

THURSDAY 27 FEBRUARY 2020, 10.30 h – 12.00 h.

Ethics and New Technology: The Case for Responsible Innovation

WIPO, 34 Chemin des Colombettes, 1211 Geneva, Switzerland
Registration at: publiclecture@wipo.int

Languages: English/French (simultaneous interpretation)

THE WIPO PUBLIC LECTURE SERIES ON ETHICS

UNITED NATIONS/ NATIONS UNIES

World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) public lecture on ethics

*In these untruthful times,
ethics provides a moral compass
to guide individual and collective
actions for the greater good.*

**SARAH JORDAN, DEPUTY EDITOR,
UNOG**

After Peter Singer (June 2018) and Julian Baggini (April 2019), Jeroen van den Hoven, Professor of Ethics and Technology at Delft University of Technology will be giving a public lecture at WIPO on 27 February 2020. He is founding Editor-in-chief of *Ethics and Information Technology* and a member of the *European Group on Ethics* in the European Commission. He has been widely published on ethics and information technology, including *Information Technology and Moral Philosophy* (2009) and *Designing in Ethics* (2018). His latest work, *Evil Online* (2018) investigates the spread of evil through the internet and social media.

Deputy Editor, Sarah Jordan, had the privilege of meeting Professor van den Hoven in Geneva in October 2019 when

he was here in the context of an international consultation at WHO on artificial intelligence (AI) in global health and the ethical considerations it raises. He will cover this and other themes in his WIPO Public Lecture.

S. JORDAN: You are a philosopher and ethicist. When did your interest in technology start?

J. VAN DEN HOVEN: My interest in information and communications technology (ICT) dates back to the 1980s. I realised early on that technology was going to shape and change the world in a big way and affect human lives because everything is mediated by technology. I started with ethics and was interested in how people justify their moral judgements. Is there a method, a standard way of proceeding? In 1999, I founded a journal called *Ethics and Information Technology*, which is now a benchmark

in the field. Then I became a Professor (first at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, then Delft University of Technology) and moved into the ethics of all kinds of technologies, robotics, materials science, civil engineering...

Does this have anything to do with design thinking, which is very much in fashion right now?

Yes, indeed; we apply design thinking to ethics. You need to think ethics from the outset when you start to think about designing and shaping. When you work with organizations, including the United Nations, it's important to start with public and institutional values and determine what problems they have. Then, you talk to policy makers and a broad range of stakeholders and work out how they and politicians can integrate the values into their procedures and IT systems in order to

THURSDAY 27 FEBRUARY 2020, 10.30 h – 12.00 h.

Ethics and New Technology: The Case for Responsible Innovation

WIPO, 34 Chemin des Colombettes, 1211 Geneva, Switzerland

Registration at: publiclecture@wipo.int

Languages: English/French (simultaneous interpretation)

THE WIPO PUBLIC LECTURE SERIES ON ETHICS



© Jeroen van den Hoven

Jeroen van den Hoven, Professor of Ethics and Technology at Delft University of Technology.

deal with the problems. We're talking about things that relate to everyone in a society: social security, education systems, healthcare...

The best way to make the world a better place is to make sure that the institutions and the devices available to people are good for them. As Churchill said: "We shape our buildings, and afterwards, our buildings shape us". In the material world our phones, our computers and the other devices and systems around us are

very important shapers of our behaviour and our thinking.

And what sort of problems are you working on right now?

My particular focus is on the issues that are triggered by new technologies, for example how should artificial intelligence (AI) be applied in healthcare? Is it a good idea to replace a doctor with a robot? Ethical questions need to be raised about the apps proposed by health insurance companies that track your fitness and dietary habits so they can calculate how likely

you are to fall ill and adjust their premiums accordingly. Or about motor insurance companies that equip your car with a black box so that they can predict how risky a driver you are. Or about Google timeline that tracks your every move.

The question here is who owns the data? Privacy is the term commonly used, but in Europe, people talk about data protection. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is the strictest legal framework in the world. In the age of big data, people outside of Europe are now realising that with so much uncontrolled data out there, strict legislation is a good idea and they would like the same level of protection.

International law is very soft – non-binding treaties that you can go in and out of, as we saw with the climate agreement. Europe has set a global standard by means of EU law. The big corporations who want to do business in Europe need to be in compliance. The new European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, has promised that within the first 100 days of her presidency she will come up with new legislation for AI, for example. And within the Commission, the Danish politician Margrethe Vestager is working on a "Europe fit for the Digital Age". The fines she has handed out

in the past are quite substantial and big tech does not like it.

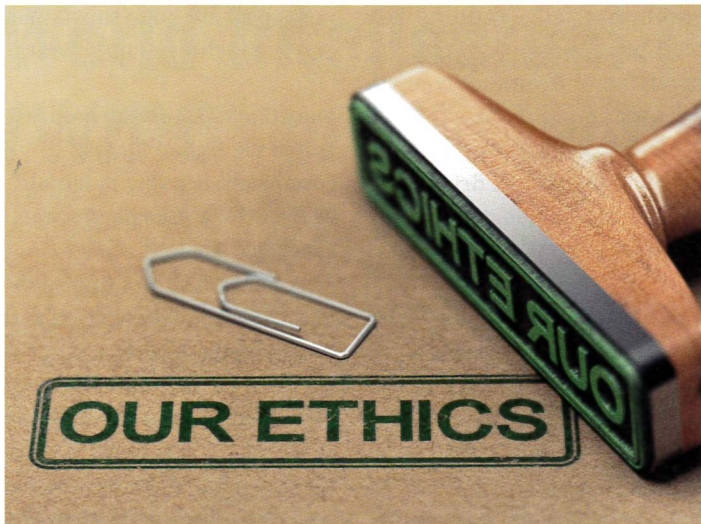
Does this relate to the antitrust action the United States government is trying to initiate against GAF A (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple)?

Absolutely, it's the same sentiment. It is about paying tax and taking responsibility and curbing the tendency to put the negative externalities on the plate of society. These huge companies have too much power. It is part of a movement started by the economist Piketty's empirical work on inequality. The idea that the benefits of all of this trickle down to the common man or woman doesn't work. People's salaries are not rising. European countries may be fairly egalitarian when it comes to income, but the inequities as far as capital is concerned are increasing.

Is there a link here to our United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

The United Nations has done a wonderful thing in defining the SDGs. It's the best consolidated list of the world's problems. We know what we need to work on: 17 goals with 169 targets that we need to meet before 2030. It has also created the new Technology Facilitation Mechanism¹ to support the goals.

To deal with climate change and with rising sea levels we



© Shutterstock

have to do something right away and that means innovation – but innovation which has ethics built into it from its inception. If you look at the UN SDGs they are about equity – about affordable healthcare, about stronger institutions, about drinking water, about the position of women, about medicines. These are all ethical aims, right from the start.

So the United Nations got it right in integrating an ethical component into the SDGs from the outset?

Absolutely. The second thing the UN got right is to realise that it has to shift gears and bring in the scientists and the engineers and invite them to meetings alongside the diplomats, politicians and international lawyers. We need smart solutions. I'm not saying that all the problems can be solved by technology, but we have to act now. Ethics is no longer a question of doing an analysis and preaching to the world, repeating ethical principles over and over again. It's about teaming up with companies and with governments and advising, training and incentivising them how to think differently and work on smarter solutions.

And those innovating need to aim at the big problems, not silly things – like smart fridge interfaces to tell you

when you've run out of milk or self-parking slippers in Korea! People get excited about innovation and novelty and they think it's "per se" good because it's new. You have to ask whether your idea is a good idea and think about the consequences; to assess and evaluate what you're doing. Look at Uber or Airbnb – on paper they looked like good ideas, but have serious downsides too. Or contrived durability and planned obsolescence – a shortened lifespan is programmed into consumer goods. Centennial lightbulbs are possible, but for commercial reasons they are not available. Deep fundamental research that is just curiosity driven is also necessary as serendipitously you might stumble across something that could help our big problems, but first aim at serious problems in society and then proceed responsibly.

But do you think people nowadays know how to proceed responsibly? How are the younger generations coping in this technology-dominated world?

I don't want to be negative, but I do see a problem. I have written a book called *Evil Online*, about the dangers to kids growing up online. In the book, with my co-author, Dean Cocking, we analyse how the online world with mobile phones 24/7 is

affecting the moral capacity to relate to other people. We claim that the online environment has a number of features, such as perceived anonymity, virality, filter bubbles. Together they may create a Moral Fog, in which young and vulnerable people may lose their way. This is how ordinary people may become nasty individuals online.

Kids who spend hours per day online often have to do without parental interaction. Parents don't look over their shoulder and comment on what they've done, how they behave, what they say or how they choose their words. Initiation into a moral society with norms and values is a very delicate, nuanced thing... Parents serve as checks and balances to children asking them to say why they chose a course of action or suggesting alternatives. We interact like this as adults with friends, partners or colleagues with the aim of becoming better. Parents who don't interact with their children don't impart those fundamental capabilities that are necessary to keep a moral society, a moral life or moral interactions going. Fewer and fewer people outside their online community comment on their behaviour or provide valuable feedback.

The book also looks at cyber bullying. In Germany, there was a case recently where a schoolboy killed himself after five of his classmates made a website that destroyed his reputation. When asked why they had done this, the classmates replied: it was online, it was virtual, just a computer game. The Germans have a wonderful word for this – *verharmlosen* – you make things seem innocent.

We can describe our interactions in thousands of ways – this interview for example – here we are sitting in a lobby, talking about philosophy, preparing for a lecture, having a

drink – all of these descriptions are true – but if something happens, if there's an accident, some of these descriptions are more relevant than others. So, what people do, especially online, is pick the solution that suits them best. We know this phenomenon. People who had to provide an account of what they did during the Second World War at the Nuremberg trials were champions of this. They said – I was just running a camp, transporting people to Bergen Belsen in a train, I tried to get as many people as I could into the train – which is all true – but it's not the most relevant description – they were sending people to their deaths.

New technology is all online, it's all virtual, just a website, fun and games. People use the novelty of the technology to distance themselves from actions in a way that they couldn't if they were to kill somebody with an axe in the real world in a traditional environment. It suits them well not to get to a better understanding. This "banality of evil" is something that Hannah Arendt wrote about in her work on Eichmann in Jerusalem. And ethics is a good starting point in the combat against this particularly sinister aspect of technology.

Professor van den Hoven, on behalf of UN Special readers, thank you for this interview. We look forward to hearing more on this subject at WIPO on 27 February. ■

For more information, or to register for WIPO's Public Lecture on Ethics, please send an email to: publiclecture@wipo.int

1 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/tfm>