

SCIENTIFIC REPORT
ESCON-2 SMALL GROUP MEETING “HUMANITY AND TECHNOLOGY”
University of Kent, Canterbury, UK
19-21 June 2012

SUMMARY

This meeting was convened to bring together researchers across disciplines working on the ways in which perceptions of humanity through technology influence social interaction, personal well-being, and individual behavior. The goals of the meeting were, first, to start a network of researchers on this topic who previously had limited awareness of each other’s work and perspectives; second, to create an integrated theoretical framework for research on technology and humanity; and third, to draft plans for a further network grant application at the European level, taking into account invited speakers who could not attend due to other commitments and constraints, as well as further outreach toward researchers and representatives of enterprise and industry. All three goals were achieved during the short course of the meeting.

Speakers were academics representing social psychology, robotics, communication, media studies, and interdisciplinary departments, working in five different countries. Additionally, a number of academics and students from the University of Kent attended the event, representing added participation value for little expense. On the first day, nine presentations of research and ideas emphasized a variety of approaches, from large-scale surveys to laboratory experiments and intervention evaluation, and a variety of topics, including online and personal video gaming; online gambling; adolescent sexual communication online; social robotics; moral consequences of interactions online; and virtual agents as “nudges” toward prosocial goals. On the second day, there was a presentation and discussion from the University of Kent’s research services representative, covering a variety of options for further funding at the European network level.

On both days, further discussion was oriented towards elaborating a conceptual scheme that could integrate all areas and approaches across the diverse lines of research. Initial work had identified a number of aspects of humanity in social communication that seemed important (human uniqueness traits such as intelligence, human nature traits such as warmth, personalization as opposed to objectification, and the mere category of humanity) as well as a number of hypotheses (reminders of humanity would lead to more prosocial and less antisocial behavior, except in cases where antisocial behavior was a conscious goal, or was seen as morally justified). What emerged from discussion was a larger framework in which research could be divided into the tasks of (1) online interaction with others and (2) purely technological interaction (e.g., with robots or computer programs), and within these, into consequences of humanity perceptions for (a) social interaction and (b) individual well-being. An important new point emerging in terms of individual well-being was that too much humanity – oppressive pervasive humanization of technology and loss of subjective privacy – could be just as deleterious as too little humanity – that is, a sense of social isolation.

Based on the research services recommendation it was decided that the next step would be to create an initial application for an ESF COST network, which would allow a much wider scope of networking across many countries. This low-investment proposal would be completed and submitted by the end of September. It was seen as giving the best chance to prepare for larger applications to schemes currently on hiatus (EUROCORES) or between programs (FP7-Horizon 2020).

SCIENTIFIC CONTENT AND DISCUSSION

Participants and speakers arrived already informed of initial conceptual work done by the convenor (Giner-Sorolla) based on existing models of the perception of humanity within social psychology. Following is a list of talks given on Day One, with a summary of content. It should be noted that three invited participants (David Smahel, Julia Davidson and Elena Martellozzo) stated they could not attend the meeting with short notice, but these and other members invited in the original proposal all maintain an interest in taking part in the future activities of the network.

Presenter: Roger Giner-Sorolla, University of Kent

Recapitulated research in social psychology on humanity and its selective denial as a form of prejudice; describing the research of Leyens and colleagues (outgroup members are seen as less capable of feeling uniquely human emotions than ingroup) as well as its extension by Nick Haslam (different traits are involved in the perception of humanity as distinct from animals, and as distinct from unfeeling objects) and a third perspective focusing more closely on the categorization of social agents as human or not. Provided a review of potential cues to humanity useful in research – emotional expression, behavioural and responsive traits, and human-like appearance. Outlined initial research suggesting that perceiving more human-like traits leads to more prosocial and less antisocial. Generates hypotheses based on these and two untested exceptions: people with an intentional antisocial goal (“trolls”) might actually gain more enjoyment from perceiving humanity, especially cues of anger and suffering; people who see their adversary as immoral (“crusaders”) would not be deterred by cues to humanity and might work harder against them, to the extent they see their opponents as having human-like intellect.

Presenter: Friederike Eyssel, University of Bielefeld

Described empirical studies involving human-like robots being developed by the robotics lab at Bielefeld. Social psychology can inform theory, research and practice in creating robots best suited for social interactions and tasks involving humans (e.g., elderly care, child minding). One line of research presented involves dynamic facial expressions in a somewhat cartoonish social robot. This finds that facial expressions increase liking and cooperation with the robot, but primarily when expressions are synchronized to be context-appropriate. Another line of research that drew much comment presented evidence that national and gender stereotypes influenced evaluations of robots even on the basis of superficial cues (length of plastic hair as cue to “gender” of robot). Briefly presented findings that imperfections in robots’ behavior can generate more positive attitude also drew comment, to the effect that “humanity” may also include imperfections or “just human” evaluations.

Presenter: Jaap Ham, University of Eindhoven

Continuing on the theme, described his own collaborations with robotics lab at Eindhoven, going beyond free-standing robots to assess the impact of adding human-like features (faces, voices, emotional expressions) to “smart” household appliances with an ecological goal, and to avatars of virtual agents. These generally increase compliance and liking. However, discussion raised the possibility that if surrounded by humanized appliances and avatars, life could quickly become oppressive; humans have a need for privacy as well as socialization. We agreed that these innovations would have to be used quite selectively.

Presenter: Tilo Hartmann, VU Amsterdam

Presented results of research on antisocial effects of playing solo computer games. Main idea tested is that the content of the game (i.e., killing humans vs. aliens or zombies; a narrative where the violence is serving a moral goal, or not) can have effects on subsequent violent tendencies as well as on moral disengagement from guilt. Representative result: players felt less remorse after realistic violent play if the mission was described as being ultimately humanitarian purposes, i.e. freeing slaves. Discussion focused on implications for social psychology and real-world violence, as well as video game ratings.

Presenter: Tobias Greitemeyer, University of Innsbruck

Also a researcher on video game effects, Greitemeyer presented two main strands of work. One demonstrated that playing violent computer games has dehumanizing effects that carry over to an unrelated task. Another showed the prosocial behavioural carry-over benefits of playing games that are exciting but have a prosocial mission (i.e. rescuing people on burning rooftops with a helicopter). Discussion focused on the question of exactly which cues in video games have a dehumanizing effect, and the relationship between dehumanization and violence.

Presenters: Mark Griffiths & Daria Kuss, Nottingham Trent University

Presented research on the social and individual factors promoting use and abuse of online gambling. The term “addiction” was critically examined and a model incorporating more social and behavioural factors was favoured – for example, ability to play impulsively. Links to the humanity theme of the conference were explored during the presentation, and more so in discussion. Among the concepts that emerged were the idea of self-dehumanization (e.g., Baumeister’s “escape from the self” by gambling) and the extent to which a socially situated gambling game (e.g., poker, as opposed to playing a slot machine) would inhibit or disinhibit reckless and excessive behaviour.

Presenter: Monica Whitty, University of Leicester

Presented qualitative and quantitative research on people’s social goals in virtual and game spaces. This added a lot of interest value in discussion, as one finding emerging was that people sought out human contact, raising the possibility that some aspects of humanity and human nature might be projected onto interaction partners and situations rather than simply inferred from available cues. As much as violent goals might make people want to dehumanize others (Greitemeyer, Hartmann), goals to socialize or form romantic relationships might make people want to humanize and trust others – possibly inappropriately.

Presenter: Jochen Peter, University of Amsterdam

Showed results of large-scale survey data, with Patti Valkenburg, about how teenagers approach sexual interaction via online and mobile media. Attempting to dispel moral panic about “sexting,” but offering a more complete picture establishing causality through longitudinal cross-lagged designs of social norms and pornography use upon risky online and offline behaviour. Also generated some very interesting interactions in discussion, via the humanity-related concept of sexual objectification, which all agreed should be incorporated into the general model.

Presenter: Michał Bilewicz, Warsaw University

Offered an overview of his research, which unlike the others is less oriented towards technology, and more towards the social psychology of prejudice and the role dehumanization plays in that. For example, a study on the use of dehumanizing rhetoric in right-wing sources (including online) was presented. Discussion centred on how the dehumanizing aspects of technological communication can facilitate dehumanizing rhetoric, or possibly make it superfluous.

Presenter: Garry Young, Nottingham Trent University

Combining a philosophy and social science background, this presentation discussed the moral implications of online environments – in particular, whether people are inhibited by moral concerns from behaviour they wouldn't try in real life even though it is not "real." The nature of moral acts (harm and rights vs. taboo violation) was brought up in discussion, as were the implications of perceiving another entity online as human or sentient.

Further discussion:

We decided collectively after the day of presentations that the original plan to have small working groups that would discuss and present specific issues would be too restrictive and there were larger issues worth discussing.

Most of the second day's morning was spent in organizing a conceptual scheme for concerns that were emerging from the research. New concerns not envisioned in the original proposal included the duality of perceiving humans as not human, and non-humans as human; the implications of the amount and nature of social contact not just for how we treat others via technology, but our own well-being, self-control and self-image; the possibility that an excess of cues to humanity could be damaging or oppressive; and the possibility of self-dehumanization as a defensive mechanism against the painful nature of self-awareness.

Each presenter spent some time brainstorming on how these concerns could be brought to bear in research on his or her own particular field of interest. We agreed that the conceptual scheme as a whole, in interaction with the great diversity of applied research that the team brought to the table, had considerable generative potential for research.

An hour was spent in the afternoon seeing a presentation from Brian Lingley, an expert on funding schemes from the Kent research office. This was followed by a question and answer session with him and the rest of the discussion time in the meeting was spent considering concrete options to take the ideas forward into a funding network. The outcome of this more results-focused phase of the meeting is discussed in the next section.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

The overall goal of the meeting was to create connections for future communication, research collaboration, and most concretely to begin the process of applying for European-level funding of a research network dedicated to the topic of humanity and technology. All goals were met, and although it is still early to judge the eventual impact of the meeting, responses of the participants are promising.

1. Participants in the meeting appreciated the novel, common theme and many remarked that they had not know of the conceptually similar work being doen in other areas. The event increased awareness of basic social psychology theory on perceptions of humanity and of the many technological realms in which these ideas can be applied.
2. Several pairs of researchers indicated a willingness to work more closely in future (e.g., Eyszel & Ham; Greitemeyer & Hartmann). The organizer (Giner-Sorolla) has begun two collaborative research projects, one with Whitty and Young on the role of moral emotion in the judgment of simulated experiences as immoral, and one with Greitemeyer and PhD student McLatchie on improved techniques for study cues of humanity and violence in computer games. The latter project will be submitted to a joint ESRC/FWO international grant scheme.
3. Most concretely, the meeting led directly to further plans to apply for a network grant. After considering the range of available schemes on the European level, we decided that the originally proposed target scheme, a focused information technology call, would be too restrictive given the great variety of research questions being proposed and the orientation of most of our research toward basic processes rather than IT systems development. We also observed that the EUROCORES and FP7 programs, which would be ideal for our purposes, are on hiatus this year, with replacement networking programs to be announced next year. With guidance from the University of Kent Research Office, we identified another European networking programme, COST, which is accepting applications currently. This programme funds exchanges, conferences and meetings in a multinational, multi-year network and its scale seemed well-suited to the continuation of dialogue on humanity and technology. With the resources from a successful COST proposal, a truly comprehensive network could be put in place, leading to further research and research funding on the topic. With this in mind, the organizer has committed to submitting an initial outline proposal by the September 28 deadline (1500 words). For this initial proposal, only ten participating institutions are required, which can be easily provided from the participants and those interested in the meeting who were unable to attend. If the COST proposal proceeds to the next level, further participants (including industry partners) will be recruited for the full network specified in the application. At the current meeting there was discussion of additional possibilities and contacts in this direction.

Annex 1: Programme of the meeting

University of Kent at Canterbury
Keynes College

Tuesday, 19 June 2012 KS13

0900-0930: Presentation: Humanity and Technology: Overall conceptual framework: R. Giner-Sorolla

Background presentations

0930-1000: Friederike Eyszel (robots and agents)

1000-1030: Jaap Ham (robots and agents)

1030-1100: Coffee break

1100-1130: Tilo Hartmann (online & computer gaming)

1130-1200: Tobias Greitemeyer (online & computer gaming)

1200-1230: Mark Griffiths (online & computer gaming/gambling)

1230-1300: Monica Whitty (online & computer gaming)

1300-1400: Lunch

1400-1430: Jochen Peter (sexuality online)

1430-1500: Michał Bilewicz (social and prejudice implications)

1530-1600: Garry Young (online & computer gaming)

1600-1630: Coffee break

1630-1830: Break into collaborative teams by application area, for initial research planning

1930: Dinner in city centre

Wednesday, 20 June 2012 KS13

0900-1100: Further research planning "with powerpoint open"

1100-1130: Coffee break

1130-1215: Team 1 (robots and agents) presentation and discussion

1215-1300: Team 2 (gaming) presentation and discussion

1200-1245: Team 3 (social, trust and prejudice) presentation and discussion

1245-1400: Lunch

1400-1500: Presentation and discussion with Brian Lingley, University of Kent Research Office, on European funding practicalities

1500-1830: Discussion of practical matters, extension academic partners, industry partners; further discussions within teams

Thursday, 21 June 2012

1000-1045: Team 4 (sex and addiction) presentation

1045-1200: Closing remarks, discussion and timetable check

Annex 2: Speakers and participants

Speakers

Dr. Michał Bilewicz	Warszawa, (PL)
Dr. Friederike Eyssel	Bielefeld, (DE)
Dr. Roger Giner-Sorolla	Canterbury, (UK)
Professor Tobias Greitemeyer	Innsbruck, (AT)
Professor Mark Griffiths	Nottingham, (UK)
Dr. Jaap Ham	Eindhoven, (NL)
Dr. Tilo Hartmann	Amsterdam, (NL)
Miss Daria Kuss	Nottingham, (UK)
Professor Jochen Peter	Amsterdam, (NL)
Professor Monica Whitty	Leicester, (UK)
Dr. Garry Young	Nottingham, (UK)

Additional participants (local academics in attendance)

Dr. Emma Alleyne	Canterbury, (UK)
Professor Theresa Gannon	Canterbury, (UK)
Mr. Neil Mclatchie	Canterbury, (UK)
Dr. Pascale Sophie Russell	Canterbury, (UK)
Dr. Milica Vasiljevic	Canterbury, (UK)
Dr. Mario Weick	Canterbury, (UK)