ParTecK19 | May 29 and 30th, 2019

Culture, Power and *Thriveability*
in our tech-infused future

**Human Data
Commons Foundation**

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ParTecK19

With the pace and reach of technology amplifying issues of equity, power and wealth differentials, cultural and identity disorientation, navigating who we are and where this will all end up has never been more exciting, or more fraught for human-kind.

It makes the average person wonder: are humans ready, willing and able to create a thriveable digital future in today's potent yet nerve-wracking reality of culture wars, shot through with deep inequity, and infused with a strong whiff of our often troubled relationship with great power and wealth? At ParTecK 19, you are invited to engage this predicament with your mind, heart and whole being, invited to be part of exploring and pioneering the kinds of resilient mindsets and deep culture that a not just viable, but genuinely thriveable way forward demands of humanity now, perhaps more than at any other point in our history.

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Framework and orientations for ParTecK19

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CULTURE: or as AC DC sang it "who made who?"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiZHNw1MtzI

Cultures consist of the usually unconscious expectations and values guiding moment-by-moment interactions between people, giving people in groups a specific flavour and identity. At ParTecK19 as with previous ParTecK events, we gather capacity through tools and practices to create a culture of courage to relax into an open-minded, open-hearted intelligence capable of glimpsing as yet unknown ways forward, together.

As the world moves further towards globalization, we're exposed to more and more different cultures. It becomes obvious that people's attitudes, beliefs, style, etc are largely culturally conditioned. . . and eventually it dawns that yours are too! This can prompt an identity crisis - who am I beyond what my cultural conditioning made me? And if culture - language, social norms etc - makes us, who makes culture? If we can create or influence culture even as we are part of it, what do we make it, and who decides?

Differences in cultural values can lead to culture wars of belief against belief, such as the left-wing vs right-ring, for example. Meantime, realizing that culture can be influenced, created even, leads to colonial style wars over creating and influencing norms. So far tech, due in part to its pervasiveness and scalability, is a dominant medium for making and spreading global culture. You can see why it's so important to get matters of societal good 'right' in the tech space.

We invite you to inquire with us into the tensions between the numerous cultures vying for prominence - or dominance even - in the open-field that globalization has created. Inquiry from a place of humble awareness that whatever problems we face as a species, be they global warming or culture wars, we have to include ourselves as part of the humanity that created them. Or, as global peace advisor Adam Kahane puts it, "if you can't see how you're part of the problem, then it follows logically there's no way you can be part of the solution, except from the outside, through forcing." *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dlaGC6BezpQ*

Photo by John Noonan on Unsplash

CULTURE: or as AC DC sang it "who made who?"

Force as we know begets counter-force, so forced solutions are highly vulnerable to ultimately fail, but worse, they are unsustainably costly to maintain. We can do better!

Codes of Ethics: necessary, but not sufficient.
As tech continues to infuse almost every human endeavour, the societal impact of advances in AI are increasingly on the public radar. In response to the potential dangers that go along with developing something as powerful and pervasive as AI, those closest to its development are starting to respond. We see great minds at Harvard, MIT, Stanford, and Sir Tim Berners Lee, inventor of the web, producing beautiful, thoughtful codes of ethics. Google's response was to form an ethics board, which not surprisingly fell apart within a week, demonstrating in part the limits of technical minded solutions to address intersectional problems.

Ethical codes are abstract and therefore carry less gravitational pull than deeply ingrained, often unconscious cultural norms and values that drive actual group behaviour. We don't mean intended or idealized culture, but the deep culture that produces parameters of what's actually desirable and what's tolerable for a given group. If as they say, culture eats strategy for breakfast, we add that it eats codes of ethics for dessert! The American Constitution is an example of a great code to guide society, one that has been slow to be fully realized. It promises equality, fairness, and freedom for all, yet arguably it has not made this a lived reality for all, as demonstrated in the continued presence of overt and systemic racism, along with numerous other inequalities it attempted to right. It has pointed society in the right direction, but as with most codes, falls short on methods to amend the cultural soil in which these aspirations can be fully redeemed. Likewise with AI codes of ethics - they are beautiful aspirations, but the cultures they would need to take root in largely cancel out the possibility of being realized.

Photo by Peter Finger on Unsplash

Culture: a hardware, not a software problem

On the failure of Triple Bottom Line due to from the man who coined the term, John Elkington.

> **"Fundamentally, we have a hard-wired cultural problem [emphasis mine] in business, finance and markets. Whereas CEOs, CFOs, and other corporate leaders move heaven and earth to ensure that they hit their profit targets, the same is very rarely true of their people and planet targets. Clearly, the Triple Bottom Line has failed to bury the single bottom line paradigm."**
>
> *https://hbr.org/2018/06/25-years-ago-i-coined-the-phrase-triple-bottom-line-heres-why-im-giving-up-on-it*

POWER: where is the line between influence, control and domination?

Current trends in AI and tech shine a spotlight on how humans do power, especially the power to influence and control others, and dominate through wealth. Using power to 'other' certain groups and then dominate them is as old as the human existence. Arguably it also severely limits tapping the fullness of human intelligence, through numerous inequities.

Our times perhaps more than ever demand that humanity transcend the domination game we're prone to playing the past several millenia. The intelligence we need to survive and thrive going forward requires more collaboration than ever among different yet equal types of people.

Trouble is, many of us are so deeply enculturated to the game, we don't even see at such: it's just how things are. Economy being more important than life has been a relatively unquestioned dominant cultural belief in the west at least as long as the industrial revolution. It's the water the industrialized world swims in: compete, dominate and get a leg up or else be used by someone else who's doing so. Or worse, be left out of the game entirely and become a refugee and un-homed, unbelonging person. It's stressful all around.

Leadership without power analysis is so yesterday:
Leadership culture has come a long way, from producing excellence in command and control management, to more collective, even leaderless leadership, at least in some portions of society. Social change, innovation and social justice movements continue to evolve our ideas and practice of leadership, towards a more thrivable and equitable future for our shining and rag-tag species.

Whatever one's critique of the social justice movement may be, it offers at least a place for discourse and correction the glaring lack of power analysis and self-audit in relation to power rampant in the vast majority of modern leadership training. As Google's failed attempt to instill a techno-centric ethics board shows, the call for intersectional leadership has never been more clear and more urgent.

AI: the worlds' biggest bomb?
AI has been likened to nuclear power due to how significant and, well, powerful it is becoming. Nuclear power reshapes tangibles like energy (electricity) generation and the threat of physical annihilation through nuclear weapons. AI's power is a little different: it shapes society by exaggerating existing inequities - socio-economic, biology or belief-based, etc. It also has the potential to alleviate them, if we can get a few things more right. AI and tech will almost certainly shape society in ways we haven't taken the time to consider, but we need to practice thinking more about risk and speed.

One of tech's cultural norms has been valuing speed over thoroughness, risk over caution, as captured in Facebook's slogan to "move fast and break things". You can see how this is also the modus operandi of toddlers, and arguably we can aim for a more mature version of how we do innovation. The high value put on bringing novel inventions to market, over more thoughtful development, is a socio-economic norm that has not changed much since the industrial revolution started. Maybe it's time?

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POWER: where is the line between influence, control and domination?

INCLUSION

When we think of power and equity a common theme that often surfaces is "inclusion" - who to include and how. This becomes important when we want to make tech that truly is of service to humanity and that doesn't harm through exclusion. Inclusion relates to both the tech we create (who is it for) and the makers of tech (who's at the workbench and who isn't). Along the spectrum of inclusion, we may over do some perspectives and under do others.

According to Neuroleadership, inclusion has a lot to do with our relationship to power. Interestingly, power has a physiological effect on the brain. When we have a sense of greater power over a group, three things happen in our brains:

1) We are more goal-focused and less people-focused;
2) We become more optimistic and less sensitity to risk;
3) We focus on the big vision and pay less attention to the details.

These tendencies may or may not be harmful, however in the context of inclusion, it becomes obvious that a dose of power on the brain makes inclusion more difficult to attain. So how do we make sure to include others, with skill and more awareness of the barrier power creates to doing so?

One way is to use the following acronym, SCARF, (provided by Neuroleadership Institute) to begin to train ourselves in paying attention to the signs of inclusion / non-inclusion.

- Status - am I respecting others, do I feel respected?
- Certainty - am i keeping others in the information loop; do I feel informed?
- Autonomy - am I allowing others to exercise choice and control; am I being given choice and control?
- Relatedness - how do I relate to others? Do I feel I belong?
- Fairness - do I give a diversity of people the same opportunities? do I feel I get the same opportunities that others do?

Skillful inclusion is not just a nice-to-have, it is a necessity if we are to create a tech future that is livable and sustainable for all.

Drunk on Power - it's a thing!

Really, it's time to come clean that power feels a certain way in the body-mind, and cop to how we humans are wired with a bit of a sweet tooth for power! And submission - flip sides of the same coin. And to think, we made a whole leadership industry that doesn't train people how to deal with power's effects on the body-mind. It's weird!

Happily this is beginning to change ever so slightly. The Neuroleadership Institute has been doing research on the effects of power on the brain and cognition in relation to leadership, hallelujah. Not surprisingly, brain scan research shows that positional power in a group or organization changes cognition, leading to certain biases, reduced capacity to take others perspective, and lack of good risk assessment. (see more on side panel)

The call to bring some sobriety into the mix is audible to us at ParTecK19, and we are honoured to explore with you how to bring power into balance to hit the sweet spot of thriveability as we build our tech-infused future.

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THRIVEABILITY: of narrative and needs

MEETING OUR NEEDS SUSTAINABLY

What is an authentic need and how do we best go about satisfying it? In the context of tech, we might have many needs we feel are being met - freedom to create, greater access to information, efficiency and saving time, sense of belonging and connection, ability to participate with our voice.

And conversely, we may feel other needs are being dampened or outright violated by tech - such as the need for privacy and free-time, genuine inclusion and belonging, and the ability to connect authentically with others, being seen (not lost in rubble), and being respected for our time and attention.

Narrative:
The past several thousand years have been in part the story, especially in the 'western world' of competing for the dominant narrative: be it religion, colonialism, patriarchy, supremacy of basically every kind has told a story of what is worthwhile, of who counts - most, and least - and who gets to decide for others - from kings to voting ballots - and on it goes. These narratives shape the boundaries of what is considered acceptable forms for economy, government, education, health-care systems and so on to take. Some of the negative results produced by recent forms of these systems are climate crisis, forced migration and homelessness, and no coherent narrative guiding how to go forward. For example from a scientific perspective we need to stop various patterns of consumption especially around fossil fuels and plastic. Yet our economic systems are not nimble enough adapt to this planetary need in the speed at which it needs to happen: ie, yesterday!

The narrative for example that science is the truest explanation of reality is a significant normative way of thinking in the west. It is a powerful way of knowing, for sure. Whether it is, or can ever be a complete way of knowing, or can reveal what is most useful to humanity, is an inquiry that seems likely to unfold in tandem with the climate crisis. It may be that the explanation for why we are not able to make the decisions and changes needed, at the speed needed to impact climate change has as much to do with the human heart and socio-cultural norms and values as it does with our scientific habits of mind.

Photo by Alexandra Ișvănescu on Unsplash

THRIVEABILITY: of narrative and needs

The way we satisfy one need can preclude another need from being met, or it can synergistically enhance the meeting of multiple needs at once. As you might have guessed, the latter is usually more sustainable ecologically as well.

Manfred Max-Neef is the Chilean scholar who developed a system of classifying need satisfiers in relation to sustainable development. Applying this to the development of tech and AI could produce a more thrivable way forward. What might an example of tech be that satisfies multiple needs?

Feedback from the system:
When we look at the current state of things, our narratives and the deep culture it is entwined with is uncomfortably reflected back to us: in islands of plastic in the pacific, homeless people on the streets, and governments building walls to keep out the masses who are fleeing from, in a sense, other harmful narratives and the norms that support them.

The western democratic capitalist narrative that governs consumer norms is that roughly anyone has the freedom to produce almost any product or service they can dream up (robot sex-doll brothels, anyone?), and consumers have a right to buy it. And if a consumer can't afford it, the financial system is premised on debt, so individuals needn't hinder the flow of production and consumption should their current wealth level be insufficient to participate. One question is obviously why? Why do we make and consume stuff, and make it ever more possible to do so, especially for most, but not all people?

Needs:
Capitalism is based on the idea of meeting - and often creating - needs. But do we assess what qualifies as a need worthy of fulfilling? This question is starting to seep into our consumer narrative: do we really need fill-in-the-blank-of-typical-consumer-stuff: plastic chew toys for pets, plastic bags at the grocery store, fast fashion, etc. There is starting to be a shift in global consciousness towards assessing products for the climate cost of making them, relative to how sustainably they fulfill a need. And, there is so much further to go in understanding what are core needs, as well as sustainable ways to satisfy them, and apply this to the tech space. Game on!

As much as any technical solution, our times demand and are ripe for the emergence of a new narrative to carry us into a thriveable tech-human future. What will we do? At ParTecK, we are shaping this new narrative - come join us.

Photo by Alvaro Reyes on Unsplash

RESOURCES

Presenter Bios

Anastasia Gaisenok
https://checkyourhead.org/people/anastasia/

Jen Gresham
https://workforhumanity.com/about/
https://everydaybright.com/who-is-jen

Jesse McKee
http://221a.ca/contributors/jesse-mckee

Zak Stein
http://www.zakstein.org/cv/

Organizer Bios

Rochelle Fairfield – As the Executive Director at Human Data Commons Foundation, Rochelle integrates academia, industry governance and ethical praxis in Big data and AI, designing and facilitating relevant projects and events. She has an MA in Integral Theory, is a Zen monk and co-author of the HDC's annual Quantified Self Report Card.

Carissa Kazyss – Carissa is a consultant, coach and community developer with a communications background in designing and facilitating workshops for diverse groups across multiple sectors. Carissa has an MA in Integral Psychology as well as a Master's in Natural Resources Management.

Scott Nelson – Scott is the founder of the Human Data Commons Foundation. He is an open technologist, aspiring futurologist, avid cyclist, serial entrepreneur and social innovator. He's supported work in decentralized digital currencies and blockchain technology since 2010.

Background Reading

Privilege and solution thinking
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https://www.economist.com/open-future/2019/01/21/we-need-to-own-our-data-as-a-human-right-and-be-compensated-for-it

Legislation that is beginning to curb the sale of health data...
https://medium.com/@bertcmiller/the-unauthorized-sale-of-your-health-data-is-coming-to-an-end-cd91edd519b3

What it's like to go from being not racist but not really able to 'get' your own privilege, to being able to see, and begin to do right by PoC
https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/kyle-korver-utah-jazz-nba?fbclid=IwAR2VOsECA1mhREUhw2LMSL8K7jEJ-rR8YVE2Gt9WhsSuBpiyyT22lG39Awg

On intersectionality, design justice and AI
https://jods.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/costanza-chock

The Max-Neef classification system of need satisfiers in relation to sustainable development and different kinds of poverties
http://www.wtf.tw/ref/max-neef.pdf

In Max Neef's own words
http://3awww.alastairmcintosh.com/general/resources/2007-Manfred-Max-Neef-Fundamental-Human-Needs.pdf

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eric@phitted.com / phitted.com