The Moral Psychology of Social Tech Conference
June 17 & 18

There will be a total of three panels and a fourth session of breakout groups. Each integrated panel will consist of five speakers and one moderator. Each speaker will give a 20-minute talk, The sessions will end with a 20-minute discussion period.

Friday, June 17

2:00pm • BUFFET LUNCH AND INTRODUCTORY REMARKS
(tent outside Warren Hall @ CALS Quad)

Gary Koretsky, PhD
Vice Provost for Academic Integration at Cornell
Cornell University
Professor of Medicine
Weill Cornell Medicine

2:30 – 4:30pm • FIRST PANEL, 150 WARREN HALL

Moderator:
Shaun Nichols, PhD
Professor
Department of Philosophy
Director
Cognitive Science Program
Cornell University

Speakers:
Vanessa Bohns, PhD
Associate Professor
Organizational Behavior
ILR School
Cornell University

The Difficulty of Saying “No” to an Intrusive Request to Access One’s Personal Device

Organizations spend billions of dollars on technological solutions for information security. However, despite extensive technological protection, an individual intent on accessing another person’s information can do so by going directly to the source. Rather than attempting to hack into a system, individuals can circumvent
technological protections altogether by engaging directly with the other individual—human to human—using basic tactics of persuasion and social influence. Such tactics, referred to as social engineering, are vastly underappreciated means by which unauthorized individuals are able to gain access to what would otherwise be highly protected information. One reason this human element of cyber security has been largely overlooked may be that people are overconfident in their ability to resist social engineering attempts. In a series of studies, we find that people believe it will be relatively easy to say “no” to someone who makes an intrusive privacy-related request for access to one’s personal device. Yet, when actually confronted with such a request, targets find it quite difficult and uncomfortable to say “no,” and consequently grant the requester access to personal data they would have preferred to keep private.

Shimon Edelman, PhD (virtual)
Professor
Department of Psychology
Cornell University

The Moral Psychology of Surveillance Capitalism

Academic institutions that partake in the capitalist order and educate the next generation of corporate cadres and oligarchs are expected to employ the Newspeak of the state propaganda. Consequently, any inquiry into the morals of "social technology" must begin with the realization that it is engineered to monetize the alienated individual's desperate urge to socialize; that "mental health" spells the medicalization of suffering induced by the very system that profits from it; that users cannot expect "privacy" when they are the product; and that the epidemic of incivility is a fig leaf for the resurgent fascism.

Jyotishman Pathak, PhD
Professor
Population Health Sciences
Weill Cornell Medicine

Secondary Use of Clinical and Patient-Generated Data for Mental Health Research

In recent years, big data, including electronic health records and patient-generated health data, have attracted significant interest across healthcare. Yet when it comes to big data science in mental health research, the successes have remained relatively limited to date. We continue to use primitive ways to identify and measure mental illness, lack organizational capacity for building and maintaining large and longitudinal data repositories, and have yet to define a robust model for turning
individual data into collective knowledge that can benefit patient care. Our research is an attempt to address these challenges by developing and applying novel big data analytics methods in understanding effective ways to diagnose, treat, and manage patients suffering from mental health conditions, such as major depression, substance use, and suicide.

Tapan Parikh, PhD (virtual)
Associate Professor, Cornell Tech
Information Science Department, Cornell University

Remaking the City

In this talk I will discuss my group’s recent work combining physical prototyping with extended reality (XR) technologies to develop novel methods and tools for participatory urban design. The goal is to provide an accessible and collaborative way for diverse groups to develop speculative design proposals using physical materials, and then to experience those designs first-hand using immersive XR techniques. I will discuss some of our learnings from testing this approach in our graduate seminar this fall, including some of the resulting designs and the reflections of students and the design team on the overall process. I will conclude by reflecting on the benefits and limitations of this approach for fostering intergroup dialog and communication, including comparing to other technology-mediated forms of feedback and public discussion (e.g., using traditional social media and/or existing 3D prototyping and visualizations).

Laura Niemi, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Psychology
College of Arts & Sciences
Management and Organizations
Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management
SC Johnson College of Business
Cornell University

Social and Moral Complications of Virtual Education.

Since 2020, when large numbers of college students began taking high-stakes exams in their childhood bedrooms, the digital transformation of higher education has accelerated, while students, unfortunately, have faced incredible intellectual, social, and moral challenges. In this research, we explore a troublesome aspect of student conduct, academic dishonesty, by mapping out some key causes and correlates of online cheating. With a large sample of current students, we tested the effect of online
versus in-person exam scenarios, as well as instructor attributes and the presence of monitoring, on self-reported likelihood of cheating. We also explored students’ justifications for cheating, the perceived prevalence of cheating online, and individual differences in learning motivations. The findings suggest that the online learning environment has opened the door to cheating for even more students, fueled new excuses and justifications, and exposed students to increased levels of damaging moral emotions.

4:30 – 6:30pm • SECOND PANEL, 150 WARREN HALL

Moderator

David Shoemaker, PhD
Professor
Department of Philosophy
Cornell University

Speakers:

Will Starr, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Philosophy
Cornell University

Social Media and the Ecology of Communication

Evolutionarily, and developmentally, human language use begins with face-to-face interactions. This form of communication is filled with risks, but also enormous rewards. Although rarely framed in this way, our social norms for face-to-face communication are a form of social technology which aim to promote the rewards, and thwart the risks. We try to be informative, speak sincerely, avoid certain topics, and much else. This talk will examine the ways that social media has disrupted our norms of communication, and the prospects for evolving new social technology better suited to this medium. It will be argued that this project cannot proceed without intersecting central issues in moral and political philosophy.

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David Scales, PhD (virtual)
Assistant Professor of Medicine
Weill Cornell Medicine

Making Medical Facts in our Digital Information Ecosystem

Scientists often say "good science speaks for itself," but that does not seem to be true in today's digital information ecosystem. The prevalence of scientific and medical
misinformation suggests we have not yet adapted our science communication strategies to social media and tech platforms, which have increased the speed and scale at which information travels and turned information consumers into information producers. This has profound effects not only on how people absorb information and make decisions that affect their health, like wearing a mask or vaccinating, but has implications for the social processes by which scientific facts become facts in the eyes of the public.

Kevin Kniffin, PhD
Assistant Professor
Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management
SC Johnson College of Business
Cornell University

Social Media and Mental Health Among Doctoral Students

Complementary to ongoing research on the career paths of (interdisciplinary) doctoral students across STEM fields, this talk will present preliminary results of a new survey of students from highly ranked graduate programs in the United States across 20 fields. I will discuss social media usage, mental health, and their interrelationships. In addition, this presentation will consider the relevance of (broad) career interests in relation to doctoral students’ mental health.

Debjani Mukherjee, PhD
Associate Professor
Medical Ethics in Clinical Medicine
Weill Cornell Medicine

Too Much Access? Smartphone Apps in Clinical Care

Electronic medical records (EMR) have been hailed as a fix for many problems, allowing for improved efficiency, clarity, and ease of communication. Yet they have also been cited as a reason for physician burnout. Ethical issues such as access, ownership, and privacy have been explored, mostly from the patient perspective. In this exploratory talk, I will consider the impact that smartphone EMR apps have on clinical staff. Drawing on my work as a clinical ethicist at an academic medical center, a psychotherapist, and a user of the “Haiku” and “My chart” apps for my smartphone, I will explore blurred boundaries, information overload, and barriers to the ever-elusive work-life balance.
Content Removal as a Moderation Strategy: A Case Study Employing a "Delayed Feedback" Paradigm on the ChangeMyView Subreddit

Moderators of online communities often employ post/comment deletion, removing content that breaks the rules. While it is absolutely important to consider the justness of the rules themselves, and whether it is right in a given context to remove rule-breaking content, we ask a different but related question: does comment removal actually cause the subsequent behavior of the comment’s author to change? The answer has implications on whether or how this type of moderation should be employed. We examine this question in a particularly well-moderated community, the ChangeMyView subreddit. The standard analytic approach of interrupted time-series analysis unfortunately cannot answer this question of causality because it fails to distinguish the effect of having made a noncompliant comment from the effect of being subjected to moderator removal of that comment. We therefore leverage a “delayed feedback” approach based on the observation that some users may remain active between the time when they posted the noncompliant comment and the time when that comment is deleted. Applying this approach to such users, we examine evidence for and against the causal role of comment deletion in changes in subsequent user behavior, and we advocate for further applications of the "delayed feedback" approach for analyzing observational data.

(Joint work with Kumar Bhargav Srinivasan, Cristian Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, Lillian Lee, and Chenhao Tan.)

6:45pm • COCKTAILS AND LIGHT FARE
(tent outside Warren Hall @ CALS Quad)

Saturday, June 18

9:00 am • BUFFET BREAKFAST
(Warren Hall, first floor lobby)

9:30 – 11:30am • THIRD PANEL, 150 WARREN HALL

Moderator
Rainu Kaushal, PhD
Senior Associate Dean of Clinical Research
Chair of the Department of Population Health Sciences
On Testing for Discrimination Using Causal Models

Consider a bank that uses an AI system to decide which loan applications to approve. We want to ensure that the system is fair, that is, it does not discriminate against applicants based on a predefined list of sensitive attributes, such as gender and ethnicity. We expect there to be a regulator whose job it is to certify the bank’s system as fair or unfair. We consider issues that the regulator will have to confront when making such a decision, including the precise definition of fairness, dealing with proxy variables, and dealing with what we call allowed variables, that is, variables such as salary on which the decision is allowed to depend, despite being correlated with sensitive variables. We show (among other things) that the problem of deciding fairness as we have defined it is co-NP-complete, but then argue that, despite that, in practice the problem should be manageable.

The Underdog Effect

Although organizations are “artificial persons” in the eyes of the law, they often try to portray themselves as real human beings, telling jokes on social media or advertising themselves as family. What makes them “natural persons,” or humans, in our eyes, and why does it matter? Humanization matters because it has moral consequences. I discuss one in particular: empathy. When in trouble, organizations often seek to elicit empathy. Empathy is often elicited through perceived suffering, but people generally do not perceive organizations to suffer. Across seven studies, my collaborators and I test whether using decoys can increase perceived suffering and hence empathy: the target organization is either framed as an underdog (by presenting it next to a larger decoy organization) or by itself as a sole dog (without any comparison). We find that it does. However, the underdog effect weakens if a third, even smaller organization is
now presented beside the underdog and decoy organizations, or if the underdog is in a different industry than the decoy organization. When people perceive increased organization suffering and empathy, they are both more likely to expend effort helping it and allow it to engage in unethical behaviors.

- Tanzeem Choudhury, PhD
  The Roger and Joelle Burnell Professor in Integrated Health and Technology
  Jacobs Technion-Cornell Institute
  Cornell Tech

**AI Must Be Developed Responsibly to Improve Mental Health Outcomes**

We constantly hear about the role of technology and artificial intelligence as a game-changer for healthcare. Mental health is an area that has received increasing attention in tech. During the pandemic efforts to integrate AI into mental health services has grown. In my talk, I will discuss why technologists should not assume that AI tools will perform well when deployed and how we can responsibly develop AI tools that improve mental healthcare.

- Jon Kleinberg, PhD
  Professor
  Departments of Computer Science and Information Science
  Cornell University

**The Challenge of Understanding What Users Want: Inconsistent Preferences and Engagement Optimization**

Online platforms have a wealth of data, run countless experiments, and use industrial-scale algorithms to optimize user experience. Despite this, many users seem to regret the time they spend on these platforms. One possible explanation is that incentives are misaligned: platforms are not optimizing for user happiness. We suggest the problem runs deeper, transcending the specific incentives of any particular platform, and instead stems from a mistaken foundational assumption. To understand what users want, platforms look at what users do. This is a kind of revealed-preference assumption that is ubiquitous in user models. Yet research has demonstrated, and personal experience affirms, that we often make choices in the moment that are inconsistent with what we actually want: we can choose mindlessly or myopically, behaviors that feel entirely familiar on online platforms. In this work, we develop a model of media consumption where users have inconsistent preferences. We consider what happens when a platform that simply wants to maximize user utility is only able to observe
behavioral data in the form of user engagement. Our framework is based on a model of user behavior in which users are guided by two conflicting sets of preferences -- one that operates impulsively in the moment, and the other of which makes plans over longer time-scales. By linking the behavior of this model to abstractions of platform design choices, we can develop a theoretical framework and vocabulary in which to explore interactions between design, behavioral science, and social media.

(Joint work with Sendhil Mullainathan and Manish Raghavan.)

John Doris, PhD
Peter L. Dyson Professor of Ethics in Organizations and Life
Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management
SC Johnson College of Business
Professor
Sage School of Philosophy
Cornell University

Did Zoom University Ruin Our Students?

Many commentators have lately noticed a decrease in engagement, and an increase in academic misconduct, among college students. Is this simply a continuation of "existing trends," or is it attributable to the unique challenges of the pandemic? Here, I argue for the latter, and wonder whether it could in part be due to the effect of virtual environments on social connectedness.

11:30am – 2:30pm • BUFFET LUNCH ON PREMISES/BREAKOUT ROOMS
(113, 137, 138 Warren Hall)

2:45pm • CLOSING REMARKS
John Doris

3:30pm • Limo pick up and return to NYC @ Warren Hall

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