

WHO REPRESENTS THE HUMAN IN THE DIGITAL AGE?

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As technology changes, so does the perceived role of humans

In his book *The Code Economy* Philip E. Auerswald talks about the long history of humans developing code as a mechanism by which to create and regulate activities and markets.¹ We have Codes of Practice, Ethical Codes, Building Codes, and Legal Codes, just to name a few. Each and every one of these is based on the data of human behaviour, and that data can now be collected, analysed, harvested and repurposed as never before through the application of intelligent machines that operate and are instructed by algorithms. Anything that can be articulated as an algorithm—a self-contained sequence of actions to be performed—is now fertile ground for machine analysis, and increasingly machine activity.

So, what does this mean for us humans who, are ourselves a conglomeration of DNA code? I have spent many years thinking about this. Not that long ago my friends and family tolerated my speculations with good humour, but a fair degree of scepticism. Now I run workshops for boards and even my children are listening far more intently. Because people are sensing that the invasion of the ‘Social Machine’² is changing our relationship with such things as privacy³, as well as with both ourselves and each other⁴. It is changing how we understand our role as humans.

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The Social Machine is the name given to the systems we have created that blur the lines between computational processes and human input, of which the World Wide Web is the largest and best known example. These ‘smart machines’⁵ are increasingly pervading almost every aspect of human existence⁶ and, in many ways, getting to know us better than we know ourselves⁷. So who stands up for us humans? Who determines how society will harness and utilise the power of information technologies whilst ensuring that the human remains both relevant and important?

¹ Auerswald, P. (2017) *The Code Economy*

² See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_machine for a definition.

³ Paul F. Roberts has some thoughts around privacy on the Web. See ‘[Web privacy is the newest luxury item in era of pervasive tracking](#)’, in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 16 February 2015.

⁴ See here for info on how digital addiction affects our lives: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_addict

⁵ For a good over see Zuboff, S. (1988) *Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power*

⁶ Lee, T. ‘[Artificial intelligence is getting more powerful, and it's about to be everywhere](#)’, in *Vox*, 18 May 2017

⁷ ‘[Computers using digital footprints are better judges of personality than friends and family](#)’, in *Cambridge University Research*, 12 January 2015.

We need to ensure technology is serving humanity, not vice versa

Thus far it has mainly been either those in academia, such as the Web Science community, who observe and seek to understand what is going on. Those in the commercial sector, who are themselves driving the technological development.⁸ Meanwhile, those who are charged with setting policy boundaries and enforcing regulation (our governments) are like rabbits in the headlights struggling to keep up.⁹

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I believe that there is a space in between that presents both the greatest need to promote the cause of humanity, and the greatest opportunity to challenge and call to account the current onslaught of technological progress. We must demand that this technological progress serves humanity rather than undermines it. And that's where, I think, philanthropy comes in.

Philanthropy can lead in humanising our digital age

Philanthropy can be defined as *love of humanity* (*philanthropos tropos*) expressed as the caring, nourishing, developing and enhancing of *what it is to be human*.

I have written about Socrates' concept of philanthropy and his desire to promote the welfare of others by wandering around talking to people, examining them as he examined himself.¹⁰ His goal was to help individual men and women understand themselves in order to live better lives and better serve their communities.¹¹ The more I have reflected on this the more I realise that this concept of *philanthropy* needs to be at the

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centre of everything if humanity is to both survive and thrive in the digitally driven world. Other players are seeking to speed things up, to rush towards a future that no one can predict,¹² let alone understand, particularly as they are now creating machines that are capable of building themselves¹³. These technologies will be of enormous benefit to humanity if they are harnessed and utilised for good. But someone has to stand up and demand that this good is at the forefront of all technological design and creation, not an inconvenient afterthought.

Australian economist Nicholas Gruen talks about what he sees as the disconnect between *'the arteries and capillaries of government'*¹⁴ as a reflection of the more pervasive inequality within society. He highlights the inability of many of our existing systems to address the differing needs of human culture at different scales. This is because the arteries (those dealing with policy) neither leverage nor understand what happens in the capillaries (service delivery at the coal face). I think that the join between the arteries and capillaries is precisely the space that those who have championed social change outside of the established systems of business and government—resulting in many of the great social reforms—have occupied. It is what philanthropy is all about.

⁸ See Foroohar, R. *'Silicon Valley has too much power'*, in the Financial Times, 14 May 2017; and Anderson, K. *'The information landscape: How do we solve the problems caused by Silicon Valley'*, in The Scholarly Kitchen, 25 April 2017.

⁹ Ferguson, A. *'Companies and governments need to get on board with data'*, in the Australian Financial Review, 21 May 2017

¹⁰ *'Moving towards a more "examined" world'*, *Intersticia blog*, 5 January 2014.

¹¹ *'The "anthro-pocene" era ... redefining "humanity"'*, *Intersticia blog*, 8 November 2014.

¹² Chakhoyan, A. *'We're moving fast. But nobody knows where we're going'*, on World Economic Forum website, 19 April 2017.

¹³ Houser, K. *'Google's new AI is better at creating AI than the company's engineers'*, in *Futurism*, 19 May 2017.

¹⁴ *'The living and the dead: Government's arteries and capillaries have lost symbiosis'*, in *The Mandarin*, 7 April 2017.

Following last year's Philanthropy Australia conference I challenged the sector¹⁵ to take the lead in occupying this middle ground. Instead of just *reacting* to the social problems created by ecological strain and economic stratification (the two factors which have, throughout history, led to the collapse of all civilisations¹⁶) the philanthropic sector must *proactively* stand up for humans; it must work to shape the value system that will determine how government and business operates both now and as the digital world evolves.

There are two ways that the sector can do this:

- We must educate ourselves, and those with whom we work, about science and technology and the social impacts that are already emerging.
- We must be ingenious about how we leverage our space in the interstice between the arteries and capillaries of society.

Doing so will help us create a legitimate, important and powerful role in championing the humans we serve.

Philanthropists must equip themselves with the knowledge they need in order to do good with digital

Consider the Luddites as they smashed the looms in the early 1800s.¹⁷ Their struggle is instructive because they were amongst the first to experience technological displacement. They sensed the degradation of human kind and they fought for social equality and fairness in the distribution of the benefits of science and technology to *all*. If knowledge is power, philanthropy must arm itself with knowledge of digital to ensure the power of digital lies with the many and not the few.

'Philanthropy must arm itself with knowledge of new technology to ensure the power of digital lies with the many and not the few.'

The best place to start in understanding the digital world as it stands now is to begin to see the world, and all human activities, through the lens of data and as a form of digital currency. This links back to the earlier idea of codes. Our activities, up until recently, were tacit and experiential, but now they are becoming increasingly explicit and quantified.¹⁸ Where we go, who we meet, what we say, what we do is all being registered, monitored and measured as long as we are connected to the digital infrastructure.¹⁹ A new currency is emerging that is based on the world's most valuable resource: data.²⁰ It is this currency that connects the arteries and capillaries, and reaches across all disciplines and fields of expertise. The kind of education that is required now is to be able to make connections and to see the opportunities in the interstice between policy and day-to-day reality.

The dominant players in this space thus far have been the large corporations and governments that have harnessed and exploited digital currencies for their own benefit. Shoshana Zuboff describes this as the 'surveillance economy'. But this data actually belongs to each and every human who generates it. As people begin to wake up to this we are gradually realising that this is what fuels the social currency of entrepreneurship, leadership and innovation, and provides the legitimacy upon which trust is based. Trust is an outcome of experiences and interactions, but governments and corporations have transactionalised their interactions with citizens and consumer through exploiting data. As a consequence they have eroded the esteem with which they

¹⁵ 'The future readiness of philanthropy', *Intersticia blog*, 28 September 2016.

¹⁶ Nuwer, R, 'How western civilisation could collapse', in BBC News, 18 April 2017.

¹⁷ Coren, M, 'Luddites have been getting a bad rap for 200 years but turns out they were right', in *Quartz*, 30 April 2017.

¹⁸ *The Economist*, 'Counting every moment', 3 May 2012.

¹⁹ One example is [how Google is tracking not just advertising but shopping behaviours](#).

²⁰ *The Economist*, 'The world's most valuable resource is no longer oil, but data', 6 May 2017.

are held. The more they try to garner greater insights through data and surveillance, the more they alienate the people they seek to reach.

If we are smart what we need to do, as philanthropists, is to understand the fundamentals of data as a currency and integrate this in to each and every interaction we have. This will enable us to create relationships with the people that are based on the authenticity of purpose, supported by the data of proof. Yes, there have been some instances where the sector has not done as well as it could and betrayed that trust. But this only serves as a lesson as to how fragile the world of trust and legitimacy are. It shows how crucial it is that we define all that we do in terms of social outcomes and *impact*, however that is defined.²¹

And we need to ensure innovation is values-driven to secure the best outcomes for humanity

Everyone these days wants to *innovate* and we have Innovation Labs popping up everywhere. My own personal opinion is that the real ideas don't come from bean bags and refrigerators full of beer and mineral water, they come from the combination of necessity and invention. From *ingenuity*.

'We must preserve what we value today in order to provide future generations with as many options and choices as possible.'

Ingenuity is about being clever, original, and inventive, and applying ideas to solve problems and meet challenges. Above all ingenuity includes a sense of imagination and play. One of the ways we can become more ingenious is by imagining how the world around us could be, and nowhere is there more inspiration than in the world of science fiction. As Cory Doctorow says, *'Science fiction predicts the present, and inspires the future.'*

Most of those who have invented the technologies around us have always been avid readers of science fiction and we now live in a world that its writers have been dreaming up for centuries. The technologies upon which we so increasingly rely have been sitting in the labs for decades, but what has happened is that they have coalesced and been let loose in the wilds of human society. It is not the technologies that determine what happens next, it is the humans. But as far as science fiction is concerned I believe that we are approaching an event horizon, a point from which we can no longer see what lies beyond because we are reaching the limits of what we can imagine²². Things are changing very quickly. As Futurist Gerd Leonhard says, *'Never in human history has the present been so temporary.'*

But whatever the future holds for us is being determined right now, and this means we need to ensure that we learn as much from the past as we can while we still remember it. Executive Director of the Long Now Foundation Alexander Rose believes²³ that preserving the elements of what we value today is crucial in order to provide future generations with as many options and choices as possible.

It's time for brave leadership in the sector

With all of this in mind, the fundamental question facing each of us is: what role do we want to play? and how do we steer our organisations through the disruptive times ahead? There is no doubt this will be difficult.

²¹ Rowland-Campbell, A. *'Philanthropy in the quantified age'*, on Intersticia website, 17 August 2015.

²² Royal Diadem Magazine, *'The post-human movement'*, 23 April 2017.

²³ See BBC interview: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08nqc4j

I believe that the greatest contribution we can make is to focus firmly on the people who are the ultimate beneficiaries of technology. To become true servant leaders²⁴, and be those who are prepared to step up and lead the brave conversations that need to occur.

This requires taking a long hard look at how we run our lives, and ensuring that we take the time to step back and recalibrate, to focus on continuous, challenging and adaptive learning, and harness our imagination to become more ingenious.

As leaders we can not leave this to other people. It is the role that each and every one of us must take on ourselves, regardless of age, stage or position. Beyond any need for skills and capabilities what we need most is to take on the philanthropic mantle and put our humanity first.

‘What we need most is to take on the philanthropic mantle and put our humanity first.’

[This essay is part of a series on transformation from the boldest voices in the sector.](#)



About the author

Anni Rowland-Campbell is Director of Intersticia, a philanthropic foundation in Australia. She has had an eclectic career spanning the arts, government and corporate worlds, which she now brings together in the work she does as an independent philanthropist, Trustee of the Web Science Trust (UK) and Advisor to New Philanthropy Capital. Anni currently focuses on promoting digital literacy in the charity sector, specifically through educational and leadership development activities with boards and senior managers.

²⁴ See www.greenleaf.org for more on servant leadership.

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