N.S. professor explores fact, fiction of AI

Whitman, Laura. **Chronicle - Herald**; Halifax, N.S. [Halifax, N.S]25 Apr 2017: A6.

Nova Scotia may seem an unlikely location for some of the most fascinating thinkers in the fields of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics to gather. But earlier this month, nine of them did exactly that.

Featured as the keynote speakers of a two-day Cyborg Workshop, researchers from universities across North America and the U.K. discussed how robots and AI are shaping the future of labour, war, the environment, and human relationships. More curious still is that the workshop was organized not by a scientist or engineer but by a Saint Mary's University professor of English. Dr. Teresa Heffernan is a thought leader and widely-published researcher who has been exploring the intersection of science, fiction and humanity for more than 10 years. She conceived, planned and implemented the workshop as part of her five-year research project, Where Science Meets Fiction: Social Robots and the Ethical Imagination.

"Scientists would say let's keep the fiction out of the science and yet, so much of what we're told to believe about robots and AI stems from fictional and pop culture narratives about them," said Dr. Heffernan. "I was interested in that contradiction and what that meant."

Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Dr. Heffernan's project explores the ethical and existential questions that emerge from the entanglement of the science and the fiction of robotics and AI.

Her primary objective is to produce a book-length interdisciplinary study that looks at the boundaries and borders between fiction, science and ethics by putting these fields in dialogue with one another. By bringing together speakers and students from various faculties and disciplines, her recent Cyborg Workshop did exactly that.

"Our speakers were all world-class," said Dr. Heffernan. "They have very busy schedules and none of them knew each other. It took me over a year, but I was able to convince them all to come to here for this event. My students were blown away by their lectures."

"I opened it up to the public because I think it's so important that we have a much wider public discussion about this, so that we're not just mystified by the technology," said Dr. Heffernan. "Machines and robots get shown in media clips or press releases as being this seamless thing, but we all know that this is not how technology works."

Thinking critically about what we're being told about the advancement of robots and the future of AI, Dr. Heffernan explains, can lead us to more important questions. For example, what happens when a robot is assigned to perform a task safely, like driving an automobile, and it malfunctions? Who is held accountable for the mistakes machines make? Or alternatively, what are the consequences of releasing humans of accountability and independent decision-making, as so many groundbreaking technologies do?

The lectures that took place at the Cyborg Workshop explored these mind-bending questions and many others. They are available to view online at cyborgworkshop.com/livestream.

Next week's extended edition of NOW! Nova Scotia will include a look at why these questions are globally relevant and how robots and AI are shaping the future of work and workplace ethics.

Credit: Laura Whitman Now Nova Scotia