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Abstract

Self-driving cars, a quintessentially ‘smart’ technology, are not born smart. In the algorithms that control their movements and the connections they make with their surroundings, they are learning as they emerge, in organised and haphazard ways. As well as a test of the powers of machine learning, they are an important test case for social learning in technology governance. In this talk, I reframe responsible innovation as social experiment, with the key question being ‘who learns what?’ Focussing on the successes and failures of social learning around a much-publicised crash in 2016, I argue that ‘self-driving’ or ‘autonomous’ cars are misnamed. As with other technologies, they are shaped by assumptions about social needs, solvable problems and economic opportunities. Responsible innovation for self-driving cars means challenging this discourse of autonomy and appreciating the ways in which self-driving cars will be entangled in their environments.