PhD Studentships for Academic Year 2026-27

Centre for Research on Organisations, Work and Society (CROWS)

About the Research Centre

The centre has expertise in the fields of human resource management, employee relations and organisational analysis. Centre members research and publish on EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion), work precarity, dignity at work, gig work, human resource development, comparative employment relations, critical leadership, organisational ethics, and organisational discourse.

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Topic 1

Title of Proposed Research Topic:

Studying Moral Engagement and Disengagement Discourse about the Use of AI in Organizations

Potential Supervisors:

Professor Peter Hamilton

Professor Onno Bouwmeester

Description of Possible Research Topic:

There are numerous global challenges that are addressed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's). However, the rise of GenAI has complicated their realization. At the one hand efficiency gains are expected, at the other hand the environmental foodprint of GenAI seems potentially very high, while hallucinations, bias replication and privacy concerns are raised as well. Today the AI industry has powerful lobbyists that seek to ensure their business models will be profitable. Still, users struggle with its application. Recently Deloitte was involved in AI scandals in Australia and Canada due to AI hallucinations and fake references in

their reports, resulting in costly settlements with their clients. While consultants were asked to work with AI, their protocols to use AI tools proved to be insufficient. Current debates on GenAI centre around long term versus short term benefits and social costs, bias, privacy and responsibilities that stay with the user (individual or organizational) and/or the producer of GenAI algorithms.

One approach to examine how businesses respond to AI adoption is through the lens of moral disengagement (Eriksson & Svensson, 2016). How people transgress and absolve themselves of immoral conduct is initially developed by Bandura (1990). Related to AI use we can find examples of diffusion of responsibilities, minimizing of effects (environment, social bias) and examples of moral justification (for some tasks better outputs than humans). Related to AI we can extend moral disengagement from the individual level to the organisational and sector level, because certain reasoning patterns are already socially scripted, and they help individuals to morally disengage (Newman et al., 2020; Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2021; White et al., 2009). At the other hand, we see the development of new regulations and laws to reduce the space for moral disengagement, and forms of activism that encourage a moral engagement rhetoric, an understudied counter discourse (Nichol et al., 2023; Volkmann & Gabriels, 2023; White et al., 2009).

While Bandura (2018) has written on the 'rhetoric and reality' of moral disengagement, and although the concept includes linguistic devices such as euphemistic labelling (Schaefer and Bouwmeester 2021) there is a paucity of studies that have examined moral disengagement through the prism of rhetoric. This is surprising since a rhetorical lens on moral disengagement tactics fits with arguments to minimize consequences as well as with moral justification arguments that help reframe unsustainable business behaviour due to AI as necessary (Perelman 2020). There are exceptions outside the business context, including rhetorical studies that have identified various moral disengagement strategies and mechanisms in presidential speeches (Cartledge et al., 2015) and online racist acts (Faulkner & Bliuc, 2016). In organisation studies the rhetoric of moral disengagement is largely unexamined.

The proposed research aims to study the moral disengagement rhetoric and discourse of AI implementations in contexts such as consulting, healthcare or government, as well as the moral engagement rhetoric in calls for more socially responsible organizational behaviour that reduces environmental impact, increases reliability of outputs based on AI, or prevents social bias. While there have been calls that moral disengagement needs to be studied more at the organizational and social level (Newman et al., 2020; Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2021), there also is a paucity of moral engagement studies. The proposed study will focus on cases where organisations or stakeholders around or within them have been successful in getting AI implementations that are more sustainable, social, and less flawed or biased,

showing moral engagement in response to earlier forms of greenwashing or moral disengagement logics.

Methods could include analysis of public discourse related to scandals or best practices in AI use and can be accompanied by interviews and document analysis related to cases, most likely contrasting cases within selected industries. The research project will aim to explore: How organizations and their stakeholders have practiced moral engagement and disengagement rhetorics related to AI implementation, and how institutional developments like the new EU AI act and other new AI regulations and policies have impacted such rhetoric over time.

The research is relevant for further developing moral disengagement theory at the organizational level, and to focus on the counter discourse implied in moral engagement activism. The rhetorical engagement strategies to be found may apply to other organisations or stakeholders that aim to challenge forms of moral disengagement. For the study of rhetoric, it is a new field of application, and a way to become more relevant as a method in the social sciences. We welcome applicants excited to work on a topic of global significance through the prism of rhetoric and discourse analysis to further our understanding of AI implementations and AI use as a key issue in business strategy and public policy.

Key References:

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