

Technology, equity and social justice roundtable

Ansari, Ahmed; Hoffmann, Anna Lauren; Gurses, Seda; Sloane, Mona; Vasquez, Mark A.; Pearl, Zach

DOI

[10.1109/ISTAS52410.2021.9629208](https://doi.org/10.1109/ISTAS52410.2021.9629208)

Publication date

2021

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Proceedings - 2021 IEEE International Symposium on Society and Technology

Citation (APA)

Ansari, A., Hoffmann, A. L., Gurses, S., Sloane, M., Vasquez, M. A., & Pearl, Z. (2021). Technology, equity and social justice roundtable. In B. Caron, K. A. Schmitt, Z. Pearl, R. Dara, & H. A. Love (Eds.), *Proceedings - 2021 IEEE International Symposium on Society and Technology: Technological Stewardship and Responsible Innovation, ISTAS 2021* (International Symposium on Technology and Society, Proceedings; Vol. 2021-October). IEEE. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ISTAS52410.2021.9629208>

Important note

To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
Please check the document version above.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download, forward or distribute the text or part of it, without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license such as Creative Commons.

Takedown policy

Please contact us and provide details if you believe this document breaches copyrights.
We will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Technology, equity and social justice roundtable

ISTAS21 Special Session on Friday October 29th, 2021, 1–2:30pm (EDT)

Session Presenters

Ahmed Ansari

*Industry Assistant Professor, Founder of Decolonizing Design Collective and Architecture Design Research Lab
New York University*

Anna Lauren Hoffmann

*Assistant Professor at Information School
University of Washington*

Seda Gürses

*Associate Professor at the Department of Multi-Actor Systems
TU Delft*

Mona Sloane

*Senior Research Scientist, Adjunct Professor,
Tandon School of Engineering
New York University*

Moderator

Mark A. Vasquez

Senior Program Manager, IEEE TechEthics

Scribe

Zach Pearl

University of Waterloo

Program Description—This roundtable discussion, sponsored by a SSHRC Connection Grant, brings together four international faculty members from a range of academic and industry backgrounds in engineering and social sciences to discuss how they engage with equity and social justice issues in their work, focusing specifically on methodology and how students and young professionals can approach these issues. Ansari will describe his current efforts to decolonize design research in the university community, in particular through the *Decolonising Design* platform. Gürses will discuss her ongoing work in the field of Privacy Engineering, which focuses on designing, implementing, adapting, and evaluating theories, methods, techniques, and tools to systematically capture and address privacy issues in the development of sociotechnical systems. Hoffman will focus on a novel and timely intervention into Data Ethics: Feminist Data Ethics, which engages with the ethical implications of data’s production, circulation, application, and storage. Sloane will highlight the critical importance of responsible AI design and governance, interdisciplinary opportunities for researchers to develop and implement tools to engage with responsible innovation, innovation in AI procurement, and AI auditing.

Keywords— *technology, equity, social justice, risk, revolution, onto-epistemology*

The discussion began with an invitation from the moderator to outline what each panelist hoped to discuss under the banner of “technology, equity and social justice” in relation to their own practice. Mona Sloane highlighted her work on infrastructure like public lighting systems as an intersection of these themes with a focus on inequality in the design of automated services. She also addressed social justice as necessarily built upon social practice, which is centred on presence and “the doing” in the moment. Anna Lauren Hoffmann chose to dissect the semantics of the roundtable themes, calling into question the use of the term “justice” without first defining the cultural context in which it was being interpreted. They offered the caveat that the emphasis should not be on “achieving” justice as the solution or to “optimize” it but rather to explore the relationality of justice. Seda Gürses voiced her concern that the conversation around equity and justice is not occurring before the development phase but in reactionary ways that cement power symmetries in infrastructure. And Ahmed Ansari echoed Hoffmann’s onto-epistemological line of questioning in his response, identifying “privacy” and “security” as Anglo-Saxon, Western constructs. He suggested that we need a different, i.e., non-homogenous idea of “mind” within the concept of computation, invoking Heidegger’s call to “keep the question of technology open.”

Later, the conversation homed in on the problematic rhetoric of “revolution” and its unqualified use in colouring any technological discourse as important or innovative. In particular, Gürses argued “revolution” has been instrumentalized to downplay the persistent problems of indentured servitude, wage disparity, elitism, etc. in technology discourse, and Vasquez, the moderator, added that he feels the same about the use of “decolonizing” as a watchword without responsible definition. To this, Hoffmann opined that often when tech developers are consulting with ethics specialists, they are asking for a “sticker of approval” when there is no such prospect, only more or less ethical development. Provocatively, they argued the aporia between technological progress and practical conversations of impact is a testament to the success of cybernetics. Ansari built on this by

directing the focus to engineering education, calling for a move toward ad hoc and critical thinking rather than supplying normative frameworks which then get applied in a template-like fashion.

In the final portion of the roundtable, Vasquez asked “Are there certain things that you’re not willing to touch in terms of doing this research?” After some vacillation, Hoffmann replied that they (and we) are “quite often unwilling to risk ourselves as academics,” noting the unconscious divorce of self from academic self and how the curation of one’s persona in academe can preclude activism or intervention on a personal level. Gürses, without disagreeing, moved the conversation to the notion of “no clean money” when it comes to funding; facing the possibility (as a researcher) that “I am legitimating a practice of knowledge production that is actually [ethically] ‘unacceptable’.” Sloane reflected on this claim, asking how we might be able to routinely reflect on the funding mechanisms and work from within the university to create accountability and responsibility such as creating degree programs in ethical technology policy.