Living with Monsters? Social Implications of Algorithmic Phenomena, Hybrid Agency and the Performativity of Technology

IFIP 8.2 2018 Working Conference

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Submission Deadline: May 27, 2018

Program Chairs:
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Our evolving digital worlds generate both hope and fears. Algorithms, using big data, identify suspicious credit card transactions and predict the spread of epidemics, but they also raise concerns about mass surveillance and systematically perpetuated biases. Social media platforms allow us to stay connected with family and friends, but they also commoditize relationships and produce new forms of sociality.

While there is little agreement on the implications of digital technology for contemporary work and social life, there is a growing realization that information technologies are performative (MacKenzie 2006) in that they no longer merely represent the world, but also produce it. And given their growing interdependence, the ability to control any given technology is increasingly limited. Stock market flash crashes, induced by algorithmic trading, are highly visible examples of such algorithmic phenomena (Scott and Orlikowski 2014). Have the things we have made become out-of-control juggernauts? Are we living with monsters?

Cautionary tales of technology have often employed monster notions, such as the sorcerer's apprentice and the Frankenstein figure (Winner, 1978). The complex hybrid assemblages that have become so crucial for our everyday lives, are both our own creation but also under no-one's control (Haraway, 1992). The monster is not "the other;" instead most of us are deeply implicated in its ongoing (re)creation. Many of us use social media while criticizing their privacy-invading tendencies; we enjoy the gig economy for its low-cost services while disliking its destabilization of workers' rights; and we perpetuate the quantification of academic life while criticizing it.

How does such eyes-wide-shut behavior square with Bruno Latour's (2012) reminder that "Dr. Frankenstein's crime was not that he invented a creature through some combination of hubris and high technology, but rather that he *abandoned the creature to itself"* [italics in original]? What does it mean to take care of the monsters in our midst? What does it take to commit and grow evermore attached to them, possibly to the point of loving them? What other relationships are possible, productive and sustainable?

We call on scholars studying information technology and related practices to reflect on the worlds that we help create through our research, debates, and teaching. The metaphor of monsters is intended to stimulate a rethinking of our orientation by compelling us to consider whether, when and why our creations turn against us, and with what implications. We wish to use this working conference, which
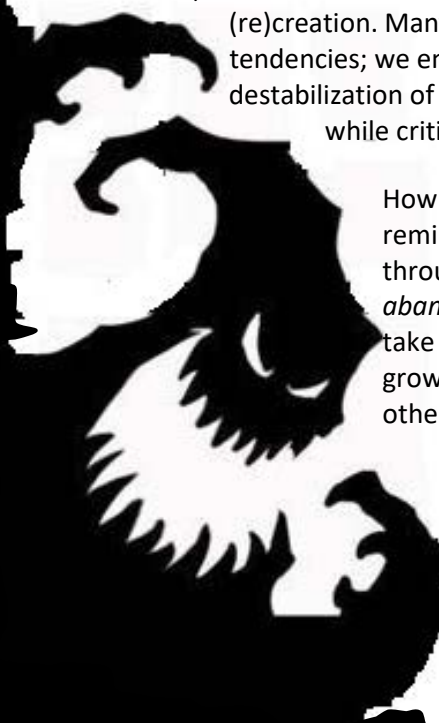
is aptly located in the shadows of Silicon Valley, as a platform for reflecting on living with the technologies we have created and how to care for them, as well as contemplating the roles and responsibilities of the researcher in studying these imbroglios.

Reflective of the conference theme, we invite both *full 7,000-word papers* and *3,000-word position papers or posters* that deal with (but are not limited to) the following topic areas:

- **Algorithmic Phenomena:** The proliferation of algorithmic decision-making in work and life raises novel questions about objectivity, legitimacy, matters of inclusion, and the black-boxing of accountability. Will algorithms and artificial 'intelligence' provide solutions to complex problems, from reimagining transport and reducing social inequality to fighting disease and climate change, or are we putting undue faith in the techno-utopian power of algorithmic life (Harari 2016)? We invite papers that engage with both, the utopian vision of these new forms of rationality, and the dystopian narratives around surveillance capitalism and the remaking of society (e.g. Zuboff 2015).

- **Hybrid Agency:** An acknowledgement that many of us have become cyborgs – deeply entangled with technologies ranging from avatars through wearables and ERP systems to infrastructure – challenges the notion of agency as a property of actants. We therefore encourage contributions that explore the nature of cyborgism and questions of individual choice in these configurations, relational notions of agency – of people, robots and algorithms – as well as their organizational, social and moral implications.

- **Technological Performativity**: As we become entangled with, tend to, and learn to love/hate these outsized creatures, how can we extend our understanding of the performativity of sociomaterial practices? In particular, how can new perspectives, concepts and vocabularies help us deepen and shift the view of how technologies are implicated in not just organizational but also social life? We encourage submissions that finds new ways to convey performativity and the flow of agency, as well as studies that explore (technological) performativity in new contexts.

- **Methodological Implications of Sociomaterial Theorizing:** Building on the excitement around sociomaterial theorizing during the Dublin conference, we encourage papers that explore research methods that take the ontological inseparability associated with 'strong' sociomaterial theorizing (Jones 2014; Cecez-Kecmanovic et al 2014) seriously; that explore the methodological implications of a performative lens; the practices, becoming, and processes associated with AI, big data, digital traces and other emerging phenomena (Ingold 2012; Nicolini 2013); and that experiment with research approaches that embrace hybridity and liminality.

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