



UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM  
Institute for Information Law

IVIR LECTURE SERIES

# I Think You Oughtn't Think Machines Can Think

by Judith Donath

Monday  
29  
September  
REC A5.24



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“Can machines think?” is the question Alan Turing set out to answer in his field-defining 1950 paper. And while he quickly dismissed it as “too meaningless to discussion”, the question of machine consciousness - will artificially intelligent agents someday be able to actually experience thought and emotion, not just mimic the appearance of doing so? - is now, with the development of AI systems of seemingly superhuman intelligence, of growing interest and importance.

Unsurprisingly, much concern focuses on the harm that AI may pose for humans, from worries about job loss and disinformation to the fear of an AI apocalypse in which newly awakened machines take vengeance on their human creators. But a growing contingent focuses instead on the well-being of the machine itself, asking what ethical responsibilities we humans have to a synthetic yet sentient being whose existence we have engendered and calling for recognition of possibly conscious machines as beings with moral rights which should be legally protected.

If AI agents are deemed conscious, ought they be granted the right of free speech? They are super-humanly prolific and persuasive: how would this affect efforts to maintain spaces of public discourse for human participants? Should they have the right to vote?

In this talk Judith argues that such moral consideration is unnecessary—there are compelling analyses explaining why AI agents are not and will not be conscious—and that granting them legal protection risks significant harm to individuals and society. She will discuss the socio-technical context that leads to belief in machine consciousness, the incentives to exploit this belief, and suggest ways to reduce the risk of mistaken attribution of moral consideration.



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## Speaker

Judith Donath is a writer, designer and artist whose work focuses on the co-evolution of technology and society.

She has published numerous articles about social media, AI, ethics and anonymity, and she is the author of *The Social Machine: Designs for Living Online* (MIT Press).

As the former director of the MIT Media Lab's Sociable Media Group, she and her students designed innovative interfaces for online communities.

Currently, she is a faculty fellow at Harvard's Berkman Klein Center and is writing a book about technology, trust and deception. She received her doctoral and master's degrees in Media Arts and Sciences from MIT and her bachelor's degree in History from Yale University.

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## Practical details

**Date:** Monday 29 September

**Time:** 17:00 - 18:15 CET  
(Amsterdam)

**Place:** REC A5.24, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV Amsterdam & online via Zoom



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