



**Pandora's Box:  
Unleashing Technology in the Human Services**

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## ABSTRACT

By promoting certain beliefs and values in the human services environment, technology can enable or disable the processes and ultimately the outcomes in service provision. The value of respect in the human services is undermined by the influences of the medical model and government policies, controlling how the sector deals with clients. The helping professions' ideal of 'doing good' displaces respect in interpersonal transactions when it perpetuates blaming the victim. Similarly, the engagement with new administrative practices and complex technology has mainly inhibited the empowerment of the staff, clients and the human service organisations. Thus, instruments to implement policy couched in this medical framework challenges the rites of respect and conflicts with the idea of technology for empowerment. As respect is a key component in human relationships, this paper argues that it should be essential in the provision of human services. Therefore, utilising the concept of respect to direct the use of technologies becomes tantamount to innovative and empowering practice in the human services arena.

## KEYWORDS

**respect, human services, technology, enabling, empowerment**

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## Introduction

As the story is told, misery was the moths of doom that came out from Pandora's illusive box. Rather than putting an end to impending human suffering, she chose to open the box to let the final surprise unfold. Such is human curiosity, always bearing hope<sup>1</sup>. In this paper, we focus on technology, namely information and communication technology (ICT), and the notions of enabling and empowering that are packaged with these new networks of power<sup>2</sup>. ICT is defined as a set of technologies taking a central role in enabling the transformation of government processes, business operations, and society through the development of novel products and services (DCITA, 2003). Throughout the progression in the 'information age' in Australia, technology becomes the means to enable socially defined objectives and justifies changes in administrative systems. Since its appearance in the vocabulary of politics, enabling has grown to mean "to empower and to provide the actual ability to choose between options, extending freedom for both providers and users of services" (Taylor, 2000, p. 372). More importantly, technology-enabled changes and the potential for ensuing empowerment provide a solution to the pressing need for the integration of different services for individual clients in the human services (J. Hudson, 2003; McCoy & Vila, 2002; Ott & Dicke, 2001).

The purpose of this article is to show that ICT has values and *modus operandi* derived from its construction, its purpose in the policy environment, and its applications in the administrative setting. The paper begins with the concept of enabling technology, backed up by respect as a social agenda, with the idea that ICT can empower service provision. Next, we discuss what is empowerment and how we apply this concept in our analysis. Positioning the concept of respect as the decisive factor in understanding empowerment aids the analysis on technological usage and the impact on organisational practices and the clients. These earlier discussions will inform the following section in which we highlight the ways technology has become a social vehicle subservient to more powerful social foundations, such as the medical enterprise. Our analysis focuses on the medical enterprise and how the scientific medical model influences the way information systems

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<sup>1</sup> This prose strengthens the fact that scientific observation, established on inquisitiveness, is not objective or value-free.

<sup>2</sup> We believe the same metaphor is used with ICT as it was with electricity in Hughes' (1983) work.

are used in government policy and practices. We follow through the use of ICT within levels of service provision and argue that despite the rhetoric of empowering value of ICT, the Human Service agencies, staff and clients are not empowered. Finally, we propose that to have empowerment through ICT, the value of respect should guide policy outcomes and the use of information systems.

### **The enabling technology**

The concept of ‘enabling’ is often attached to images of new technologies (DCITA, 2003), contemporary labour (Peters, 2003), and improved working conditions for people with disabilities (Roulstone, 1998). Technology-enabled work and service provision, hence, are deemed synonymous with workers’ empowerment and clients’ freedom of choice. The professed empowerment of individuals through the use of technology is backed by policies referring to respect as a social agenda. Respect, manifested in a myriad of appealing jargons, such as rights, autonomy, choice, freedom, and empowerment renders the word clichéd. Indeed, the concept of respect is saturated with beliefs, attitudes, and expectations to guide our actions. Respect is often interpreted as having moral and cultural dimensions, something that is earned. Cultural norms like ‘respect for your elders’, ‘respect for authority’ and the coming of age show that respect in society is attained when you reach certain milestones; for instance, according the status of adulthood when someone turns 18 years old. In essence, respect concerns ‘a sense of worth’ or “a regard for one’s worth and sensitivity to factors that enhance or threaten worth” (Dillon, 1995, p. 20). While referring to respect and giving the idea that technology will enable service provision and empower workers, the concept of enabling, needs to be critically analysed for its meaning.

A critical analysis on the concept of ICT as an enabling technology shows that the concept of enabling is discussed in various ways. First, the word ‘enabling’ suggests that in its design, ICT enables processes that recruit information. Castells (1996) argues that social organisations now rely on information as a source of power and productivity in which ICT facilitates how information is managed and shared. For instance, the modernisation of the public service represents government commitment to becoming a competitive player in the new information economy (DCITA, 2003; Podger, 2001). The

political goal articulates the whole-of government approach in pursuit of economic prosperity (NOIE, 2002) by marketing egalitarian status and choice in the emerging information society (J. Hudson, 2003; Taylor, 2000). However, ICT development in Australia has become pervasive with the evolving information, communication and digital technologies (DCITA, 2003) to create complexity in policy, processes and procedures (Henman & Adler, 2003).

Second, the concept of ‘enabling’ has to make sense to people before they can apply it. Humans, as argued by Norman (1998), constantly make sense in their daily activities and apply this ‘sense-making’ on the products they use. A study by Henfridsson (2000) shows when workers overcome ambiguity at the introduction of a new technology and learn to integrate technology as part of their work, they accept technology as meaningful and an integral part of work. Nonetheless, products such as information systems are normally designed based on technical requirements and do not necessarily fit with how people work (Norman, 2002). Hence, the concept of ICT as ‘enabling technology’ would not be properly understood and applied unless people are trained to understand how technology enables their work. By having adequate competency to cleverly manoeuvre technical systems, they can use these technologies to increase choice and flexibility in service provision. Finally, ‘enabling’ is supposed to target the end users’ experience or to enable ‘user empowerment’ (Duane & Finnegan, 2003). The notion of an enabling technology not only has conferred value to autonomy and choice, but the new infrastructure of the information society has also reassigned a great deal of responsibility to the autonomous individual (Henwood, Wyatt, A Hart, & Smith, 2003).

The analysis of ICT as an enabling technology suggests that 1) ICT is an enabler, and not the cause of pervasive changes in economic and social activities, 2) ICT is part of meaning-making process that can be achieved through personal and organisational learning, 3) ICT depends on the quality of its use in order to enable, and 4) ICT should promote an enabling experience to the users. Enabling the individual or empowerment is perhaps one of the glorified outcomes of using ICT and the extent of this occurring is still moot.

### **Empowerment defined**

Lovemore and Dann (2002) define empowerment as “both a process and an outcome involving the individual or group’s ability to pull from within themselves the power to influence or control significant events in their lives” (p. 235). Generally, within the context of human services, empowerment means to give power to enable users to self-determine their needs. Empowerment, in this context, is sequential process achieved through guiding policy and infrastructures with respect often promoted as the value for provision and outcomes. Empowering practices occur when policy, processes and procedures are instigated from a primary respect for people to enhance a continuum of empowerment throughout the organisational strata and consequently practice frameworks and methodologies. Consequently, respect is used to market the use of ICT in the new economy, yet the concept of enabling remains void of practical meaning. Arguably, without the concept of respect as an inherent guideline, empowerment becomes prescriptive dialogue lacking practical actions, which, in turn, promotes hierarchal structures to continue centralising power.

The following section will discuss the ways ICT derived its values from the design of artefacts, from policy objectives, and administrative operations. ICT is so ubiquitous that its artefacts have become the conduit of human actions (through means of information) and relations (through means of communication). The subtle changes from technological artefacts, namely computers, are achieved through the adoption of new technology as a neutral tool. This ‘technology as a neutral tool’ perspective has blinded some people to see beyond the familiar and useful machines.

### **Politics in the design of technological artefacts**

Johnson and Nissenbaum (1995) argued that the presence of computers sometimes make no moral difference in the case of a computer replacing a typewriter. However, by having computers we are more likely to work faster and execute more functions than a typewriter so we become more critical of and get more frustrated over inefficiencies. The use of a computer has changed our commitment towards efficiency of work and it could be argued that artefacts themselves have politics. That politics can be introduced in the configuration of an artefact is shown in Langdon Winner’s (1986) example of Long

Island Bridge designed by Robert Moses. As the bridge is constructed so low, no buses can travel on it. This design, whether or not it has incorporated Moses' ideologies, would have ensured the exclusion of people who use public transport. This example illustrates that the separation of a technical system comprising things and a social system comprising people, can obscure the fact that artefacts themselves can have ideologies, regardless whether politics are introduced in the design of things.

### ***The social aspects of technology***

Technology, subject to construction and re-construction in society, is not only an extension of human capabilities, but also the knowledge of specific motives and the application of specific techniques to achieve political goals through the use of language and symbols. We talk about things, people, or ideas. The conception of an entity in our mind is imbued with our own values and this complex knowledge is then organised into texts communicated through language. Language itself is subject to limitations (Amir, 2003) and, therefore, discourse is applicable within certain boundaries (Neubert & Reich, 2002), namely, institutional treatment and validation of certain discourses alongside others. The technological system manufactured in the name of improved well-being of society is nothing less than sacred. Herein lies the authority of discourse to construe what is understood by technology. Not only the *idea* of improved well being is put forward in technical innovation (Ayres, 1996), but also the *articulation* of technology as enabling and empowering comes with the package.

Landmarks of achievement refer to technological innovations that have been made relevant by powerful stakeholders in society (Bijker & Law, 1992; Hughes, 1983) and this infrastructure, in turn, shapes the social order for consecutive years in history. The shaping of technology in society and the foundations that support its development promote a non-linear technological growth. This perspective that counter-argues the neutral entity of technological artefacts is the social construction of technology. It holds that a society is defined by its technology and vice versa. Fitzpatrick (2003) argues, "new technologies do not emerge *ex nihilo*, but are always embedded within social contexts whose contours shape the ways in which technologies are constructed and utilised" (p. 133). Accordingly, to get a more holistic assessment of technology, structural conditions



such as social and policy environment should also be addressed (Fitzpatrick, 2003; Klein & Kleinman, 2002). Whilst it has been a research priority to understand the emerging societal model capitalising on ICT (J. Hudson, 2003), research neglects the relationships between technology and social policies (Henman, 1997). A closer look on the relationship will uncover that social policies and technology are the complementary forces policing social order.

### **Medicalisation of the human services**

More powerful social institutions, such as the medical enterprise, dictate the values of ICT in policy and in the modes of operation of information systems in the human services administration. Roche Anleau's (1999) analysis on social control posits "medicine is displacing religion and law as the major institution of social control...dictating standards for the physical and moral relations of the individual and of the whole society" (p.199). Indeed, the institution of health has become a worldwide influence and the World Health Organisation (WHO) defines the 'quality of life' referenced in policies and services (Jamrozik, 2001). Quality of life in Western society is interpreted through the authority vested in the medical profession, which legitimises the existence of experts, techniques and protocols (Jamrozik, 2001). Interestingly, the new economy also promises quality of life of the individual, community, and nation through an economy that harnesses information (NOIE, 2002). Combining the authorities of health and the forces of economy, the medical enterprise assumes its place as a powerful institution in industrial societies.

The field of medicine, as part of scientific knowledge, advocates the same empirical approach in policy and practice. Whilst there is a growth towards more evidence-based knowledge and practice in the medical model, the criteria and standards to be eligible for services do not address subjective elements that make up the whole person. This can be devastating to users who need human services not only to maintain their health but also to attain personal wellbeing. As the model evolves services are restricted to those obtained from medical resources (Smith & Eggleston, 1989) and, therefore, the government contains expenditure by shifting responsibilities for caring to families, friends, and religious or community groups. Compared to the more affluent users, the

medical service model is the only alternative for the socially disadvantaged groups and for people who have exhausted their personal resources. Since the main users of the default services are mainly disadvantaged groups, the control from the medical model must traverse the human services environment (Jamrozik, 2001).

For example, the medical model is a common framework in the human services, such as in long-term care for the elderly (Smith & Eggleston, 1989) and in the education and rehabilitation of children with disabilities (Reiter, 2000). This scientific medical model applies empirical methods to health and views patients “as someone with a medical dysfunction that requires treatment” (Smith & Eggleston, 1989, p. 26). This problem-centred approach applies rigorous scientific method to diagnose and treat diseases or problems whereas the well being of the whole person is completely ignored. That is, when the focus is based on rigid diagnosis, a person’s condition can only be addressed in purely medical terms. Therefore, the person requiring services has to be labelled with a disease or a problem before he or she is eligible for services.

Due to the disrespect for an individual’s personal worth, traditions built on the medical model lack avenues for empowering practices. Research on empowerment in the medical context explains disempowering influences on attitudes within the human services sector. To discuss whether empowerment would be the outcome of the use of information systems in human services administration, we have applied the ecological model to map the policy, organisational, and operational levels of the human services. In this model, all concepts of empowerment are viewed as multi-level constructs whereby empowerment of the individual will promote empowerment on other level (Lin, 2002). In this analysis, we adopt respect as a person’s intrinsic worth endorsed by the United Nations Convention on Human Rights which states “...respect for human rights and human dignity is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world” (United Nations, 1996).

### **Technology and control in the human services environment**

New requirements for research and technology in social services is introduced with the scientific medical model (Reiter, 2000). These requirements come with changes in

policy and in the administrative operations. The human services have also been affected with reforms towards managerial styles and reconstructions of information systems to meet political procedures. Utilising the ecological model to draw out the inconsistencies within human service organisations, the concept of respect is seen as important, especially because technology and social policy are not separate entities. Instead, “technological systems and cultures settle into interstices of administrative processes and the interactions of producers, consumers and clients” (Fitzpatrick, 2003, p. 135). Therefore, whether empowerment can be achieved through technology is somewhat determined by the ideologies established in technological artefacts.

### **Empowerment in policy and practice**

Although there have been numerous research papers on technologies in the human services they do not address the sequential outcomes that traverse different levels of the human service contexts and practices. Although is not specifically referred to, Henman & Adler’s (2001) review provides clarity on social welfare policy and how, through policy driven agendas, the value of respect is weakened. The Henman & Adler (2001) and later Henman (2002) reviews on technology in social welfare policy and outcomes argue that the use of technology assists the fragmentation of society by the methodology in which it is applied for government risk management agendas, thus creating conditions that are to monitor and survey. When policies are premised on control they devalue respect, particularly in an industry that is ostensibly about valuing humanity. Consequently, technology becomes a tool to enhance this outcome.

Reflecting Henman and Adler’s (2001) analysis, policies from the Federal government’s Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) exemplify the currency of technological use in the partnerships between Centrelink and state agencies dependent on allocation of Federal government resources (2003). The protocols that define the partnership between FaCS and Centrelink show how policy agendas for technological implementation are particularly representative of the way in which government maintains control over Centrelink.

As Henman and Adler (2001) indicated, the requirements for the use of technology are to bolster monitoring and control. Management of technological systems in the partnership requirements of FaCS, do not mention benefits to the user but rather for policy and operational efficiency. There are no requirements that could be interpreted as respectful of workers and their values, although the projected outcomes of FaCS are meant to achieve empowerment and respect for the users (FaCS, 2003). However, this outcome is hard to foresee when compliance to government legislation and policy is a condition for funding. The technological applications needed to fulfil the political obligations promote a culture that evades respect and the potential for an empowerment continuum.

Other dynamics impacting on organisational contexts show how policy driven use of technological resources continues to endorse unhealthy organisational environs and thus, diminish the possibility for an empowerment continuum. For example, issues raised by Henman and Adler (2001) are defined by authors Hsiao and Ormerod (1998), who state that applying IT use to structure organisational environments for resource allocation and cost effectiveness, emphasises changes in social relationships within internal and external organisational environments. The consequences of these changes have increased operational efficiency and cost effective applications of resources, but have taken away power from workers when such reform continues to alienate organisational structures and strategies (Hsiao & Ormerod, 1998).

The relationship between our behaviour and our environment underpins the development of our conceptions and schemata (Piaget, cited in Carlson & Buskist, 1997, p. 378). The impact from the shift to a managerial style of organisational operations centred on administrative and cost effective service provision ensures workers remain in a constant state of disempowering emotional flux by professional expectations that are encoded to “challenge oppression” “but now represents systems that oppress rather than empower” (Tanner, 1998, p. 454). As the relationship between policy and technologies, which help establish the organisational culture has been raised; exploration of the factors that impact on the psychological well being of workers is necessary. Promoting social justice and equity are the main drivers for service existence in the human services. Following the

argument of this paper, the organisational environment, and its use of technological resources should support workers' values.

Research on nursing environments by Mok & Au-Yeung (2002) shows the relationship between psychological empowerment and establishing the organisational environments. The authors' studies reveal the main influence on nurses feeling empowered was through good leadership and teamwork. This is confirmed by Cole's (1998) findings in that empowerment of employees by managers is achieved through teamwork and leadership. Such an environment then allows employees responsibility and accountability appropriate to their level of training. Studies cited by Cole (1998) refer to the satisfaction employees receive when these factors provide for involvement in the decision-making processes of the organization.

However, the chances of this occurring diminish when focus on operational and administrative efficiency centralises power rather than dispersing it to workers. If managers feel empowered through having the access to technological and other resources at the cost of professional and discretionary autonomy (Tanner, 1998) why would they want to hand what power they have to others when it diminishes their own? Having expertise in technological usage can, not only, qualify individuals to have power over others but also incur detrimental outcomes when that knowledge is not communicated. For example, an evaluation on the Queensland Juvenile Justice Services Model (DoF, 2001) referred to the inadequacy of the Department of Families (DoF) FAMY databases and workers skills to coordinate information for enhancing quality service provision (Department of Families Queensland, 2001). The workers blame this on the complexity of the database and the lack of time in fulfilling the requirements of implementing the system (DoF, 2001).

Other disempowering outcomes are inevitable when the opportunities for collaborative service provision are not capitalised on. The availability for technologies to enhance service provision by providing expediency and efficiency to target effective case management is not necessarily productive for the user. For instance, the conditioning effects from the competitive funding environment undermines the possible benefits of

networking and cooperation (M. Hudson, 1995), especially when it is shown that the interpersonal forum creates the opportunities for communication (Healey, 1998). Establishing a competitive edge for resources between agencies inhibits communication and thus enabling technologies become neutral or disabling tools reliant on human actions for imparting necessary information.

Utilising the analysis of Cole (1998), it is apparent that correlations between training and empowerment attenuate quality outcomes. This becomes worrisome considering the power DoF has over human services provision and the collaborative enterprises it facilitates. Additionally, considering the dominance of government's vested interests in the partnerships and the imposing conditions of policy and funding, lack of quality in technological systems and training can be seen to undermine communication and quality in the partnerships, to the government's advantage.

### **The conditioning of human services**

The need for coordinated ICT sharing between organizations highlights the influence of the competitive funding environments. Poor infrastructure shows the policy objectives do not necessarily create a healthy organization or empowering work practices when ICT is not passed on to the user. Moreover, the lack of training and education for providers and users indicate how resources to empower are easily discarded especially when the costs are prohibitive and/or people are technophobic (Wolstenholme & Stanzel, 2003). The drive towards an administrative task-centred model for practice demoralises care management in service provision when workers do not feel empowered. In other words, workers' values and respect for those values becomes alienated by policy agendas that dominate organisational outputs and in doing so, creates an environment that isolates workers from their ethical values.

Supporting Henman (2002) and Hsaio and Ormerods' (1998) analyses, Tanner (1998) states quality care management is damaged by processes and procedures required for implementing legislation and policies. Tanner (1998) further contends, the changes in case management methodology may extend managerial power but conversely decreases

professional independence and discretion. The implications from Tanner (1998) and Henman's (2002) analyses shows connection to Hsiao & Ormond (1998) contentions where the change in organisational operations effectively leads to centralising power bases rather than dispersing it to empower employees. Tanner (1998) recognises the tensions created between the values of social work and the shift towards managerialism.

These issues, combined with the challenge of sharing power, participation and choice for the consumer will obviously not, or ever, be attainable. This is significant when growing bodies of research show requirements for facilitating services are influenced by how valued workers feel in work environments (Clarke, 2001; Lovemore & Dann, 2002). Investigation is needed on why policy constructs use of technologies as a method of control when it creates a tension between workers values and service provision, effectively breaching the mission and vision-laden statements of empowerment for the human services user.

As the customers that qualify the existence of the human service providers are the one constant in provision of services, what happens to the users of the human service provisions? Because disability organisations have a pivotal role in informing the community, the impact on clients from technological usage is highlighted within this environment. For instance, a review on technology information and access for people with a disability by Wolstenholme & Stanzel (2003) uncovers the outcomes of the current human services environments, practices and provisions. The authors reveal that, on one hand, the opportunity for ICT to empower the consumer has risen with the advent of technological usage and the access to knowledge. On the other hand barriers for the consumer still exist, namely, improper assessment of client's needs by local council and mainstream organisations. Ignoring clients' input for assessment emphasises the influence of the medical model because it fails to include psychosocial influences on a person's functioning. This issue combined with the other identified factors associated with influences on policy and administration draws attention to the unlikelihood of IT being used respectfully or at least consistently, for the user's benefit.

### **Discussion**

Technology is subject to the philosophy and moral values of the community it is meant to serve. The process of deliberation and implementation of technology, unless tailored to the social prerogatives such as ‘respect’, will bow to other social institutions that use technology as their social vehicle to define social realities. Notice the social is reproduced from culture (knowledge) to processes (vehicle) to outcomes (realities).

The medical profession, as a corporate body defining quality of life, uses medical knowledge to perpetuate blaming the victim. What’s more, in a competitive social service environment, respect for clients of human services is downplayed for bottom line efficiency. This moral vacuity has caused more suffering to humankind than can be acknowledged. As enabling and empowerment is inherent rhetoric in artefacts, the social outcome of technical systems becomes vague and irrelevant. The ambiguity of the concept of empowerment means that the pathway from policy to practice is not really clear, and has been made more complex through new technologies.

Social science discourses reveal that there is inconsistency between how empowerment is conceptualised and where it is activated (Clarke, 2001). Expanding on Clarke’s (2001) perceptions on policy agendas for empowerment, Lin (2002) explains how the notion of empowerment is synonymous with the ideals of human services provision but becomes rhetorical when “empowerment tends to be talked about at the cognitive level rather than realised in practice” (p. 534).

To extend respect, the providers of human services also need to be respected. Respect for both clients and practitioners will enhance ethical use of technologies to enable and provide access to empowering resources and quality outcomes. Constructs of empowerment cannot be defined without understanding power and how this influences the dynamics regulating the provision of human services. To empower, one must have power to relinquish and bestow on others (Lin, 2002). These issues, combined with the challenge of sharing power, participation and choice for the consumer will obviously not, or ever, be attainable. This is significant when growing bodies of research show



requirements for facilitating services are influenced by how valued workers feel in work environments (Clarke, 2001; Lovemore & Dann, 2002).

Reinforcing Lin's (2002) argument, Clarke (2001) stated, "policy fails to prescribe how the rhetoric for empowerment can be achieved" (p. 80). Arguably, rhetoric has become a cloak of 'verbal plumage' when it raises the issues that need to be addressed and conversely obscures the discrepancy between ideal policy outcomes and actions that do not promote empowerment, nor consequently respect for the individual. The lack of respect shown between the power interplays of government and the medical profession that proffer solutions but whose pathways reveal consistent disregard of the human value except for the selected few (defined by monetary status). Paradoxically, the two bodies that are meant to represent, protect and uphold respect for all persons become the antithesis of humanity.

### **Conclusion**

Within the human service sector, the healthcare industry and the regulating mechanism of competition policy foster the changes in social policy settings and administrative operations to enhance lack of respect throughout human service structures. Technology, in this setting, becomes the infrastructure of rigidity and control while demanding the human component to be more flexible. Investigation is needed on why policy constructs use of technologies as a method of control when it creates a tension between workers values and service provision, effectively breaching the mission and vision-laden statements of empowerment for the human services user. The paper illustrates the twin effect of Pandora's curiosity: failure and hope. The failure is in the moral vacuum in the deliberation of technical systems and cultures mediating administrative processes and relationships between government, providers and clients of human services. Better service provision, as argued, can only be realised if respect is regarded as the predominant value that becomes an inherent tenet in actions, such as in how we value and treat clients when they require a service.

The use of technology takes away from the 'face-to face' personal transactions that can mould respect. Nullifying this impact will require an interpretive and cultural change based on the understanding of the discriminatory practices throughout the human service

environments. With due respect, people can hope to improve their intrinsic value and wellbeing. When respect is generated through policies and practices to encapsulate the value of our social capital, the hope is in improved understanding of the social construction of technology through moral philosophy and values.

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