

Economies of Virtue: The Circulation of 'Ethics' in AI & Digital Culture



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Deakin Downtown

727 Collins Street, Melbourne

Organisers: Dr Thao Phan, Dr Monique Mann, Dr Jake Goldenfein, Dr Declan Kuch and Dr Emma Kowal



Economies of Virtue: The Circulation of 'Ethics' in AI & Digital Culture

Convenors

- Dr Thao Phan (Lead convenor, Deakin University)
- Dr Monique Mann (Deakin University)
- Dr Declan Kuch (Western Sydney University)
- Dr Jake Goldenfein (University of Melbourne)
- Prof Emma Kowal (Deakin University)

Summary

This interdisciplinary workshop brings together experts in AI and social responsibility to discuss questions of funding and integrity, academic independence, and the circulation of “ethics” in critical studies of AI. It brings together Australian and international researchers specialising in anthropology and the social study of science and technology (STS), technology law and policy, technology and social justice, technology and human rights, and the sociology of digital culture. The workshop aims to (1) identify risks to the legitimacy and efficacy of AI, with a focus on the Australian context, (2) generate new knowledge on the political economy of ethics; (3) formulate recommendations for policy to protect research independence and integrity; and (4) enhance democratic engagement with independent academic research.

Description

Artificial Intelligence technologies are profoundly reorganising society in ways that demand engagement about their framing, funding and effects. But who funds research into the ethics of AI technologies? What are the risks of an industry-led agenda on socially responsible AI? And how do these issues impact the production of knowledge and the independence of researchers working on the impacts of AI in society? This interdisciplinary workshop brings together Australian and International experts in socially responsible AI to explore critical issues regarding the integrity of our field.

AI systems and technologies play a central role in the quality and social organisation of human life — from healthcare to criminal justice, housing and social services, media and creative industries, and more. But the vast majority of these systems are integrated with minimal oversight, limited accountability measures, or indeed, without a clear view to their broader social impacts. There are a myriad of examples from across the world in which algorithmic and automated decision-making systems have been applied in high stakes contexts with disastrous outcomes (see AI Now, 2018).

In response to this crisis of “bad AI” there has been a wave of social science led research on what is commonly understood as “AI ethics.” This field has been instrumental in driving new agendas and initiatives in “Fairness, Accountability and Transparency” (FAcCT, formerly known as FAT), and the development of AI ethics frameworks across industry, government, and academia. In broad terms, AI ethics is concerned with understanding the causes and effects of AI failures, identifying approaches to “fix” these problems, and designing mechanisms to make AI “ethical”. But as this field grows and becomes more lucrative, it too is at risk of its own ethical crisis. Accusations of wide scale “ethics washing” (Wagner, 2018), in which initiatives towards ethical AI have delivered either underwhelming results or have been panned as performative PR, have led to urgent questions about how (and for whom) the ethics of AI are being enacted. Is ethical AI possible in current social systems and if so what is required of the engineering profession, company directors, users, policy makers and others?

Such ethical choreography (Thompson, 2014) is taking place against profound shifts in the University, corporate and government sectors. Social and political pressures for companies to behave “ethically” has seen the emergence of new corporate repertoires of accountability, such as corporate social responsibility and reputation management. At the same time, the erosion of public funding to the University sector, and the subsequent turn towards industry as a primary income source for research has provoked questions regarding the ethics and democratic legitimacy of research. For some critics, Big Tech is the new Big Tobacco (Abdalla, & Abdalla, 2020), whereby tight relations between industry and research compromise the latter. Examples include Palantir — whose AI technologies have been implicated in the United States Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) deportation programme — sponsoring academic conferences on privacy (see Funding Matters, 2018). In Australia, the Minderoo Foundation — the philanthropic arm of mining magnate Andrew Forrest — invests in research initiatives to build a “digital ecology that empowers people” (see Minderoo Foundation, 2020). Yet, simultaneously, Minderoo has been an advocate for the implementation of the controversial Cashless Debit Card (CDC) into Indigenous communities, while the Fortescue Mining Group actively withholds royalties from Pilbara traditional owners (see Michelmore, 2020).

In this context, this interdisciplinary workshop will bring together Australian and international early career and established scholars to engage in urgent and crucial discussions on the state of funding and academic integrity in the area of socially responsible/ethical AI. It includes experts specialising in anthropology and the social study of science and technology (STS), technology law and policy, technology and social justice, technology and human rights, and the sociology of digital culture.

Objectives

The objectives of this workshop are to:

- Identify the risks and problem areas of industry funded ethics agendas, with a focus on the Australian context
- Generate new knowledge on the political economy of ethics through analysis of global comparative case studies
- Formulate recommendations for policy to protect research independence and integrity
- Enhance public understanding and inform debate on the value of independent academic research.

This workshop represents a significant intervention to current approaches in AI ethics and policy. It examines the impact of industry in shaping ethical agendas in AI that in turn influence policy frameworks. It is crucial to understand the funding mechanisms that undergird research, and to understand how these can constrain individual researchers, and the research environments in which they operate.

Themes

1. **Ethics Owners:** This theme explores how ethics is managed at a practical level within a variety of organisations related to the implementation of AI systems. It looks at measures and mechanisms for maintaining ethical standards, and seeks to understand the opportunities and constraints of those tasked with “managing ethics” for an organisation.
2. **Funding Ethics:** This theme looks explicitly at funding structures and issues associated with industry-led agendas for ethical AI. It examines topics such as conflict of interest, academic independence, and research integrity.
3. **AI and the New Extractivism:** This theme seeks to expand on narrow conceptualisations of AI ethics as merely detrimental algorithmic outputs to address broader issues including the ethics of extraction. It will put AI ethics researchers in dialogue with political ecology researchers, labour studies scholars, and scholars of environmental policy and activism.
4. **Ethics onwards:** This final theme addresses the potential limits of “ethics” itself as a framework, and explores alternative approaches to the issue of AI, social responsibility and social justice.

Assessment and outcomes

This workshop will make a series of critical contributions to the production of scholarly knowledge on AI ethics, the political economy of knowledge, and academic independence and research integrity. This includes: (1) improved understanding of the risks of industry led agendas on AI ethics in the Australian and global contexts; (2) advancing knowledge on the political economy of ethics and its circulation within the field of AI research, (3) establishing a cohort of academics and policy makers invested in advocating for research integrity.

The principal outcome from the workshop will be an open access edited text of the international publisher Institute of Network Cultures (INC). As part of the workshop we will invite and develop contributions to the edited text, and will also issue an open call for papers (i.e. both invite and open call). The contributions to the edited text will be subject to a blind peer-review process. Further, we will produce a series of accessible provocation pieces that align with the four workshop themes. These pieces will be written for a public audience and will be published on an open platform (such as Medium or the INC website) prior to the workshop. The workshop will establish an international cohort of researchers and practitioners engaged in new agendas in AI ethics, and will situate Australian researchers at the forefront of leading this critical dialogue.

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DAY 1

Thursday, July 8, 2:30pm-7:00pm

Welcome and Introductions

2:30pm | Dr Thao Phan

Roundtable 1: Ethics owners

2:45pm | Chair: Jake Goldenfein

This theme explores how ethics is managed at a practical level within organisations. It looks at measures and mechanisms for maintaining ethical standards and seeks to understand the opportunities and constraints of those tasked with “managing ethics” for an organisation.

Speakers:

- Dr Thao Phan - ‘Economies of Virtue’
- Dr Angela Daly - ‘Think Global, Act Local’
- Prof Sarah Pink - ‘Anticipatory ethics and certainty hype’
- Prof Brett Neilson - ‘Ethics, Politics and Power in AI’

Break

3:45pm

Roundtable 2: Funding ethics

4:00pm | Chair: Monique Mann

This theme looks explicitly at funding structures and issues associated with industry-led agendas for ethical AI. It examines topics such as conflict of interest, academic independence, and research integrity.

Speakers:

- Dr Jake Goldenfein - ‘Google in the Scholarly Economy’
- Prof Mark Andrejevic - ‘The relationship between media research and market research: some historical critical reflections’
- A/Prof Julia Powles - ‘The University’s Faustian Bargain’

Day 1 wrap up, reflections and social dinner

5:00pm - 7:00pm

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DAY 2

Friday, July 9, 10:00am–1:00pm

Roundtable 3: AI and the new extractivisms

10:00am | Chair: Thao Phan

This theme seeks to expand on narrow conceptualisations of AI ethics as merely detrimental algorithmic outputs to address broader issues including the ethics of extraction. It will put AI ethics researchers in dialogue with political ecology researchers, labour studies scholars, and scholars of environmental policy and activism.

Speakers:

- Dr Sy Taffel - 'New, Old, More: AI and Extractivism'
- Dr Declan Kuch - 'Generative and Extractive approaches to digital ownership'
- Dr Winifred Poster - 'The Uneasy Relationship of Labor Activists and AI'
- Dr Tsvetlina Hristova - 'Corporate AI in organisational context: empirical findings'

Break

11:00am

Roundtable 4: Ethics onward

11:15am | Chair: Declan Kuch

This final theme addresses the potential limits of "ethics" itself as a framework, and explores alternative approaches to the issue of AI, social responsibility and social justice.

Speakers:

- Dr Michael Richardson - 'Military Virtues and the Limits of 'Ethics' in AI Research'
- Dr Tanja Dreher - 'Media Justice: media studies contributions to moving beyond AI Ethics'
- Ed Santow - 'Regulating artificial intelligence: A battle between ethics and law'
- Dr Monique Mann - 'Resistance - (how) can we challenge austerity through algorithm? An emerging case study of rationing the National Disability Insurance Scheme in Australia'

Workshop wrap-up

12:15pm

- Final wrap and reflections on the workshop
- Forward planning for publication

References

Abdalla, M. & Abdalla, M. (2020). The grey hoodie project: Big tobacco, big tech, and the threat on academic integrity. Retrieved from: <https://arxiv.org/abs/2009.13676> AI Now. (2018). AI Now Report 2018. Retrieved from: https://ainowinstitute.org/AI_Now_2018_Report.pdf

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Thompson, C., 2013. Good science: The ethical choreography of stem cell research. MIT Press.

Wagner, B. 2018. Ethics as an escape from regulation: From ethics-washing to ethics shopping. In: E. Bayramoglu, I. Baraliuc, L. Janssens et al. (Eds.), Being Profiled: Cogitas Ergo Sum: 10 Years of Profiling the European Citizen, pp. 84-98. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
Assessment