oversight

Aleksandra Samonek

In my talk I will show how the modern notion of privacy has been gradually redefined in alignment with the needs of the technological industry and, more recently, agencies such as the NSA. I will argue that this change was made possible by the conceptual vacuum in legal and political philosophy, where the lack of citizen- and community-oriented scholarship of privacy has facilitated the conceptual shift in our understanding of what is personal, or private. I will also discuss how defining privacy became an instrument in surveillance narratives: a means of justifying mass oversight and surveillance.

What underlies the financial and political success of contemporary surveillance capital, including corporations such as Alphabet Inc., the owner of Google, or Meta/Facebook Inc., is an intentional and carefully executed process of conceptual engineering. Shoshana Zuboff (2019) argued that these conceptual maneuvers were made possible by a conjunction of favorable social, economic, and policy conditions. The needs of people inhabiting the "third modernity" radically differed from those of their predecessors. Combined with the economic-political fertile ground – neoliberal free-market and its ideological underpinnings – those needs enabled a mutation of the capitalist economy, which resulted in the emergence of a qualitatively new type of economic power driven by the surveillance capital. The corporations with enough stake in future data mining technologies started campaigning to adjust the expectations of the society and the policymakers, and they did so back in the early days of the Internet. In 1999 the CEO of Sun Microsystems Scott McNealy famously said: “You have zero privacy anyway. Get over it”. Subsequently, various versions of this *get over it* argument were used to postulate that there exists a necessary trade-off between access to technology and accepting privacy violations on the side of technology providers.

New ways of justifying corporate violations became available thanks to careful framing and conceptual engineering of notions such as *client*, *corporation*, and *service*. Before the third modernity, the idea of a corporation violating their clients’ privacy as part of their service would be outright rejected. The very motivation for developing the legal and political concept of privacy was to prevent companies and public institutions from such violations (*cf.* Warren and Brandeis, 1984; Cooley, 1906; Moor, 2003). However, in the new digital economy, the corporations started to label themselves as "service providers" – a move which obscured the old client-company relationship. As service providers, companies were no longer accountable to those who used their services. Clients were replaced by *users*, people who peruse the services while having no control over their conditions. A powerful distraction was born in the form of the postulated trade-off between corporate violations and access. The term *client* was hence redefined to accommodate other corporations, firms, and political entities, who buy access and exposure to users and their data in order to further their financial and political agendas. In relation to privacy, these new terms served to solidify the new proposal for privacy, the proposal in which the expectation of privacy no longer applies to *users*, ordinary citizens and service recipients.

References

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