

Editors

Amanda Breytenbach

Kate A Chmela-Jones

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Ethics and accountability in Design: Do they matter? - DEFSA Conference Proceedings

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DEFSA contact details

Kate Chmela-Jones

DEFSA President (2015-2017)

kate@vut.ac.za

Amanda Breytenbach

DEFSA Senate Member

abreytenbach@uj.ac.za

CONFERENCE OVERVIEW AND PUBLICATION OF THE PROCEEDINGS

The seventh International DEFSA conference entitled, Ethics and accountability in Design: Do they matter?, were hosted by Midrand Graduate Institute & Vaal University of Technology. The conference presentation took place from 2-3 September 2015 at the Midrand Graduate Institute campus. The aim of the DEFSA 2015 conference was to honour and grow an emerging principle-driven, civic minded and human-centred design culture that takes issues of the sustainability, credibility, corporate social responsibility, professional accountability and personal integrity to heart. The typical worldview rhetoric of what should be done is redirected towards individuated responses and actions that foster meaningful change.

The conference catered for three subthemes.

- The individual: Ethics and accountability in Design
- The institution: Ethics and accountability in Design
- The industry: Ethics and accountability in Design

A conference review process took place after the submission of both abstracts and full papers. A call for abstracts was presented on the DEFSA website and communicated through the DEFSA network resulting in the submission of 37 abstracts. Each abstract was reviewed through employing a double-blind peer review process and a final evaluation by the conference review committee. The double-blind review process ensured that both authors and reviewers remained anonymous during the peer review process. A total of 37 abstracts were selected for submission of full papers, from which 31 papers were submitted and presented at the conference, resulting in 31 papers published in this conference proceeding. The 31 papers represent 19 institutions across South Africa. Combined with the delegates attending the conference, the 2015 DEFSA conference succeeded in bringing together 58 delegates.

Full papers were submitted for peer review after successful acceptance of a conference abstract. Papers adhered to the conference format and addressed the conference themes, sub-themes and conference focus areas. Expert specialists within the field of Art, Design and Architecture were selected to perform double-blind reviews with the review reports being evaluated by the conference review committee. A list of the peer reviewers is included in the Conference Proceedings. This peer review process took place prior to both the verbal presentation at the conference. Authors included comments presented by peer reviewers and feedback presented at the conference in papers resubmitted for publication in the Conference Proceedings. Authors received feedback in the form of peer review reports.

FOREWORD BY PROF ALAN MUNRO

This conference, and the papers contained in these conference proceedings, comes at just the right time, as lifestyles, the world, and values of human flourishing are under more and more intense pressure. It is an altruism that ‘we share the world,’ but the nature of ‘sharing’ is fraught with tensions of beneficiation through sharing, the right to grow, develop and foster self-enhancement, and the necessity to temper such self-enhancement for/with the demands for mutual (whose ‘mutuality?’) human flourishing.

Critically the conference was caught in a wonderfully provocative binary. It was Hume who suggested that there is a fundamental difference between what a thing ‘is and does’ and what a thing ‘ought to be and do.’ This binary neatly summarises the dilemmas, tensions and potential trajectories of Design as it wrestles with what the nature of Design is and does, and what it ought to be and do, within the pressure of modern living. (It is also pertinent to note that the previous DEFSa international conference engaged extensively with the former, and, therefore, this conference carries on the debate and moves it into the realms of the ethical).

The papers in the conference (and these proceedings) neatly engage with this debate in three realms that are the bedrock of the organisation: how to foster and engage with the abilities and creativity of the individual (and how this plays out in tensions between that individual and the community for whom designer designs), the role of institutions in inculcating principles of ethical responsibility and accountability to communities and the planet (much was written and spoken of the necessity of sustainability in and through design), and, reciprocally, the engagement with industry to develop ethically driven briefs and commissions (tellingly, one of the most provocative papers deals with whether designers should engage in commissions that can be viewed as unethical and to the detriment of human flourishing – see de Lange on ‘Non-Malificence’).

One of the central thrusts contained in models put forward to articulate such ethical accountability dealt with Human Centred Design (HCD), or related or interwoven approaches, and many of the papers speak to this ‘design as intervention strategy’. HCD speaks to all three themes of the conference and it is particularly pertinent that it does in this context because it situates (and opens out) the tensions that arise (and the negotiations necessary) between the individual designer’s sense of creativity and ability, on the one hand, and the particular views and demands of the community on the other, between the necessity to meet training outcomes on the one hand (a potentially normative experience), but the fostering of individuality on the other, and between the necessity of industry to grow and (economically) flourish, on the one hand, but potentially ‘suffer’ because of ethical (as opposed to legal) considerations on the other. These are, as some of the papers point out, ‘wicked problems.’ Both Yoko Akama and Julian McDougall, as key-note speakers, address these problems in their own particular and provocative ways.

Inevitably, with such a wonderful spread of design disciplines at play, and with the three themes that were to be engaged with, some, perhaps important, material was not engaged with to their full potential. Particularly this might be seen in what “ethics” actually means (or could mean) and how it relates to morals and the law, for example, and what the key considerations around accountability might imply. The notion of ‘human flourishing’ drives many of the papers, but a critical engagement with the concept is at times not as decisive as it could be. These are philosophical debates, but critical, in time, because they establish the bedrock of all that follows. Should designers also be philosophers?

I heartily recommend the papers in this collection of Conference Proceedings. (And I look forward to the next collection!)

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Two internationally acclaimed design education visionaries delivered keynote talks at the conference. A short biography of each speaker is presented below with the focus area of their presentations.

Dr Yoko Akama

A Senior Lecturer and design researcher in the School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Australia. Dr Akama is also Research Leader of RMIT Design Research Institute and Node Leader, Digital Ethnography Research Centre.

Her design research practice is entangled in social ‘wicked problems’, for example, to strengthen adaptive capacity for disaster resilience, and to contribute towards the efforts of Indigenous Nations enact their self-determination and governance. She is passionate about what people can do together to tackle complex problems and explores the role of designing in scaffolding engagement, co-creation and transformation. Her specialities include human-centred design, co-design, communication design, service design, participatory design, transformation design, and practice-based research.

Yoko is also a leader and founder of two prominent networks – Service Design Melbourne and Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability Lab Melbourne. She is a recipient of British Council Design Research Award (2008); a Finalist in the Victorian Premier’s Design Award (2012); and two Good Design Australia Awards (2014).

Before she entered academia in 2002, she worked as a Graphic Designer at Save the Children UK, and as a Publications Officer at Survival International for Tribal Peoples in the UK.

Dr Julian McDougall

Dr Julian McDougall is a British educationist and media theorist. He studied for his PhD at Birmingham University whilst teaching at Halesowen College.

In 2000 he took up a Senior Lecturer post in Education at Newman University, before becoming Head of Creative Arts and then Reader in Education at the University of Wolverhampton. Currently, he is Head of the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice and Full Professor in Media and Education at Bournemouth University, United Kingdom (UK), where he leads a taught doctoral programme in Creative and Media Education. He is also Principal Examiner for A Level Media Studies (further education, pre-University) and an executive member of the Media Education Association.

He is editor of the Media Education Research Journal and Journal of Media Practice and author of a range of academic books, student textbooks and journal articles in the fields of media education, media arts and media literacy. Recently, he has undertaken research projects for Samsung, the United Kingdom Literacy Association, Sixteen Films, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) UK, and the European Union.

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- Department of Creative Arts & Communication: MGI

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CONFERENCE REVIEW COMMITTEE AND PEER REVIEWERS

ABSTRACT AND PAPER CONFERENCE REVIEW COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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Kate Chmela-Jones

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Affiliation

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