From Values to Things: designing ethical technologies

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From smart watches to connected doorbells, smart thermostats to air pollution sensors, "connected" devices are now part of our everyday lives. As these connected "things" populate our homes, work spaces and cities, they also become important mediators of how we see and sense the world. While this connectedness makes important promises for the future, such as efficiency, usability and life satisfaction and even upgrading human capabilities; they also hint at a dystopian future of surveillance, control, discrimination and abuse. Against this background, at Virt-EU we have been studying how ethics get built into things. Values of those designing technologies get built into the things they develop as they are imbued by their visions and beliefs. This, we argue, is expected. However, we also add that, technical properties of things themselves, eg. sensors, screens, cables, data and so on, enable or hinder ethical development. In other words, technologies are not neutral, they come with their own ethical possibilities. The choice between a Wi-Fi network or Bluetooth mesh, expensive batteries with long durability or cheap and easily replaceable ones or storing data in the Cloud or on the devices themselves are not merely technical choices. They are also ethical. Therefore, designing ethical technologies require us to shift our attention from values to things, and from things to ethical things. The new world order is going to be dependent on the choices we make today, and we need to take things that make up our technologies into consideration.

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