

***Philosophy of Technology Un-Disciplined***  
**William Davis, Virginia Tech**

I was not entirely what I should discuss when the call for contributions to a Collective Vision was proposed over the summer. Working on a proposal for my dissertation was consuming much of my time and insulating me from ideas and themes that I could not directly apply to my own project. The closer I came to defining my own research agenda, however, the more I began to realize that the Collective, as a process as well as a community, might provide the opportunity to put my ideas into practice.

In what follows, I provide a brief overview of the dissertation I am currently working on at Virginia Tech, but I conclude by making a request to the SERRC community. I hope that by describing my current investigative path, SERRC members will respond to my ideas and generate further questions and trajectories and/or simply provide their comments. As a student, my PhD committee is limited in size. As a member of the SERRC, my potential interlocutors are numerous. (Y además, hablo, leo y escribo en español si algunos de nosotros prefieren comunicar en ese idioma.)

My dissertation asks: what can, and should, a philosophy of technology account for in the creation, mediation and transfer of values to an epistemic community? I argue that in order to understand, and act in relation to, technology, we cannot rely on a sub-discipline of philosophy, pursued by a narrow set of practitioners, to provide adequate epistemic resources. As currently practiced, philosophy of technology must move beyond disciplinary boundaries and be, at its core, synthetic — speaking to multiple audiences and drawing from a variety of disciplines.

Those who transcend disciplinary boundaries and provide synthetic analysis and explication perform what I describe as *un-disciplined* philosophy of technology. I include writers/speakers/intellectuals like Stewart Brand, Kevin Kelly, Ray Kurzweil and Jaron Lanier under this label. The *un-disciplined* philosophy of technology I envision reclaims the tradition of early philosophers of technology like Herbert Marcuse, Jacques Ellul and Lewis Mumford. These writers examined the broad relationships between technologies and the human condition. They proposed actions and ways of being in the world<sup>1</sup> that would move individuals, singly and collectively, toward improved lives.<sup>2</sup>

At such an early stage in the development of my arguments, I have far more questions than answers. One such question involves how to leverage the contributions of a community like the SERRC and incorporate them into my work. I claim that the current practices of academic philosophers of technology must be altered — styles of writing/presenting, as well as interactions with audiences outside of single disciplines, perhaps even those not affiliated with any particular discipline — if their ideas are to transcend a sub-discipline of philosophy and effect change. With that in mind, what

---

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Husserl's *Logical investigations* volumes 1 and 2 (1900, 1901) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of perception* (1962) use similar phrases, but my own usage departs from theirs. In my work, this phrase describes an integrative approach, mindful of historical and social factors, that asks audiences to think deeply about human-technology relations as they are and could be in the future.

<sup>2</sup> "Improved lives" is a phrase frequently trotted out by both academics and marketers of particular technologies. Throughout this project I will attempt to elucidate just what an 'improved life' entails, although I will be critical of descriptions like making our lives: easier, more democratic or more financially robust. These characteristics of the 'Good Life' seem full of promise but empty of specific content. I wish to investigate what thinking deeply about technology in a *classical* way (similar to Ellul, Marcuse and Mumford), and in a contemporary setting, will get us and how it might inform the 'Good Life.'

does un-disciplined philosophy of technology, informed by social epistemology, look like in practice? What goals does it have, and how do these goals alter our values?

The un-disciplined philosophy of technology practitioner I envision investigates and takes normative positions on issues like expanding digital learning in classrooms and rapid online publication, but she will connect particular cases to broader themes and issues that transcend individual instances and technologies. At stake is what our Collective founder, James Collier, describes as the *transportation problem*: how does one move from micro studies to macro claims, and *vice versa*?<sup>3</sup>

When I first joined the SERRC, I had no idea how we would develop a community of writers/thinkers that could speak across continents and cultures, disciplines and specializations. I wondered what ‘writing collectively’ involved and if I would be up to the task. These questions remain for me, so my contribution to this Collective Vision page takes the shape of a proposal. I intend to inform our community of my work by providing regular updates to SERRC regarding the topic of *un-disciplined* philosophy of technology, including pieces of my dissertation, in the hopes of spurring conversation, critique and debate. I am interested in how the ideas I examine strike others who have backgrounds and areas of emphasis perhaps only tangentially related to my own. As SERRC participants, we write *to* each other and our audiences exceedingly well. I want to discover what writing *with* each other entails and how that will affect our communication, communities and values.

**Contact details: [widavis@vt.edu](mailto:widavis@vt.edu)**

## References

- Burian, Richard. “The Dilemma of Case Studies Resolved: The Virtues of Using Case Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science.” *Perspectives on Science* 9, no. 1 (2001): 383-404.
- Pitt, Joseph. “The Dilemma of Case studies: Toward a Heraclitian Philosophy of Science.” *Perspectives on Science* 9, no. 1 (2001): 373-382.

---

<sup>3</sup> A similar debate occurs in the philosophy of science, although certainly applicable in philosophy of technology as well, between Richard Burian (2001) and Joseph Pitt (2001) regarding the use of case studies. Pitt argues that generalizing from specific cases or examples, no matter how many, does not get around David Hume’s problem of induction, i.e., that past instances tell us anything about future occurrences. Burian counters that case studies, particularly interdisciplinary case studies, allow for independent means of confirmation of broader theories. Though I am not convinced Burian fully resolves the problem Pitt poses, his recommendation of seeking methods of analysis that transcend single disciplines seems relevant here.