

Abstract for the general public

The recent experience of social isolation has spurred debates about the future role of technology for human relations in circumstances when the non-contact status is not an alternative but a default. This project concentrates on technological endeavours around affective programming to provide a comprehensive study of the new forms of loving which came with the new media affordances and the new physical reality that follows the advent of digital technocracy. Following an assumption that the devices we use are smarter and more intelligent as well as ‘emotionally capable’ in how they convey, reflect, and respond to human needs, this project contends that not only are we increasingly relying on technology with our emotional interactions, but technological objects, as they become more sensitive, actively contribute to our emotional dynamic. As such, they influence our perception of emotional and physical engagements and relationships, as well as revise traditional semiotics of love. Drawing on technological solutions for transmitting emotions as well as on technological interventions in human amorous/intimate interactions, this project will examine and describe modifications in love practices and their related new affective standards with regard to how and to what extent those standards redefine emotional affordances of both people and things. It will concentrate on technologically induced protocols of emotional encounters and exchanges (e.g. the role of haptics and mediated tactility) and formats of contact that follow the proliferation and advancement of digital objects. It will take an eager interest in formulas that redefine traditional notions of togetherness and their constituents, investigating if love is exclusively for people. Does affection need a physical body? How do we feel with ‘machines’? And, can machines have feelings?

The project subscribes to the tradition of new media and cultural studies as well as to research in technoculture preoccupied with the changing human condition along the rapid technological development (specifically, digitalization) and new modes of communication. It directly contributes to the post-humanist debate on human nature as inherently hybrid, constructed and technologized. The proposed project will apply this claim to love relationships, contending that the human romantic/intimate/affective interactions with and by means of “smart” and “sensitive” technologies are interactions of a technologized human and a humanized ‘machine’. With this it will interrogate the human templates of loving and its understanding of intimacy, contact and togetherness.

Discussions about the significance of modern technologies for human relationships are at the forefront of social and scientific debate. It is crucial to take a stance on the new speculations around technological possibilities for rendering or substituting physical presence and emotions, and spark an urgent need to rethink our engagements with technological objects. This is clear in a reality where mediation becomes the primary mode of interaction, and where human company gets obscured by distancing and unavailability. This is the same reality where AI is tested for the ability to love, and where hug shirts – garments for transmitting touch – are being prepared for mass production, and where haptoclones – touchable holograms that enable human interactions at long distances without any equipment – are being tested for common use.

The project’s research results will be disseminated in two scholarly articles in internationally acclaimed peer reviewed journals and in a monograph *Love in Contemporary Technoculture*, whose proposal is already under contract with Cambridge University Press.