

Conference report 'Ethics, Technology, and Identity 2008'

By Noëmi Manders-Huits

The conference on Ethics, Technology, and Identity 2008 was held in Delft and The Hague in June of this year. Participants coming from all over the world came to discuss a wide range of issues related to this topic. The first day of the conference started in a beautiful location in the historic centre of Delft, The Prinsenhof. The stunning surroundings of this old convent that also served as the home of William of Orange for some years, with its Delft design covered conservatory, immediately created the perfect atmosphere for discussions on philosophical issues. After a word of welcome by the organizer, **Noëmi Manders-Huits**, keynote speaker **Oscar Gandy** was the first to expound on the topic of the conference. He pointed to the possible unintended consequences of the seemingly thoughtless and ill-considered evolution of technology. Algorithms used to authorize and regulate access and control data streams, referred to as ambient intelligent sentinels, may inadvertently invoke racist selection. The use of these sentinels is legitimized by and through the objective of efficiency and on the basis of "actuarial assumptions", however causing e.g. severe discriminatory implications. Gandy pressed for raising awareness and taking action concerning the (implicit) biases of and in information systems.

After this challenging start of the conference, a delicious buffet lunch was served in the Room of Charitate, adjacent to the gardens of the Prinsenhof. After lunch the **first parallel sessions** started in the van der Mandelazaal and the Room of Charitate. One session contained topics ranging from the formation of relationships (and ultimately, identity) through the ubiquity of revelation and disclosure in social networks, to the ethics of voter micro targeting, and a moral critique of digital consumerism from the conceptual perspective of self-respect. The other session included topics on the right to determine the extent of accuracy of personal information, pointing to the difference between accuracy of information and the protecting of an individual, followed by the ethics of web use and the quality of online information in educational web environments, and the production of identity and the question of 'self' in relation to the inoculation of data. After these sessions, there was a break and a guided tour of the Museum. This tour ended in the van der Mandelazaal, where **David Velleman** presented his keynote on the artificial self in virtual reality. The virtual world seems deceptively like a fantasy world, yet the experiences we have in the virtual world may have real life consequences. Can we then still uphold the idea of a unified self?

The day was concluded by a wonderful buffet dinner in the Room of Charitate. Early the next morning, the main share of the participants of the conference met to take the tram from Delft to The Hague, experiencing some authentic Dutch rush hour traffic. After a little hike from the station to Campus The Hague, the joint campus by Delft University of Technology and Leiden University, the conference continued at this site with a **second set of parallel sessions**. Session IIA started off on the main topic of the conference, in "Understanding Identity in Ethics and Information Technology". At the same time, other presentations were held in the other room on the transformation of humans into automated symbol systems and the understanding of humans in relation to our technology mediated world by means of the Heideggerian concept of Hyperbeing. After the coffee break, keynote speaker **Robin Dillon** continued with the next keynote lecture of the conference on

respect for persons and information technology, pointing to the moral demand to regard and treat real persons in their dignity as persons in various IT contexts.

Despite the drizzle, the morning program was concluded by a city hike of The Hague. A local tour guide led the conference participants past some historical sites and eventually to Dudok, where the tables were set to have a tasty lunch. The second half of the day consisted of **two more sets of parallel sessions** of 2 speakers each. In the first set, one session was concerned with two related discussions on the effects of information technology on our way of thinking and our identity construction. Where the first presenter provided an analysis of the influence of information technology on the construction of our identities and therefore suggested several legal-technical tools for dealing with this, the second presenter showed how data technologies bring about changes in our understanding of fundamental concepts, e.g. the individual and the collective, the accidental and the essential, and so forth. In the other room, the first presenter discussed privacy and the presentation of a digital self in relation to Goffman's notion of performance, and the second discussed the impact of different types of technologies on the (moral) identities of persons. After the break, presentations followed on the articulation of social and ethical aspects of Identity Management Systems and the identification of additional disabilities related to the topic of the digital divide and accessibility issues for constructing identities online. Concurrently, presentations were held on the topics of the consequences of machine bureaucracy for the construction/development of an identity and the body as the key determinant versus not important in determining identity in the information society. At the end of the day, the conference dinner was held in the cellar of Restaurant the Hardans.

On Friday there was another early start in the centre of Delft, in an old girls' orphanage, Het Meisjeshuis. There were **six more presentations in parallel sessions**. In one session a view was presented on parenting in relation to the digital divide between parents and their children, followed by a discussion of the consequences of e.g. facial transplantation on identity formation, and a presentation on the ethical concerns related to micro-chip implants. Simultaneously in the other session, a participant explored the tension between the articulation of power and agency in certain blogs versus the increasingly policed, censored and corporatized development of the Internet. He was followed by a presentation on the reconsideration of individual and collective identities in light of our being in a network in the information society, and the session was concluded by a discussion of how the notion of personal identity is altered through the use of database technologies inspired by the philosophy of Camus.

After the coffee break, the fourth keynote speaker **David Shoemaker** concluded the substantive part of the conference with a strong and convincing presentation reaching to the heart of the topic of this conference, on the re-conceptualization of privacy in relation to identity, which he presented in terms of the right to control or manage the presentation of one's self-identity and a right, to a certain extent, to manage certain public construals of this self-identity.

Finally, the conference was closed with a delicious and sun-drenched lunch in the garden of Het Meisjeshuis.

More information on the conference can be found at:

<http://www.ethicsandtechnology.eu/ETI>.

