

Research line: The Future of a Free and Fair Society

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CHALLENGES

The challenges that SDTs create for current societies are fundamental. Under the influence of digital technologies, the basic structure of political and social orders is challenged, power relationships are changing, and the envisaged transformation towards sustainable societies calls for unprecedented global regulatory measures. These changes are fundamentally reshaping the social fabric of the world on which our moral principles and political commitments rest and force us to reconsider the content and the scope of basic moral convictions and raise questions of human control over social and political processes.

Current societies are based on the assumption that there are *discernible communities* of human agents which form the basis of political organization. These communities used to be relatively stable, geographically bound, and they shared - at least to some extent - culture and history. Yet the emergence of all kinds of digitization questions these assumptions. New virtual communities emerge, old communities disappear, and national boundaries are blurred. What are the relevant communities of the future and how should we deal with the moral, cultural, and political diversity within these (global) communities? In addition, a new class of entities, artificial agents, will enter the scene. How do they change the communities we live in and what place in society will they receive (Wallach and Allen 2009). Should we give them certain rights and obligations? Can they be held responsible for what they do (Kroes and Verbeek 2014)? Similar questions apply to human beings enhanced with neuro-technologies or biotechnologies.

Secondly, the idea of a distinction between a *private and public sphere* is under pressure - a distinction which is, for example, fundamental for the understanding of the idea of individual rights. Data science, empowered by new generations of omnipresent micro-sensors, will collect information about citizens on an unprecedented scale, challenging how we understand privacy (Floridi 2011). These data collections are often carried out by international high-tech private corporations (Facebook, Google, Microsoft), who will know more about citizens than their national governments, while not being democratically controlled. This also the issue of access to and ownership of information. What information rights should people have and how do we make sure that the cost and benefits of information are distributed in a fair and responsible way?

Thirdly, these developments raise the issue of changing *power relations* in society. The traditional picture of the state as the entity that ultimately controls society, enforces the rules, protects its minorities, and is accountable to its citizens, is seriously undermined by these developments. Large information-driven companies most likely will have more power in the future than national governments, the more so because they can influence people on the basis of what they know about them (Sunstein 2017). This requires new forms of governance and regulatory systems, probably on a global scale. How can we still make decisions in a democratic way about issues that really matter for the society we live in? Or should we give up the entire idea of democracy (Brennan 2016)?

Fourthly, the transformation into sustainable societies will require new forms of energy production and use, forms of transportation, reproduction patterns, and behaviour changes in various aspects of human life (Gardiner 2011). This challenges basic moral ideas regarding the exercise of human liberties and autonomous life styles and has the potential to increase societal and global inequality. How can basic ideas of individual rights and social and global justice be understood under those changed conditions and how can the rights of future generations be taken into account? Or is the moral idea of an equal, free, and sustainable society just incomprehensible under these changed conditions?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How should we understand the social and political effects of socially disruptive technologies? How do changes in social relations, social structures, social institutions, and democratic practices affect the basic concepts of social and political philosophy?

- 2) How can we realize basic normative ideas - such as democratic control, social justice, individual rights, and solidarity – under the conditions created by SDTs? How can we optimally use new opportunities offered by SDTs?
- 3) To what extent are those normative concepts and the normative frameworks used in ethics, social, and political philosophy adequate to analyze the effects of SDTs, including their side effects? And if they are not, how should we adjust them?
- 4) How can we regulate SDTs and how should we empower our social and political institutions to enable political and societal decision-making that leads to morally justified innovations?

RESEARCH AGENDA

1. 'Control' and the conditions of political institutions

SDTs are changing the conditions of political institutions in various ways by influencing the possibilities of control. Some technologies allow for micro-control of human behaviour. How can those possibilities be regulated and limited (e.g., the Chinese social credit system)? At the same time, some features of SDTs limit their controllability as such (e.g. because of their global functioning). This concerns not only the possibility of the state or of supranational bodies to enforce regulation of those technologies, but also the opportunities that citizens have to contest and influence such regulation. There could be normative reasons to shape institutions that have the power to exercise such control, to design those technologies in a way that controllability is effectively possible, or to refrain from implementing those technologies. This sub-line will investigate how political institutions can take questions of the controllability of SDTs appropriately into account and how that affects their normative legitimation.

2. Democracy in a Technologically-Driven World

SDTs are challenging the structure of democratic decision-making. Access to information has changed, elections are vulnerable to manipulation ('fake news', micro- profiling and targeting), and the digitalisation of political debate changes central features of politics in general. Some pessimists even doubt whether or not under those circumstances democracy is still a possible form of governance, while optimists see new opportunities for democratic engagement. And how can such democratic governance function when digitalisation requires global regulation, while regulatory bodies are necessarily embedded in different political systems and cultural contexts? The focus of this sub-line will be on the reconceptualisation of some normative assumptions that are central to our idea of democracy. Which features of democracy are indispensable for democratic government, how can their protection be guaranteed under the conditions of SDTs in new ways, and in which cases are SDTs undermining or promoting the possibilities of democracy? The goal is to develop a normative theory of democracy under conditions of a digitalised world.

3. Technology, Globalization, Diversity and Intercultural Ethics

Technology is increasingly produced, marketed, and used by people and organisations with a non-Western background, and ethical issues concerning technology increasingly involve intercultural encounters. Building on previous studies (Hongladarom & Ess, 2007; Brey, 2007; Düring et al., forthcoming), we will develop an intercultural ethics of technology that is able to understand how different cultural perspectives are influencing views on technology and what a moral assessment of SDTs would look like if it were sensible for and sensitive to the intercultural dimension of an ethics of technology. We will do so by engaging in discussions in comparative philosophy regarding the normative starting points in different cultural contexts and strive for integrative forms of ethical assessment. Also, building on research in gender studies of technology, feminist ethics, care ethics, and ethics of technology, we will investigate to what extent social disruption will have gender biases (this is e.g. a quite obvious problem in reproductive technologies). The aim is to make this gender-dimension visible in all areas of the ethics of technology and develop an account of ethics of technology that take into consideration to what extent technology enhances or reduces gender discrimination.

4. New Perspectives on Social Justice

SDTs challenge our ideas of social justice, including distributive justice (Shrader-Frechette 2005). Traditionally, theories of justice have focussed on the distribution of the burdens and benefits of social cooperation within the boundaries of a nation-state. The effect that SDTs have on communities and forms

of cooperation forces us to reconsider both the scope of justice (who is within and who is outside of the sphere of justice?) and the relevant agents of justice (who is responsible for creating a fair distribution of burdens and benefits?). Most SDTs are functioning at a supranational or global scale which require thinking about global relations of justice. What is a fair distribution of the burdens and benefits of social cooperation on a global scale? How do we take into account the diversity of human beings, including, their moral beliefs and principles and intellectual traditions? The changing social world as a result of SDTs thus requires us to rethink core dimensions of theories of justice. It is the task of this sub-line to re-examine and reconstruct theories of justice in light of SDTs.

5. (Human) Rights in the 21st Century

The current normative global order and most Western legal systems are built on the idea that human beings are beings with dignity and have accordingly an equal status as right holders (Buchanan 2013). This idea is challenged in various regards. The content of the rights is under dispute: Should access to the use of Internet or access to enhancement technologies be considered to be an individual right? Should human beings have a right to be protected against the ambivalent side effects of new technologies? Different cultural traditions may have different views on these questions. In addition, the introduction of artificial agents and the effects of our behaviour on future generations raises the question of whether artificial agents and/or future people should be considered as rights holders. It also raises the question of how these new rights can be promoted, realized, and protected. Who, for instance, will be the bearer of corresponding duties? Individuals, the nation-state, or also companies like Google and Facebook? SDTs pose challenges for legal and political debates and require rethinking the idea of (human) rights.