

Ethics, Society and Computing: Escaping inequality in technology

Mackay, Hannah . University Wire ; Carlsbad [Carlsbad]19 Feb 2020.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

Publication: Michigan Daily, , University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, Ann Arbor, MI

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Wednesday, February 19, 2020 - 8:10pm

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Hannah Mackay Daily Staff Reporter

The University of Michigan's brand new Center for Ethics, Society and Computing opened in January with the goal of addressing inequality produced by digital media and computing technology. With the prevalence of computing technology across almost every professional field and modern, everyday life, the potential for inequity and exclusion exists across many disciplines. The center aims to use University resources to better understand this and educate people.

ESC Director Christian Sandvig, associate communications professor, highlighted the need for organizations like ESC, especially given how rapidly the use of computing has grown.

"Generally speaking, there's a moment at which we as a society are reflecting about advances in computing," Sandvig said. "Computers are doing these things that they never before did, and they're definitely good at things we didn't think they would be good at, but they're often being rushed into situations where there hasn't been necessarily a lot of thought about some of the implications or the consequences, and sometimes the designs are rushed."

Recently, interest in ethical computing has been on the rise as algorithms are implemented in everything from deciding bail rates in our justice system to credit scores and social media feeds. Sandvig discussed the breadth of this new center, emphasizing that prior to its launch the University had no centralized resource issues related to this new and evolving field or students interested in it.

"If you were interested in, for example, the ethics of working for different companies in the tech industry or interested in issues of justice and fairness and computing or mass surveillance, it wasn't really clear where the community was, so our job we think is to answer that," Sandvig said. "We have faculty from art, we have faculty from architecture, music, LSA, information, public health, it's a pretty broad group of people and they're all interested in these problems of computers in society."

The center aims to be a research hub focused on understanding computing inequalities. For example, Sandvig brought up a past research project in which he and a group of students tried to determine why a Facebook algorithm provided the option of a gay pride flag emoji reaction to only some users during June of 2017.

"It's pretty interesting that Facebook thinks that it should be, probably algorithmically, profiling your support for homosexuality," Sandvig said. "We tried to reverse engineer how Facebook was deciding where to deploy the gay pride emoji."

Sandvig said the University provided ESC with an opportunity to address these issues with multidisciplinary efforts

computers, but also to justice, or fairness, or ethics or morality," Sandvig said. "The idea was, what if we are able to showcase our University's strength in this area by organizing all of the professor's together and to try and form a community around the students that are interested in this area."

Art & Design assistant professor Sophia Brueckner, former Google software engineer, does research with ESC that focuses on people's perspectives regarding the role of technology in the future, both good and bad. She does this partly by analyzing and studying science fiction, using a variety of mediums to showcase her findings.

"Often I find myself thinking about what visions of the future are industry offering us?" Brueckner said. "Everything right now seems to be free but really we're paying for it with our attention and our data, and that's what's shaping the trajectory of a lot of these technologies, in particular wearable technologies and most internet technologies. If we weren't constrained by that what might be a person's vision for how they might live with technology or incorporate it in their body be?"

Brueckner further explained the goal of her research, as well as the outcomes that she builds herself using a variety of mediums to reflect people's goals for future technology.

"I'm trying to get people to think about the future, to take current trends that they see in the present and extrapolate them into the future and think about what those might be and also about what they might prefer," Brueckner said. "So I use software, hardware and electronics and digital fabrication, whatever it takes to build a prototype."

Brueckner has been working with Sandvig and other ESC researchers, analyzing popular algorithms and the role they play in everyday life to better educate people about them and create alternatives.

"I think they're very much critiquing the current state of technology and I think they're also interested in offering visions for how things could be different and I think my work feeds directly into that though my building of prototypes," Brueckner said.

Art & Design senior Evan Maalouf began doing research with Brueckner after taking one of her classes. He expressed his growing interest in the field of computing inequity, as well as the importance of educating people about it.

"This idea of critical optimism, and being super critical of technology, and not just shutting the ideas and possibilities of technology out, but really thinking hard about the implications of them is fascinating to me," Maalouf said. "Things like advertisements and how your online presence is monitored by larger corporations is something I've learned and something I consider now when I think about technology."

LSA senior Pu Zhao, member of the ESC undergraduate committee, works on a research project in ESC developing algorithm auditing techniques to expose biases correlating with things like race, income or sex. She commented on the mission of the center as a whole.

"From my perspective it's a center to deal with the inequality produced by big data, big data could be like digital media or computing technologies," Zhao said. "What we want to do is learn about the inequalities produced by the algorithms in search engines and to teach people, to educate how the inequality works."

Sandvig remarked on the recent and stark changes in the computing industry, explaining that the center's goal is to meet the needs of students and professionals and to provide them with a platform.

"Five years ago I don't think people would have turned down a job offer from Facebook right, everyone wanted those jobs, and now it's sort of like, well let's pause and consider what we're doing here," Sandvig said. "Our mission is not that we have a list of priorities that we have decided to dedicate some faculty to, it's really the reverse ...our agenda is kind of grassroots and bottom up."

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DETAILS

Subject:	Research; Software; Big Data; Computers; Students; Society; Social networks; Algorithms; Ethics; Digital broadcasting
Location:	Michigan Ann Arbor Michigan
Company / organization:	Name: Michigan Daily; NAICS: 511110; Name: University of Michigan; NAICS: 611310
Publication title:	University Wire; Carlsbad
Publication year:	2020
Publication date:	Feb 19, 2020
Section:	news
Publisher:	Uloop, Inc.
Place of publication:	Carlsbad
Country of publication:	United States, Carlsbad
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2362550685
Document URL:	https://search.proquest.com/docview/2362550685?accountid=32521
Copyright:	© 2020 UWIRE, a division of Uloop
Last updated:	2020-02-25
Database:	U.S. Newsstream

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