

Wednesday, 2 April March, 2014, 11 a.m.

Fellow Seminar

Gina Neff

Listening to Machines:
Agency in an age of smart devices

Companies and people are increasingly looking for social intelligence in “big data”-- from the analysis of historically large and interlinked new streams of data, traces of massive online social networks, and computational models of complex problems. But what happens when we cast information and computer technologies into the social role of decision makers? What happens when people try to listen to (and learn from) the machines around them? And what do these questions imply about human communication, power, and agency in the many complexly linked social and technical systems in our contemporary world? In this talk I will present qualitative data from five years of field research on team decision making with, through, and around computational models in building architecture, and three years in the field of data-enhanced personal health and wellness.

The results are surprising and require new theoretical frames for the role of communication technologies in power and agency. In the fields we studied, teams deferred to the intelligence of algorithms that were little understood, governed, or questioned; people talked about using data to substitute for conversations; and they searched Facebook for surprise discoveries to thorny scientific problems. In short, these practices with data in our everyday lives challenge a vision of engaged, empowered and in-control users. They present us instead with the need for new languages to talk about the increasingly powerful social role our smart devices play in shaping our lives.

Dr. Gina Neff is an associate professor of communication at the University of Washington, senior fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study and an affiliate with the Center for Media and Communication Studies at CEU. Her book *Venture Labor: Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries* (MIT Press 2012) won the 2013 American Sociological Association Communication and Information Technologies Best Book Award. She also co-edited *Surviving the New Economy* (Paradigm 2007). She co-leads the Project on Communication Technology and Organizational Practices, a research group studying the roles of data communication and sensing technology for collaboration and decision making. Her research has received funding from the National Science Foundation, Intel, and Microsoft Research.