ISTAS13: Wearable computing and augmented reality conference comes to UofT at the end of June

TORONTO, ONTARIO – Internet-connected digital eyeglasses and similar smart technologies will soon be on the market, but their benefits and dangers are little understood.

A groundbreaking conference at the University of Toronto, 27th to 29th June 2013 will inform that discussion. Renowned experts in wearable technology, artificial intelligence, augmented reality and privacy will discuss both the potential and the pitfalls of these technologies. Speakers will include futurist, inventor and Director of Engineering, Google Inc. Ray Kurzweil, the 'father of artificial intelligence' Marvin Minsky, 'father of wearable computing' Professor Steve Mann (General Chair of ISTAS13), legendary computer scientist Gordon Bell, privacy expert Helen Nissenbaum and American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) president Susan N. Herman.

The conference is hosted by the Society on the Social Implications of Technology (SSIT) of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE). The annual conference, the International Symposium on technology and Society will explore how the environment around us is increasingly becoming smarter. According to Ray Kurzweil, we are approaching a "singularity" where these smart technologies are becoming increasingly pervasive, able to replicate themselves without human re-design or intervention. It is with this rise in technologies that understanding fields such as artificial intelligence, pioneered by Marvin Minsky, and grid computing, pioneered by Gordon Bell, are becoming more relevant than ever.

According to Steve Mann, many appliances and everyday products, such as light fixtures, sensor-operated showers, are starting to use more sophisticated camera-based, computer-vision technologies. In a world of smart things, Mann raises the question, what happens when you have 'smart people,' – when you put sensors on people?

What is to be done of the growing numbers of businesses like department stores and restaurants that prohibit cameras, yet display QR codes that require cameras to read and understand? How will smart environments interact, or sometimes clash, with smart people? As Program Chair, Associate Professor Katina Michael raises, it is one thing for people to carry sensors and another for them to be considered a moving node in an intelligent network. In other words, technology becomes society.

In the case of Bell and Mann, they explored these questions by wearing sensors such as cameras to continuously record the environment around them throughout their lives. Wearable technology and augmented reality are not something from science fiction nor the distant future and demonstrate the power of "sousveillance" to influence society, when recording equipment is readily wearable and available to everyone. This timely conference brings together an international and transdisciplinary conversation amidst growing awareness of the onset of wearable technologies as the next big disruption in the trajectory of humanity.

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