

MC³ Newsletter

February 2020

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The February meeting of the McHenry County Computer Club will be **February 8, 2020 at Salvation Army Building 290 W. Crystal Lake Ave., in Crystal Lake, IL.**

NOTE: *Enter the building on the parking lot level under the awning.*

Meeting Agenda

- Introductions & Reports
- Demo: gMail - John Luff

Upcoming Demos - Subject to Change

To be determined.

Please let a board member know if you have any ideas for upcoming demos.

Two new movies could disturb you into deleting all your apps - Joan E. Solsman, c|net

Our favorite technologies have strapped you, me and the rest of society onto a collision course. The Social Dilemma and Coded Bias take a hard look at it.

Maybe you try to be an eyes-wide-open tech user. You clamp down on apps' location tracking. You keep Facebook and Alexa on a short leash. Yeah, me too. And still my phone felt radioactive in my hands both times I walked out of the theater after watching The Social Dilemma and Coded Bias.



The Social Dilemma

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Our membership is \$26.00 a year.

NOTE: This fee offsets the running of the club; membership benefits include help with computer problems. Please pay Lyle Giese, our treasurer, or the designated Board Member in his absence.

MC³ OFFICIALS

President:

Larry Freeman

lpfreeman@hotmail.com

Vice President:

Bob Wagner

rmwagner@ameritech.net

Secretary:

Bruce Ecersberg

Treasurer:

Lyle Giese

lyle@lcrcomputer.com

Database Manager:

Lem Erita

Newsletter:

info@Mc3ComputerClub.org
(for articles & suggestions)

Past President:

John Katkus

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Both movies -- new documentaries at the Sundance Film Festival this week in Park City, Utah -- try to lift a veil off technologies we know and, sometimes, love: social media, algorithmic recommendations, artificial intelligence. Casting away any gauzy optimism that remains about connecting the world or delighting users, both movies dig into how these technologies addict us, extract data from us for profit or control, or inadvertently work against already marginalized people.

They both make the point that our robot overlords aren't going to be the ones popular sci-fi has warned us about. Humanity is at greater risk of falling prey to a much quieter technological dystopia, one we're already be living in.

"AI is not something that is of the Terminator, or the stuff of Blade Runner. It is the stuff of health care and hiring and criminal justice," Shalini Kantayya, the director of *Coded Bias*, said in an interview this week. "Automated systems are becoming gatekeepers in many of the systems that we interact with every day, and ... we can be denied an opportunity without knowing it."

Researcher Joy Buolamwini's face was undetectable by the facial-recognition system used in her student project, unless she put a white mask over it.



Coded Bias

Coded Bias

The central figure in *Coded Bias* is Joy Buolamwini, an MIT Media Lab researcher. The movie starts with Buolamwini's realization that biases are baked into code, when the facial recognition system in her student project couldn't detect her, a black woman, until she put on a creepy, chalky-white mask. The movie takes side trips, but it always returns to her learning about flaws with technology and trying to educate about them. The journey culminates with her testimony in Congress about how these problematic systems make crucial decisions in people's lives.

As Buolamwini testified, the director felt one of her greatest shocks during filming. Jim Jordan, a conservative Republican representative from Ohio, was so alarmed by facial recognition as she and other experts presented it that he called the technology "a 1984 George Orwell scenario that I think troubles us all." Kantayya said she realized "the seriousness that this actually wasn't about left and right."

"It actually was about right and wrong," she said.

The focus of *Coded Bias* is how automated systems, like facial recognition or application-sorting software, are often inaccurate, and those inaccuracies can be worst for people who don't resemble the designers of the technology. (The technical forces and leadership ranks of the biggest consumer tech companies are majority male and more white than any other race, based on workforce diversity

reports from Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google and Microsoft.) Yet flawed, biased systems are used to make decisions like who gets a loan, how job performance is measured and who police stop in the street, the movie argues.

The Social Dilemma, as you might expect, homes in on social media. It lays out how we, as individuals, are outgunned by supercomputers preying on the weakness of our psychology every time we scroll through our social feeds. And it dissects how these technologies are finely tuned to become addictive tools that mine us like a raw resource, sometimes with painful repercussions.

The doc takes an unconventional route to get its message across. In between talking-head experts and animations to explain wonky concepts, The Social Dilemma weaves in a scripted plot with actors. And the narrative itself has a twist. The nucleus of the story is a family of five dealing with technology in their day-to-day lives, but it all plays out with a satirical embodiment of algorithmic menace. Vincent Kartheiser, who got his break portraying a weasely ad man on Mad Men, embodies three different algorithms -- engagement, growth and advertising. They all stand in front of a Minority Report-like console designed to nudge and prod the family's teen brother with notifications, ads and recommendations -- eventually taking him down a dark path.

"We came across all these personal stories of people had been radicalized online, or girls who had committed suicide or attempted suicide because of things that happened online," said Vicki Curtis, one of the writers of The Social Dilemma, in comments after the film's premiere. "We wanted to find a way to bring all of those personal stories and all those heartaches that broke families up into the film."

In the end, both The Social Dilemma and Coded Bias end with solutions. As the credits roll, the experts in The Social Dilemma run through simple changes you can make and rules you can set for yourself to control more of your fate in a social-mediated world. And as Coded Bias draws to a close, Buolamwini literally dons a cape and shield, the emblems of the Algorithmic Justice League organization she founded to advance more awareness about AI.

But the last line of Coded Bias is actually delivered by an AI, the kind of tranquil, female-gendered voice familiar from Alexa, Google Assistant and Siri. Some people say technology can be dangerous, she intones.

"I say, trust me. What could go wrong?"

Atari announces video game hotel and other tech news - Marc Ciesak, BBC

Microsoft issues a second update for Windows 7, just days after it said it would provide no more patches for the decade-old operating system

The Metropolitan Police announces it will use live facial recognition cameras operationally on London streets - despite concerns from privacy campaigners

Atari says construction will begin on their first video game themed hotel offering virtual and augmented reality gaming spaces later this year

Petitioners Demand Microsoft Release a Free Windows 7

The Free Software Foundation wants Microsoft to keep Windows 7 alive as a free operating system. Microsoft stopped providing free security patches and support for Windows 7 earlier this month.

Although the popular operating system reached its 10th birthday last fall, some 200 million PCs around the globe still run it, according to industry estimates. Users include small business owners, some larger companies, government agencies, and hordes of consumers worldwide.

Microsoft expects most Windows 7 users to migrate to Windows 10, but it continues to provide patches and support for Windows 7 Pro and Enterprise, which are eligible for extended security update support for three years, for a fee. Windows 7 Home editions and Ultimate editions are not included in the options to purchase extended support.

The FSF this week launched the “Upcycle Windows 7” petition. The organization is still collecting signatures, though it has surpassed its goal of getting 7,777 people to sign on to make Windows 7 available for free. The current tally is approaching 10,000.

Making the OS free would allow users “the freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software,” according to the foundation.

The petition makes no reference to who would maintain the free version with necessary patches and continued upgrades, if any.

Making Windows 7 free could be viable, said Charles King, principal analyst at Pund-IT.

“At this point, the likelihood of converting current Windows 7 users to Windows 10 seems nil. Releasing the OS could earn Microsoft the goodwill of those users, and might lead to projects that would help ensure the continuing viability and security of Windows 7,” he told LinuxInsider.

Not Just a Big Ask

The petition’s wording is to demand rather than simply ask that the company release Windows 7 as free software. The petition asserts that Microsoft ended “10 years of poisoning education, invading privacy, and threatening user security.”

Windows 7’s end of lifecycle gives Microsoft “the perfect opportunity to undo past wrongs, and to upcycle it instead,” it states.

A precedent for releasing some core Windows utilities as free software already exists, according to the petition. So Microsoft would lose nothing “by liberating a version of their operating system that they themselves say has reached its end.”

Microsoft released code for the Windows Calculator. So it can do the same for Windows 7, according to the foundation.

Also, Microsoft released MS-DOS five years ago as downloadable code. However, using it is limited to the terms of a noncommercial-use license agreement.

Given Microsoft’s growing prominence in open source, and its ownership of GitHub, releasing the Windows 7 code as open source also could be beneficial to Microsoft.

It could be positioned as “putting our money where our mouth is,” King noted. Many in the open source community would welcome that.

Amazon Now Employs 798,000 People Worldwide, 500,000 in the US - Associated Press

Only one American company beats Amazon in the size of its workforce: retail rival Walmart, which employs 1.5 million in the US and more than 2 million worldwide.

Need more proof that Amazon is big? It came this week. Amazon’s U.S. workforce has topped 500,000 for the first time, up 43% from the year before and more than triple what it was five years ago, the company said Friday. It gained 150,000 workers last year, more than the size of Apple’s entire workforce.

When it reported its quarterly performance Thursday, Amazon revealed that 150 million people were paying to be members of its Prime service, which offers faster shipping and other perks. On Friday, even while the Dow fell 600 points, Amazon shares soared passed \$2,000 apiece, doubling in price in about two years.

Amazon's growth comes with increased scrutiny. Some Democratic presidential candidates want to break it up. Others want it to pay more taxes. It is a regular target of President Donald Trump, who has been tweeting similar complaints as he fights with Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, who also owns The Washington Post. Amazon has said it shouldn't be broken up, and that it pays all the taxes it owes.

Being under the microscope has not slowed its phenomenal growth. Sales during the holiday season soared. Its other businesses, including cloud computing and advertising, grew, too, despite increased competition from other big tech companies.

Analysts at Benchmark said the results were a "not-so-subtle reminder Amazon is still king."

After retreating from a proposed new headquarters location in New York City because of local opposition, it has ramped up hiring across the country, including New York City. Amazon said it has 30,000 workers in tech offices outside of its Seattle home, in cities such as Chicago, Denver, and Austin, Texas. That group of workers is up 50 percent in the last year and a half, Amazon said.

It has also increased hiring at its warehouses and delivery centres, where orders are packed and shipped.

Worldwide, Amazon had 798,000 employees by the end of last year. Only one American company beats Amazon in the size of its workforce: retail rival Walmart, which employs 1.5 million in the U.S. and more than 2 million worldwide.

Walmart, however, took 35 years to build a workforce of similar size to Amazon today. Amazon reached the milestone in 24 years, more than a decade sooner.

Google's New Messaging App To Unify Gmail, Drive, And Hangouts... Gene Marks, Forbes

Google's tenth messaging service will "unify" Gmail, Drive, and Hangouts Chat.

According to a report released this week, Google is in the process of creating its newest messaging app and the company's development team is looking to combine the capabilities of multiple apps that the tech giant already provides into one. The report detailed that the new messaging app would combine the features from Hangouts Meet, Hangouts Chat, and Drive, but also include Gmail features. The report also detailed the newest app as a "mobile app" leaving out any mention of a desktop or Web version. This would be Google's tenth app. (Source: ARS Technica)

Why this is important for your business:

It's a welcome development. Why? Because many of my clients use Google apps but all these apps have grown on separate paths and the different options and versions have increasingly created confusion. It's time for cleanup and consolidation. So let's hope the tenth go-around is the best.

Antivirus vendors plan to support Windows 7 post EOL - Gene Marks, Forbes

Despite Microsoft officially ceasing support for Windows 7 this past month, major antivirus software makers have announced that they intend to extend support for their products for now. While some exceptions exist, the majority of the antivirus vendors have verified that their software will still oper-

ate on Windows 7 until 2022. Microsoft's Extended Security Updates (ESU) program will only allow current Enterprise customers to be eligible for Windows 7 security updates. (Source: Tech Radar)

Why this is important for your business:

Although appreciated I'm sure by many small business owners who haven't upgraded their older PCs, relying on the major anti-virus software makers to protect your devices is not the best solution. The best solution is to move to Windows 10. Yes, my firm is a Microsoft partner, but we don't sell Windows 10. But what I do know is that the best protection against malware and viruses is to run the most recent version of your device's operating system, be it Windows, Mac OS or Android.

Meteorite chunk contains unexpected evidence of presolar grains - Washington University, St. Louis

An unusual chunk in a meteorite may contain a surprising bit of space history. Presolar grains -- tiny bits of solid interstellar material formed before the sun was born -- are sometimes found in primitive meteorites. But a new analysis reveals evidence of presolar grains in part of a meteorite where they are not expected to be found.

"What is surprising is the fact that presolar grains are present," said Olga Pravdivtseva, research associate professor of physics in Arts & Sciences and lead author of a new paper in Nature Astronomy. "Following our current understanding of solar system formation, presolar grains could not survive in the environment where these inclusions are formed."

Curious Marie is a notable example of an "inclusion," or a chunk within a meteorite, called a calcium-aluminum-rich inclusion (CAI). These objects, some of the first to have condensed in the solar nebula, help cosmochemists define the age of the solar system. This particular chunk of meteorite -- from the collection of the Robert A. Pritzker Center for Meteoritics and Polar Studies at the Chicago Field Museum -- was in the news once before, when scientists from the University of Chicago gave it its name to honor chemist Marie Curie.

For the new work, Pravdivtseva and her co-authors, including Sachiko Amari, research professor of physics at Washington University, used noble gas isotopic signatures to show that presolar silicon carbide (SiC) grains are present in Curious Marie.

That's important because presolar grains are generally thought to be too fragile to have endured the high-temperature conditions that existed near the birth of our sun.

