Accelerating Economic Inequality and the Moral Responsibilities of Corporate-Employed Technologists

Alan E. Singer, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC, USA

ABSTRACT

Corporate-employed technologists and have a special moral responsibility to themselves and to others to help oppose the dynamics of accelerating inequality in the US and globally. They have distinctive capabilities in this respect and they are in a special position to do so. There exists a moral-responsibility-to-self in this context, involving meta-coherence and integrity. Responsibility-to-others can be enacted by attempting to inject scientific and ethical habits-of-thought into the global distributed governance process, but also by standing in opposition to corporate-level strategies and practices that make inequality worse.

Keywords: Corporate-Employed Technologists, Economic Inequality, Ethics, Integrity, Meta-Coherence, Moral Responsibilities

1. INTRODUCTION

Many discussions of the ethical management and governance of emerging technologies have focused upon technological risks (e.g. intrinsic controls, virus detection programs, suicide genes and pollution controls) and the practice of responsible innovation (e.g. Hunt & Mehta, 2007; Schmidt & Cohen, 2013, and the U.S. Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues, 2010). In such discussions there appears to have been a reluctance to acknowledge the ethical ‘elephant in the room’ that represents the problem of accelerating inequality in the US and globally. For example, in a 2013 conference on the “Governance of emerging technology: law, policy and ethics” just one paper out of sixty-four mentioned the issue (Singer 2013a). It thus appears that many technologists and executives are assuming that the technologies can continue to be governed ethically within a system of hyper-competitive shareholder capitalism (i.e. business-as-usual). This assumption, however, conflicts directly with the recommendations

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of the US presidential commission on the ethics of biotechnology (and by implication other technologies), because these amounted to an outright endorsement of the global stakeholder model.

Given the existence of this fundamental moral-political conflict, one of the greatest risks that society now faces is that ethics committees, guidelines and reports that refer to technologies will be routinely deployed for three fundamentally unethical reasons, which are to:

1. Provide legal protection, to top management or the corporation.
2. Self-aggrandize, implying that “at the top we are holier-than-thou,” or
3. Conduct compliance, even where the laws and practices complied with contribute to the acceleration of inequality.

Corporate employed technologists are in a special position to try to do something about this risk and to more generally stand in opposition to the dynamics of accelerating inequality. Technologists have special capabilities in this respect and special reasons to do act in this way, relating to their personal integrity and the philosophical concept of meta-coherence. Furthermore, their responsibility is heightened to the extent that the technologies have already contributed to increased levels of inequality.

The paper duly begins by pointing to the convergence of the “emerging” technologies and the general applicability of the various principles of ethical governance recommended by the US commission. Then (in section 3) the many dynamics of accelerating inequality in the US and globally are considered. The final section considers some of the cognitive and behavioral strategies that corporate-employed technologists can adopt if they want to exercise their moral and ethical responsibilities.

2. CONVERGENCE

Much of the literature on ethics and technology (e.g. focusses on one particular stream, such as artificial general intelligence (AGI), nanotechnology (NT) or synthetic biology (SB). In almost all such contributions, the posited principles of ethical governance are essentially the same (Figure 1). As a result, authoritative recommendations that appear to refer to one specific

Figure 1. Stable governance principles for the convergent technologies
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