When Not to Design, Build, or Deploy

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CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → **Computing / technology policy**; *Professional topics.*

KEYWORDS

technology policy, technology refusal, politics of tech refusal

1 SESSION ABSTRACT

Recent debate within the FAT∗ community has focused on how the field conceptualizes the problems it seeks to address, what approach the field should take in attempting to address these problems, and whether the field should even pursue some of the proposed remedies. Questions regarding when not to design, build, or deploy a technology are perhaps the most common expression of this trend. Identifying the problems to address is inextricably linked to the broader question of how to collectively make decisions about what technologies our societies need and want.

While much extant FAT∗ work to date has focused on various model and system interventions, the goal of this session is to foster discussion of when we should not design, build, and deploy systems in the first place. Given the recent push for moratoria on facial recognition, protests around the sale of digital technologies represented by the hashtag #TechWontBuildIt, and the ongoing harms to marginalized groups from automated systems such as risk prediction or surveillance, a broader discussion around how, when, and why to say *no* seems both relevant and urgent.

The discussion seeks to surface the question of *when, how, and why not to design, build or deploy* to a broader audience of interested practitioners, academics, and society. While the question is now common in critical FAT∗ work drawing on the Science and Technology Studies literature, we believe it remains underarticulated to many with training in machine learning and other areas of computer science. We create the space for perspectives on why, when, and how to justify not deploying or building systems in part because the problem is so infrequently discussed.

The session, through perspectives contributed by academics, industrial practitioners, and civil society activists, seeks to provide the foundation for answering the long-term questions of:

- **Relevant historical and disciplinary contexts.** Assessing and articulating the social character of technologies is a venerable theme in the philosophy of technology. How can we draw on these and other scholarly traditions to build frameworks to direct and prioritize our critical efforts today?
- **Frameworks and guidelines for practitioners to use when reasoning about** *not designing, building, or deploying.* Upon what values should we base our decisions regarding whether to build, deploy, and critique particular technologies? How do we take all affected people and things into account in making such decisions? And through what specific mechanisms should such decisions be made as a matter of practice? Moreover, what drives this idea from a practical perspective is the reality of practitioners and developers of socio-technical systems. When faced with a task—how do they decide if it's morally acceptable? Should the decision be based purely on intuition? What are frameworks and resources they could use to make their decision and then defend it when confronting superiors?
- **Politics and aftermaths of refusal.** While practitioners or activists might often be the ones to flag projects as unacceptable, no less important is who gets to decide whether or not projects go forward. In the above scenario, typically the engineer/student gets no say in the matter, as the end decision is often made above that level. It is crucial to understand the politics of how such decisions are made in practice, as well as how should decisions like this get made. What real alternatives are there to the way things are being done now? Moreover, despite all the efforts to just say no, it's urgent to ask what happens after the moratoria? Are these attempts to reject a technology completely or temporarily halt its development and use until we have rules in place? Is it even possible to regulate a technology out of existence? Practically speaking, what does a politics of refusal entail and require?