Responsible technology for vulnerable children?

*Marit Haldar
Oslo and Akershus University College, Norway

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AV1 is a robot used in the classroom, acting as a substitute for chronically ill children who are not able to be present in person. The robot is intended to prevent isolation and help making contact between chronically ill children and their fellow students. Today, approximately 200 children in six different countries use the AV1. Key questions for studying the robot AV1 relates to how AV1 creates a symbolic space for the child in the classroom. What kind of representations are possible using the AV1? What kind of materialization of presence in absence are thinkable?

In this paper, I will review relevant research of ethical aspects (in large), perspectives and methods relevant for the study of a concrete, recently launched technology; the robot «AV1». Technology has challenged traditional views on the primacy of humans over the machine, as well as the limits of rationality, knowledge, autonomy, transition and identity – with implications for ontology, epistemology, and ethics. We are in great need of new knowledge about the relationship between humans and technology and insight into concrete, yet complex and multifaceted relationships.

The development of useful technology products and digital services requires cooperative efforts in interdisciplinary groups of users, researchers and producers of technology. We have established an interdisciplinary research group and we have received financial support to develop a research application. The present paper is an effort to build a platform of past and ongoing research, providing perspectives, methods and ethical concerns to professionally strengthen our research efforts.

Studying a new and popular concrete technological instrument provides unique opportunities for a truly interdisciplinary, user-focused collaboration of research. When something is studied as it is in use in concrete settings, the perspectives in use in the study can be quite diverse without the focus being lost. However, it is important for such a diverse group to prepare well and be familiar with already well-founded knowledge to ensure fruitful questions. We are particularly keen to discuss the ethical concerns tied to the empirical study of humans and technology, in particular when this is technology for vulnerable children.

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