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RIT Scholars Explore the Impact of Imaging on Our Reality

Research investigates how imaging transforms, distorts and even creates what we perceive

Imaging is the use of machines to enhance humans' ability to perceive things, often by producing visible phenomena that cannot be seen with the naked eye. But, can imaging technology distort reality and even change what humans perceive to be real?

A team of scholars led by two philosophers at Rochester Institute of Technology is exploring how the use of imaging technologies is changing our perception of reality and evaluating the overall impact this may have on what counts as legitimate knowledge and meaningful experience. The research will ultimately lead to a greater understanding of how imaging, and technology in general, is changing how we relate to each other and our surroundings.

"Now more than ever, sight and perception are shaped by the technology we use, from X-rays and MRIs of the body to the Facebook photos of friends we only know online," notes Timothy Engström, professor of philosophy at RIT and one of the leaders of the project. "In an imaging-saturated environment, sight is not about how the eye records the real, but about how imaging machines interpret and make the real available for certain kinds of use."

"The more sophisticated the technology, the greater the interpretation," adds Evan Selinger, co-author with Engström and associate professor of philosophy at RIT. "The question then arises who is doing the interpreting, the viewer or the technician running the machine? And if the visual record, which is central to our society, is just an interpretation, would other interpretations or other produced images provide a different reality?"

Engström's and Selinger's work in the field initially led them to organize an international conference on contemporary theories and practices of imaging. The symposium brought in leading scholars in science, philosophy, art and aesthetics, engineering, and ethics to discuss imaging technology's effect on a variety of fields, as well as on society more generally.

"It also attempted to illustrate how imaging technologies can modify traditional habits of sight and induce forms of engagement whose consequences are far from obvious or neutral," notes Engström.

The team followed the conference with the book *Rethinking Theories and Practices of Imaging*, published this fall by Palgrave MacMillan. Co-edited by Engström and Selinger, the work seeks to expand understanding of the key ethical, epistemological and political impacts of the growing use of imaging in society and how this is impacting art, public policy, the representation of

knowledge and human identity. The book is one of the first to focus on societal effects of imaging technology, and the team hopes to utilize it to also broaden understanding of how we interact with technology more generally.

“With the development of new imaging technologies come new forms of reality, and with them new interpretative challenges for thinking about and managing their effects,” says Engström. “Through our efforts we hope to better and more critically understand the ways different imaging practices interpret and even invent what’s real and, in turn, transform our interactions with each other.”

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