Entrevista

Charles Ess

Charles Ess é referência nos debates sobre as questões éticas impostas pela adoção global das tecnologias digitais da comunicação. Criador e organizador da série de encontros internacionais e interdisciplinares CATaC (Cultural Attitudes Towards Technology and Communications), que ocorrem bi-anualmente desde 1998[1], Charles Ess participa ativamente também da Association of Internet Researchers, AoIR, entidade igualmente pautada pela interdisciplinaridade e pelo desejo de internacionalização[2]. À frente do Ethics Working Group da AoIR, Charles Ess esteve diretamente envolvido na elaboração do protocolo para a pesquisa empírica online que viria a materializar-se, em 2002, no AoIR's Ethical Decision Making and Internet Research Recommendations (disponível online em http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf). Em outubro, foi eleito vice-presidente da AoIR. Ao final do último Congresso da Associação (IR 6.0, Internet Generations, que teve lugar em Chicago, EUA), Charles Ess conversou com a professora Suely Fragoso, do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências da Comunicação da Unisinos, sobre as práticas e políticas das associações científicas com as quais está envolvido e, a partir delas, sobre ética, multiculturalismo, tecnologias e interdisciplinaridade.

Fronteiras: CATaC Conferences have been held every other year since 1998 and I am aware that they attract more and more participants every time. The first of these conferences was based on the thematic question: 'how do diverse cultural attitudes shape the implementation and use of CMC technologies'? What led you to conceive of an event around this idea, and, more specifically, of an event with the particular characteristics of the CATaC Conferences?

Charles Ess: It started when I went to Oslo in 1996, for a Technology and Democracy conference. It was the first time I had been out of the United States in twenty years, and it was after the PC revolution had occurred. It was a sort of classic moment of realizing my own ethnocentrism. I should have known much better that we can't assume that everything we do is normal and universal. My Norwegian colleagues were using computing technologies in markedly different ways from the way that I and the people around me were using them. It just became obvious to me *that* there must be something about cultural differences that was playing a role here and I wanted to raise that question. Not many people at that time were raising this question. There was still a very strong dominance of the United States not only on the technologies themselves, but also on the scholarship about them.

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[1] A próxima CATaC, cujo tema é neither global village nor homogenizing commodification: diverse cultural, ethnic, gender and economic environments, terá lugar em Tartu, na Estônia (2006). Maiores informações e o Call for Papers estão disponíveis online em http://www.it.murdoch.edu.au/catac/index06.html.

[2] Maiores informações sobre a Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), inclusive o Call for Papers para o próximo Congresso Internacional, Internet Research 7.0: Convergences, que acontecerá em Brisbane, Austrália, em setembro de 2006, estão disponíveis online em http://www.aoir.org.

Everything in the field was still very much US-centric. The United States is a great country in many ways, but we are not known for a deep understanding of other cultures because most of us don't travel. It became very clear that a few people perhaps asked this question, but not very many. So we encouraged interest in this by developing a special issue of a journal, the Electronic Journal Of Communication[3]. The editor of the journal then told us that: "you'll get better submissions if you have a conference". Given that I teach in a small university in an unknown state and I don't do international interdisciplinary conferences I was terrified at the thought. However Terry Harrison, the editor, put me in touch with Fay Sudweeks[4] who is brilliant and splendid at conference organization, so we put together a conference in 1998 at the Science Museum in London. To our great surprise we got a grant for it, we didn't lose money and people came. It was a wonderful experience, so we thought "we could try it again". Since then, we have been extremely fortunate at finding local chairs at different universities around the world who bring their own energy, enthusiasm and fund raising ability to support the conference. It is very much a year-to-year thing or, better to say, every two years. Neither Fay nor I receive any support for this from our institutions so, in a certain way, even if we are not married to each other, it's a kind of 'mom and pop' conference. I like that because one of the things that people say about CATaC that makes me feel very satisfied, and they've said it from the beginning, is that, unlike most of the professional conferences that we go to, very much like AoIR, it's wildly interdisciplinary. In CATaC Conferences, people tend to really put aside the sort of status and hierarchical games that we have to play with one another when we are in a more discipline-specific context and thus a great deal of informal enjoyable and productive dialogue and networking takes place. That is what people say they value most about it. The presentations are great, they have a good time, but it's that cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural dialoguing and networking that really is the hallmark of the conference.

Fronteiras: Do you think that there aren't enough studies of Cultural Attitudes towards Technology within disciplinary fields – Communications, Sociology, Social Psychology and Computing, for example – or do you think that interdisciplinary approaches can really take it further?

Charles Ess: When I started researching this, in 97/98, I developed a bibliography with maybe five or ten entries. That was it. There were some sort of outstanding things, like the work of Geert Hofstede, which is now sort of under critique and revision, but apart from Hofstede - and one or two or three things sort of scattered here and there - things tended to be done within a discipline. You could find a lot of things about intercultural communication, but they didn't address technology, or you could find a lot of things about technology, but they did not, resolutely did not, address culture at all and so forth. So there was not very much around in 1997/1998. Thus, here we have this wonderful technology that not only allows us to cross disciplines easily in terms of communications, but also to cross cultures. There was all the rhetoric in the 1990s of the 'global village' and now we are all talking about globalization and so forth. It would seem to me about the most obvious thing in the world: If we are going to have all these people communicating cross-culturally online, maybe we should figure out how that works. As you know, the CATaC Conferences have contributed to what is now a fairly substantial body of literature – and some other people have done some very good things as well, not just CATaC - but even so I find myself very frustrated with the widespread lack of understanding about the matter. It is as if you are going to go take a vacation in France, or Portugal, or Brazil, or wherever: you can get a book and it well tell you: do this; don't do this; here are some phrases; watch out for this; they really like that; here are the foodstuffs. There is nothing like that for going online to my knowledge. Yet it appears that that is what we're bringing to the foreground as this is going to be increasingly part of our lives. It seems to me that it's a vital kind of knowledge to have. I like to think that the CATaC work is contributing to it. Other people are doing other good things in their interdisciplinary work on line and I think we all have just barely started.

Fronteiras: It is mentioned in the CATaC 2004 Proceedings that the number of paper submissions the organizers receive has been growing dramatically. Are you getting people from more diverse disciplines and more diverse countries or is it more people from the same disciplines and the same countries? Also, are the conferences themselves growing or is it just getting tougher to be accepted?

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[3]   Editor's note: the EJC is available at http://www.cios.org/www/ejcmain.htm [Dec 2005]
[4]   Fay Sudweeks is Senior Lecturer of the School of Information Technology, Murdoch University, Australia.

Charles Ess: It's growing. I think at our first conference we had 40-some people and about 27 or so papers or presentations. At CATac 2004, the last one so far, we had close to 100 people participating and I don't remember the exact number of papers, but the proceedings is over 500 pages long, it's just huge. At CATac 2004 we had people from 29 different countries, so we have grown more diverse in origin. I don't want to say we are the 'United Nations' of this kind of research, but we have had research and or scholars from every continent – not every country, but at least every continent - and usually two or three countries within a continental group, including Africa, the Arabic and the Slavic worlds. We also had representatives from indigenous peoples: Australian, Canadian and North American are the ones that come to my mind right now. So I think we have done a pretty god job and we have been fortunate with the range of people and disciplines that have come to CATaC. It's been growing, it's been on an upward curve since 98. I understand that we also get more and more diverse disciplines represented every time. What we decided at CATaC 2004, however, is that 100 is the maximum number, we just were hitting that sort of mysterious boundary where there were a touch too many parallel sessions and people were complaining about the fact that there was a little less time for the kind of interaction we wanted to have happen. So we have decided that, instead of letting it continue to grow, we would become more selective, and there is a bit of regret about that. We have to balance that with what we do have: we have tracks for work in progress and research reports and we are talking about poster sessions. We need to keep that part of it manageable and if at least in some of those tracks it means to become more selective, that probably won't hurt us too badly, it's probably a good thing. Now one of the things that we did in CATaC 2004 that I hope we can expand on in CATaC 2006 is that we started out primarily mostly with researchers from academia and one or two people from business or newspapers with whom we somehow crossed paths. What happened in 20004 was that we had a kind of critical mass of people working in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), particularly Michel Menou[5], who is closely associated with us now and who has done development work in something like 80 countries. He is French and I don't know how many languages he speaks, but it is like a bunch! So he has been specially helpful for us in terms of him bringing to the table, to the conference forces, not simply from different places that don't always get represented, but also who are doing really on the ground work, ICTs for development. So in 2004 we also had a number of NGOs represented, which is great. We want to figure out how can we make it a place that is attractive for NGOs to come to, because we would say that there is really where 'the rubber hits the road' in terms of you wanting better technology and you wanting to do good things. Just under the surface if CATaC there is a very strong commitment to social justice in all kinds of forms, the first of which is recognizing, protecting, helping to flourish diverse cultural identities. We are sort of resolutely anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, anti-homogenization and globalization and so forth. Development is not always a bad thing – despite what some people might say – but lets do it in ways that are culturally appropriate and are in fact beneficial to the many, so we really want to get the NGOs. Whether or not we succeed on that we will see.

Fronteiras: You are also co-chair of the European Conference on Computing and Philosophy, ECAP 2006. This will take place in a university where you are a professor, the Norwegian University for Science and Technology, in Trondheim, Norway. Are you involved in the organization of ECAP 2006 because you took part in its conception or is it due to your position in that specific University?

Charles Ess: More the latter. This will be the fourth ECAP, the first one was in Glasgow, in 2001. ECAP is an international affiliate of something called the International Association of Computing and Philosophy, and the Computing and Philosophy Conferences started, if I remember correctly, at Bowling Green, in the late 80s. Soon they became sited at Carnegie Melon, under the leadership of Robert Cavalier. I started going to those Conferences back in 1989, 1990, fairly early on. I was pretty strongly involved, I have been on the Program Committee, and kind of an informal member of the Executive Group. This work on computing and philosophy tries to give an overview on something called 'the computational turn', how the rise of computer technologies and network technologies reflects back onto traditional philosophical questions and, by the same token, how these new technologies are raising new questions that philosophers need to grapple with. I've been with that group for a long time and I did go to the first ECAP conference, but I've not made all the subsequent ones. But I know the people at ECAP and so when we had one of the ECAP members come to a workshop in Trondheim that I was responsible for – when I was professor for Information Ethics there – we thought that would be good to hold the next ECAP in Norway.

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5   Dr. Michel Menou is Visting Professor of Information Policy in the City University, London.City and more commonly known as designer of several plans for national systems for scientific and technical information for the developing world.

Fronteiras: Your first three degrees (Bachelor, MA and PhD) are all in Philosophy. Your Vitae also shows a strong interest in the study of religions. How did computers get involved with that combination?

Charles Ess: I actually went to university as a Mathematics and Computer Science major. That was back in 1969, when computers filled rooms. Because of the Vietnam war I was confronted with the decision as to whether or not to declare myself a conscientious objector, somebody who would refuse military service on the basis of either religious and or philosophical grounds. In my mind that was very much a life or death decision and my advance calculus groups just weren't helping! I had read philosophy in an amateurish way since I was 13, and at that time I took my first Philosophy course, ethics classes, and said: "this is it, I've got to do it". So the computing stuff was there, sort of in the background, but my life took other turns. When the PC revolution came along in the 1980s and you could actually have one of these things on your desktop I though "Wow, this is really great!". So I was very excited, first of all for the possibilities of hypertext, because in Philosophy and in Religion, hypertext is a kind of electronic instantiation of the Talmud: this kind of growing circle of interpretation of text and commentary and more interpretation, I love that! It would be nice if we could all be Talmud scholars, but we're not. But we can do hypertext and I thought that was very exciting. So that's where I kicked back in.

Fronteiras: The connection between all we have been talking about so far and you becoming the head of the AoIR Ethics Working Group is pretty clear. In 2002, the Ethics Group released the Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research Recommendations (aka the Ethics Report). This is ethics statement tailored to the distinctive venues and methodologies of Internet research, intended to reflect the considered ethical judgments, insights, and practices of those active in the multiple fields of Internet research. The document was unanimously approved by voting AoIR members in November of 2002. Is the version presently available at AoIR's Home Site (http://www.aoir.org) still the same which was released three years ago?

Charles Ess: The Working Committee is still going and we have constantly debated over that. It is usually agreed to leave that document in place as it is. Many professional organizations have Ethics Guidelines and they tend to revise these about once every ten years. But this is the Internet and things change very quickly and there have been whole new areas that have come up and are not directly addressed in our Guidelines, as well as an explosion of literature about the same subject. The Guidelines were approved in 2002 and then in 2003 and 2004 there were many books that came out on Internet Research Ethics that had not yet been referenced. So, in my mind, we very much need to refresh that bibliography, to go back and revise and expand that document. Because I'm switching out of the role of chair of that Committee and into the role of Vice-President of AoIR, I won't be able to have very much influence on how that happens and how soon. But I'm hoping that the new Working Group or, better to say, the continuation of the Working Group under the new chair, will do that within the next two or three years.

Fronteiras: There is something always bothered me about AoIR's Ethical Decision Making and Internet Research Recommendations: The basis of the existence of such a document appears to be the belief in some universal consensus about what's good what's bad. Having attended the Group's workshop in 2003, in Toronto, and since then having got to know better, both you and others in the Committee, I am sure that neither you nor others involved with the elaboration of the Ethics Report pledge that it should function homogeneously as a guideline of what is right or wrong in Internet Research whatever the place or the circumstances. Between the lines of the Document, however, I still can see signs of a belief that certain things are good or bad despite where in the world you are. Am I wrong or is it really there?

Charles Ess: I think that your impression is certainly well grounded, and we had to be specially careful about how we worked in the Committee for a couple of reasons. We weren't writing for philosophers, so we couldn't really go into a lot of the discussion and theoretical debates that surround that question. There is a footnote in there about ethical pluralism[6]. I'm not sure how well I'll get this ordered, but I want to say two or three things *on* that point. One of them is that from my perspective I have a kind of feminist and Habermasian view – in fact, it goes back to Aristotle for that matter as well as Confucius – that ethics in a very important way needs to sort of 'bubble out' of what real people do on the ground every day. In order to have

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[6] Editor's note: Charles Ess refers to Endnote 7, pg. 29, which starts "Cross-cultural differences are addressed especially by an ethical pluralism that rests on a shared commitment to a fundamental norm, value, or guideline: the interpretation or application of that norm, however, differs in different contexts".

our sort of general guidelines percolate out of practice, we need to be theoretical and reflection on the theory is crucial, but it has to be grounded in the realities and specific contexts of the day-to-day. So that means that any kind of notion, even as a tentative hypothesis, as a working hypothesis, that there might be some larger universal, or quasi-universal, standard, has to be tested constantly in the face of practice. That was sort of my starting point. How do we know what we think? Well, we talk about it in certain conditions so people aren't intimidated by hierarchy or any other force. What was fascinating in the Committee was that in its original configuration it had 19 people from 11 different countries including a person from Malaysia and a person from Thailand, so we were not just Western. We began to find out that, well, of course there are enormous cultural differences, in some way absolutely dichotomous differences, in terms of the person and so on. I talk about the Western – and specifically US – notion of the human subject as the carrier of these rights that have to be protected and so forth. That'll carry you into Europe, kind of, certainly Scandinavia, but that isn't how the rest of the world thinks about it. So, of course, there are these tremendous amount of differences. At the same time, however, a sort of structure of ethical purpose begin to bubble up and start to get clear. It was first within the Western context – an early example was whether or not people needed to have a form of consent for being recorded in a public space. We had a Norwegian philosopher, named Dag Elgesem, on the committee at that time and an American sociologist named Joe Walther. Joe said "well of course not" and Dag Elgesem "well of course you do". So we said: OK, you tell us about this. And what we discovered in that dialogue and conversation is that they actually agreed on how to think about it ethically, namely, that you start with the expectations of the people in the public space. That is the common of orientation of your ethics, but it turns out that the expectations of Norwegians, for cultural and historical reasons, are quite different from the expectations of North-Americans. So you have an orientation point that is shared between cultures, but how that shared norm or value is interpreted or applied often varies quite dramatically 'on the ground' (so to speak) because it's different cultural settings, different people, who are exercising judgments in different ways and so forth. This is an old sort of solution to this problem. In Philosophy we are acutely aware of the problem. What the Post-Modernists like to point to is, if you have a universal value, then it tends to become, in effect, fascism. Everybody must conform in the same way at all times and places. And you don't want that. But, on the other hand, you don't want pure relativism either, because relativism also becomes fascist. There's a great quote from Mussolini that goes something like: "if there are no universal values then, basically the only way we have values as a society is to force some, so I'm your guy, I know how to apply force!". So it invites fascism, it invites authoritarianism. What was most interesting to me was that I have been interested in ethical norms for a long time, but this was a chance, in a very strong sense, to test it. Does it work? In a very specified context, cross cultural and so forth, so it was an empirical test of a hypothesis. It has been just amazing that we have found so many instances of which, it is fair to say, that there are these shared norms and not just within the Western cultures but also between the East and West. We have just finished a special issue on attitudes toward privacy and data privacy and protection laws in China, Thailand and Japan and you could not ask for more radically divergent perceptions of human beings, the role of the individual vis-à-vis his society. Mostly, in those traditions – as was true in the West prior to the industrial revolution – if you had some notion of privacy, it was a negative notion: you were hiding something shameful and bad, so privacy is not a good thing. Not something you want to protect. But even there, even in these profound East-West differences, there is a recognizable sort of family resemblance, partly because the West is affecting profoundly what goes on in those countries, of course. This is a globalized world and the people are exposed to these activities so there is a cross cultural fertilization. But there are also indigenous notions that remain in place, so what you get is that there is a shared notion of privacy, but the way it is interpreted, applied and understood in a Chinese context is recognizably Chinese. It is not utterly alien to Western cultures, you recognize it: yeah, this is privacy. It is not the same, but it is not utterly different. So, again, this kind of structural pluralism works at least in some cases. I do not want to say it works in all cases. There will be ethical issues about which people are going to say: these are different, they're irreconcilable. But there is also this sort of middle ground in which diverse viewpoints or judgments do converge onto a shared set of guides. I think there is in effect empirical evidence to support the notion that in some important cases you can talk about universal values, and in a way that they are not homogenizing, they are not ethnocentric, they're not imperialistic but they exactly preserve, protect, allow to flourish the irreducible differences, the things that make you Brazilian, me North-American, somebody Norwegian. These irreducible differences are not going to go away, we can't jump out of our cultural skins and we shouldn't have to.

Fronteiras: Since yesterday (8/10/2005) you are officially the vice president of AoIR. This is an elected position and I understand that, after two years as president, one will automatically become President for the next two years. It is therefore

a great opportunity to ask you, as vice-president and future president of the Association: what are your plans and ideas for AoIR?

Charles Ess: AoIR is a really odd organization. It's a scholarly organization that has strictly been brought together by the focus on one thing. We are focusing on a technological archive and from a wide variety of disciplines. So that has a lot of advantages and a lot of different connotations. From my perspective I think AoIR does a number of things well; we do bring together people from a variety of disciplines and a variety of cultural backgrounds to talk about shared interests in research. There also is a pretty strong commitment – it's not on the web site or in the bylaws, but it is clearly part of what drives some of the work – a commitment to social justice. We don't want see these technologies misused or abused in some certain ways. To make that work it seems to me that there are several things we need to do. Many things we've done well, but there are several things we need to do better. The things that I will focus on, in the next year at least, are, first of all, internationalization: we have good representation I think, but we need much more. The world is dominated by the United States, for good or for ill, and there is a lot of work in the United States that is valuable for us to know about but, as you can probably tell, my heart beats for the different courses. That is where I think we get enriched. It is not just a matter of protecting people because they the right to autonomy, it's also, in a certain way, a very strongly self-interested notion. We have the richest experiences of our lives when we encounter others who are really other and in that encounter that otherness is preserved. It's not homogenized away, so its not like Benetton cosmopolitanism or CNN cosmopolitanism, when the differences are thin: "oh, they dress differently, isn't that sweet?". So we need to do more on internationalizing AoIR so that is one of my primary briefs. Outside of that, within the United States we need to do more to bring in people of color and other minorities. We do OK, we need to do better, there is a diversity of forces within the United States, so I have some ideas on how to do that. The other thing that I want to look into is about providing a venue for graduate students and new Ph.D.s who may not be well supported by their institution, so we will do that. We already do it pretty well, but I would like to see if there are some ways in which we can do it better, provide more support, particularly for graduate students.

Fronteiras: Perhaps everywhere, certainly in Brazil, the idea of doing interdisciplinary work is put down a little. Every time you fight for quality, it automatically leads you to be placed behind very restrictive disciplinary walls. Is it the same in the US?

Charles Ess: Yes. There was a time in the 90s when there was a lot of flurry [about interdisciplinarity]. I don't mean that pejoratively, but there was a lot of discussion and a lot of enthusiasm, journals were founded, conferences were founded and so forth. They are still continuing, but the whole thing has died down quite a bit. Part of it is just the reality of academic politics. The reality is that resources, social status and prestige, power, all of these things, channel almost exclusively through departments and disciplines. Henry Kissinger, who I otherwise do not approve of or quote from, did say something pertinent a long time ago. He said: "in academe the politics are so vicious because the stakes are so small". We have so little to fight over that we fight over it a great deal. I think that: the reality of academic politics has made it very, very hard to find funding and support and thereby status and prestige, recognition, for interdisciplinary work. It is a hard road to hell.