

Society 4.0 Symposium 2019

The changing nature of relationships

Convened by Dr Julian Oldmeadow, this panel explored the consequences of new and emerging technologies for our relationships with ourselves, our children and other people.

The theme for this session is 'relationships'. Our goal is to explore some of the various ways in which technological innovations influence our social relationships, and the ways in which trust might be implicated in these connections.

There are many ways in which technology has a direct influence on our relationships. One simple example is our ability to have face-to-face conversations with friends and family, even when separated by different countries and time zones. Another could be the use of technology to help couples dealing with dementia to manage their relationship, an area that one of our audience members, Sonja Pedell, has been working in. Or the direct influence that social media has had on adolescent relationships, mental health, and self-esteem.

So, there are many ways in which technology influences our relationships.

But for a social psychologist like me, who studies social perception and stereotypes, there is another, less direct, way in which technology may influence our relationships, and that is through our relationship with technology itself.

Technology is rapidly evolving. There's always something new. Most of us don't really understand it, and accept that we are probably behind the times and in the dark about the latest trends, gadgets, apps, devices, and so on. Who here really knows what blockchain is?

So, when we encounter new technology we rely on social representations, or stereotypes, to help make sense of it and of the people who use. Technology becomes a reified thing that exists out there in the world, which we have some sort of understanding of, and with which we have some sort of relationship.

Our relationship to technology is, for many of us, one of ambivalence. On the one hand we are consumers of technology – we buy it, we use it, we create it, we benefit from it and we enjoy it.

But on the other hand, we are cynical of it, we are cautious, wary, and critical of it. This ambivalence towards technology, these different attitudes towards it, can have rather profound impact on our perceptions, stereotypes, and relationships with those who use technology, including ourselves, and those who we perceive to produce and control it.

To illustrate the way this ambivalence can impact social relations and stereotypes in a profound way, I want to go back to the mid to late 19th century, during the heyday of European colonial expansion, when the latest technologies were things like the typewriter, sewing machine and telephone.

At this time the Europeans were going out into the world and colonising large parts of Africa, Asia, the Pacific and South America. There they were encountering people who were very different to themselves. These people lived in huts made of mud or grass, rather than in concrete buildings. They ate with their hands rather than knives and forks; they hunted with spears and bows rather than guns; they sat on the ground rather than in upholstered chairs.

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In short, they appeared, and were, in many respects, technologically less advanced. They didn't have typewriters, sewing machines or telephones.

What emerged out of the juxtaposition of the technologically advanced European colonialists against the less technologically advanced colonised peoples were particular images or stereotypes about the 'other' and by comparison about Europeans themselves.

One of these images, conveyed through travel writing, early anthropology, in cultural displays at world fairs, and influenced by evolutionary theories popular at the time, was the image of the 'primitive'. In this image the other represented an earlier stage of human evolution, a window into Europeans own evolutionary past, a past from which the Europeans had evolved to higher level of civilization.

As Michael Pickering puts it, "In anthropology and travel writing, cultural difference was transformed into the historical, and the historical into evolution along a unilinear scale that became the key to evaluation of social development and progress".

Colonised peoples were portrayed as savages, unintelligent, violent, sexually promiscuous, prone to herd mentality. They were seen not only as intellectually inferior to Europeans, but culturally and morally inferior as well.

This was an image of man 'stripped of the virtues of civilization', and it reflected a wholesale celebration of European technological development. Not only were Europeans technologically advanced, they were intellectually, culturally and morally advanced too. At the top of the evolutionary ladder.

So, we can see how there is a close connection between the image of the primitive other and the European's attitude towards their own technological advancement.

But this was not the only image of the other to emerge around that time. There was another, conveyed in art, literature, and anthropology, at least since the work of Franz Boas, that was driven by a deep cynicism towards the civilising process and the type of society that Europe's technological development created, and the impact of this on people.

Artists of the Primitivism movement, including Gauguin and Rousseau, expressed this clearly in their paintings, and Freud addressed it in his book *Civilisation and its Discontents*.

This cynical view of technological advancement was reflected in the construction of a very different image of the 'other' best captured in the image of the Nobel Savage, often attributed to Rousseau.

In this image, in contrast to the Europeans, the primitive was seen as enjoying an age of innocence and plenty, wise, ethical, connected to others and to nature. In short, as human nature stripped of the vices of civilisation, or "unspoiled by the ravages of civilised sin". Against this image, technological advancement was a corrupting and isolating force, replacing generosity, human connection and happiness with self-interest, disconnection and misery.

So, we can see how, for our European ancestors, there was a deep ambivalence about technological development, and this ambivalence drove the construction of very different images and stereotypes of the 'other'.

These images, in turn, provided a contrast through which the Europeans could construct their own self-image, and they provided a foundation for very different relationships with the others, one image providing moral and intellectual support to European colonial expansion and slavery, the other undermining this project and promoting respect.

I think that this ambivalence of our European ancestors towards technological development is something we carry with us today. On the one hand we are quick to adopt the latest tech trends, use them in our work and personal lives, and enjoy the benefits they bring.

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But on the other hand, we are cynical about becoming too technologically dependent, wary of giving away too much information about ourselves, and quick to blame technology for increasing social isolation and loneliness, and for damaging our children.

For me this raises interesting questions about how our understanding of and attitudes towards technology shape our perceptions of and relationships with people who use, consume, create and control it.

For any new, unfamiliar technology, we might begin by asking what do people understand about it? What social representations surround it? What associations do people have with it?

These are relevant questions for things like assisted reproductive technology, driverless cars, face recognition, and so on. From here we might ask how these representations influence our perceptions of those who use the technology.

How does our knowledge and attitudes towards assisted reproductive technology influence our perceptions of people who use it, or who are born as a result of it? How does it shape our view of companies that offer to pay for oocyte cryopreservation so that women can put five to ten years into their careers before starting a family? How does our attitude towards social media impact our relationships with our teenage children, or their relationship with us? How does our attitude toward ebikes and scooters shape our perceptions of people who use them to get around? How does our attitude towards face recognition influence our relationship with and trust in authorities?

So, these are just some thoughts and questions that are meaningful from my own particular perspective, but now I look forward to hearing from our panel their particular perspectives on technology and relationships.

Our panel is facilitated by Amanda Smith from ABC Radio National.

This discussion will be chaired by Amanda Smith, journalist and presenter at ABC Radio National. Amanda is currently the presenter of Sporty.

Our panellists are social psychologist, Associate Professor Brock Bastian, from the Melbourne School of Psychological Sciences at the University of Melbourne, Marilyn Johnson, Senior Research Fellow at Monash University and Research and Policy manager of Amy Gillett Foundation, and medical doctor, Susanne Oldmeadow, GP, whose special area of interest is the ethical issues arising from the use of assisted reproductive technologies.

Please join me in welcoming our panel.

Society 4.0

The Society 4.0 program examines the human, social and cultural implications of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, biotechnology and autonomous systems.

Society 4.0 symposium: Trust in an age of thinking machines

In the midst of the growing power of emerging and converging technologies, such as genetic manipulation, robotics, and artificial intelligence, our notions of self, society and what it means to be human are changing. In this symposium, we explore the development, maintenance, loss and restoration of trust in an age of thinking machines.

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