

Making four times as many patents per head as Europeans, the US is rapidly losing its coveted role as a superpower and turning into an invention spluttering machine that can barely manufacture a durable product anymore. Personally, being allowed into this country by the dubious 'graces' of an expensive inefficient bureaucratic machine I have learned one thing quite rapidly, that is, that the land of dreams has turned into the land of excess. Similarly, it seems that patents are going through the same issues and to no surprise the race for inventions has created an excessive patenting. While normal people outside our gates at Brown are stuck with barely any health insurance due to excessive lawsuits, excessive patenting has also resulted in patent lawsuits. The ridiculousness does not end there. In fact, The Economist piece gives the example of how Amazon was granted a patent for 'inventing' the one-click shopping button, as if internet shopping is not in essence always one-click shopping. The readings from this week deal primarily with a necessary creature ('inventing') and the stupendously unwarranted beast known by the name 'patenting'.

The paper by Hong entitled *Unfaithful offspring? Technologies and their trajectories*, highlights the human-invention connection, which is a forward looking situation. Mainly, despite the numerous rapid changes in our present society, most of us are often stuck wondering as to where our present technologies will lead us to. As a kid in primary school, educated on school books possibly from the 70s, I remember our teacher musing about our future lives in 2010, and how we might possibly be thinking about establishing settlements in space. In contrast, now in 2011, the US is ending the Discovery space program, and hence, my condo in the sky will not be happening anytime soon! However, despite our human self-critical attitude, it is often naturally assumed that understanding the past will lead to a better understanding of the present. Hong rightfully points out that such predictability is clearly impossible and the sheer essence of being lies in the uncontrollable,

unpredictability of living. This is interesting to me for numerous reasons. Primarily, I doubt anyone of us could quite predict the future in the same way that we can not directly access the past. Also, the author is completely right to point out that technologies, once invented, have trajectories of their own which are directed and motivated by social agents. An example close to our field is the invention of radar technology which was originally intended for war use that has now bridged over to the commercial world and even utilized as a geophysical instrument. I find that Hong's distinction between technologies and technological system/networks is, in contrast, less useful. My impression is that inevitably any new technology, if successfully maintained or re-adapted, will form part of a wider technological network anyhow. It seems that such a distinction, probably influenced by the STS theoretical stance, seems to inadequately 'stretch the buck'.

An inherent danger, lies in defining and outlining technological trajectories as autonomous in their eventual manifestations. Indeed, the author (p.267) eventually describes a given fact, widely debated by historical works on technology, that a technology is always allowed an 'interpretative flexibility' which provides a multi-leveled potential usage. While the Charlie Sheen in all of us wants to win and depict the world in hyper-polarities, the last point is potentially useful even to archaeologists. After all, as researchers dealing with past technologies we are often presented with elements that are created, modified over time, permeating through numerous sectors of society, and finally re-adapted according to needs. Therefore to me, deviating technologies do no so much reflect their nature as 'unfaithful offspring' but rather as 'adopted offspring', that are consciously or unconsciously introduced into new contexts and made to play out their lifetime.

Connecting this complex manner of inventions, re-appropriation, and unpredictable trajectories, the articles by Cooper expand more on the way in which technologies emerge and evolve. In *Myth, rumor and history*, Cooper observes that attributing an invention to a single agent simplifies the story quite a

bit. Yet, the appeal to such single 'inventors' is overpowering and amenable to the creation of myths in our present day society. It is interesting that such myths, which are typically propagated and distributed as rumors, possibly emerge as a means to simplify an otherwise complicated history. Choosing her words carefully, Cooper highlights that the general public's simplicity in this matter augments the propagation of such simplistic processes. Therefore, in the case of the young Yankee boy, while he is not the inventor of the all-wonderful pocket knife, the obscurity of its invention is replaced by a myth that bonds this lack of origin to the contemporary fascination to its genius and utility. I feel that Cooper hits the nail on the head, when she explains that the problem for technological historians as they seek to publicize the 'truth' is that myth relays a deeper truth, that perhaps is more relatable to the general public. Indeed, such stretched truths might be a way for all of us to connect to the general public and enhance the propagation of knowledge.

In her terrifyingly older, and longer article, Cooper reflects on how inventions and patent management were not ideal bedfellows. In fact, returning to my Charlie Sheen metaphor and his numerous hedonic escapades, inventions and patents as bedfellows sounds like it would actually turn quite rapidly into a crowd. After all, despite that the principle of patents were supposed to protect inventions and the inventors, it easily descended into anarchic judgment contests of what is 'new'. Also, to the joy of all oppressing capitalists, patent management turned into a gold mine for the never-ending romance between the individual and the rising leeches, better known as 'middle-men'. In the world of creativity and inventions, such middle-men acted as intermediaries and supposedly were placed to streamline the whole system. Of course, they did not do that. In this inter-webbing of overlapping players, the process of patent management, as indicated by Cooper, can be interpreted through the means of networks identification and analysis. Between all these players the flow of information was not unidirectional but rather the opposite. These same relations were also complicated by intermediaries and issues of judgment and comparing like with like. At the end, the cases presented by Cooper indicate and make us

reflect on pressing issues of our own society at large. Why do we prefer an Ipad but not an Android tablet? Are they not the same thing in essence? Where is the innovation?

While we all enjoy our gadgets and gizmos, we have to reflect on all the Charlie Sheen's out there who are currently 'winning'. The present day need to enrich ourselves by inventing has quite literally tanked a long long time ago. Despite that we often hear of the utility to protect yourself and patent your product, the social construction of patents and their management has only allowed us to dig ourselves a deeper capitalist ditch. Some of you might consider my account as a paranoid conspiracy-drive rant. Well, the next time we turn on our laptops or fancy gadgets let us try to consider their origins. How many Antonio Meucci's are out there, angry that the system has failed them? Remember Charlie Sheen is still winning, he is still making money by selling his sub-par demi-godness. Sometimes, I wish we could turn back to the dark ages!