

What does it mean to be human in the 21st century?

By **Caclainn Hogan**

From AI-operated elevators to data-driven algorithms deciding our futures, the Trinity Long Room Hub is exploring what it means to be human today.

From algorithms driving our decisions to smart devices tracking our lives, even the most basic integration of technology into our daily existence is so advanced and ever evolving that it has become urgently necessary to question how this might be changing our understanding of what it means to be human.

“Content is king, but context is God,” Jane Ohlmeyer tells me. We are sitting inside her office at the Trinity Long Room Hub Arts & Humanities Research Institute, a modern architectural Tetris opposite what was once the cutting-edge Brutalism of the Arts Block in Trinity.

Since opening in 2010, the Hub has become a dedicated research institute, supporting interdisciplinary collaborations in Trinity and championing the humanities as crucial to future innovations. As Director of the Hub, Ohlmeyer is now pioneering new collaborations between the humanities and the tech industry, with the launch last year of the new speaker series: “*What does it mean to be human in the 21st century?*”

With public talks from leading minds in academia, industry, arts and the media on the interaction between humanities and technology, the series interrogates and explores what it means to be human in a digital age. Ohlmeyer believes the humanities can provide the context needed to ethically ground technological innovation. While humanities in Trinity are top-ranked, there is a chronic issue of underfunding. In breaking down the binary between humanities and tech, one that she says employers themselves never seem to be limited by, Ohlmeyer believes the Hub can future-proof the humanities.

Trinity Long Room Hub Speaker Series 2019

A broad ranging series of talks traversing the humanities, sciences, arts and social sciences. This speaker series will offer an unmissable snapshot of human progress; who we are, where we are, and where we're going.

Luke O' Neill	Genevieve Bell
SIRI	Lisa Godson
Ian Robertson	Danielle Bassett
Mark O'Connell	More to be announced

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THE DOCK



Professor Jane Ohlmeyer

Photo: Marc O'Sullivan

The Trinity Long Room Hub series looks at the impact of tech on what it means to be human, but also raises questions about how human beliefs and social constructs become ingrained in emerging technology. “Machines are doing a lot of the screening of applicants,” she said when speaking about diversifying employment within the tech industry. “Algorithms that are designed by very middle class white men.” In what ways are inherent biases written into the technologies being designed today?

One of the speakers at the launch of the series was techno-anthropologist Genevieve Bell. A few years ago, she was speaking at the Other Voices festival in Dingle about being on the “edge” of things. The 3A Institute that Bell founded at the Australian National University is on the cutting edge of the “next industrial revolution”, not only researching how cyber-physical-systems will impact humanity, but designing education models to face the challenges ahead.

While visiting Ireland, Bell became connected with the Hub and found herself gravitating back to it. “Everyone at the the Trinity Long Room Hub is incredibly welcoming,” she said. “The ways in which you have the tech innovation sector growing in Ireland attracted me.”

When Bell started working at Intel in 1991, being an anthropologist, she was considered “odd”. But she has spent more than 20 years working in tech innovation, in many ways more fixated by people’s interactions with technology than the technology itself. Now, there is recognition of the urgent need to understand the deep social, economic and cultural shifts technology is causing.

She believes it is important to recognise that technology has a past, not only a rapidly evolving future. From illuminated manuscripts to the transatlantic telegraph cable in Ireland, technology has been radically changing our societies and our world for centuries.

Bell was invited to participate in the 160th anniversary of this cable, which stretches from a station on Valentia Island, off the coast of Kerry, to a tiny fishing village called Heart’s Content in Canada. “What did it mean when you connected those cables?” she wonders. “Time, distance and social relationships are some of the most important indices in a culture.” A distance that once took weeks and days to cross contracted into a space traversed in minutes, affecting cultural distances, imagined differences, how news moves, how ideas circulate.

“History gives us better questions to ask,” she says. “What is the intent? Who is going to use it?” The intentions of the designer, imaginings about who is going to use a product and why, lives on within the technology that is created. I think of what that says about the fact social media started off as a way to rate if people were hot or not.

Trinity Long Room Hub & Accenture

Trinity’s Arts and Humanities is the only faculty area ranked in the QS World University Rankings global top 50, and are top overall in Ireland. However, despite the strength of their disciplines and reputation internationally, there has been traditionally little engagement between enterprise and the Arts and Humanities, while relationships overall between education and enterprise have been growing in recent years.

In April 2018, the Trinity Long Room Hub worked with Trinity Research and Innovation to remedy this and invited potential enterprise partners to explore how to broaden these relationships and to discuss the changing needs of business, the need to insert ethics into the design and tech conversation as well as the potential for creative solutions to organisation needs. Present at that conversation was Accenture, keen to hear more on the human-centric approach which could be explored in a new partnership and a major new speaker series “*What does it Mean to be Human in the 21st Century?*”.

Organised by the Trinity Long Room Hub Arts & Humanities Research Institute and The Dock, Accenture’s global flagship R&D and Innovation Centre in Dublin, the series aims to ask some of the disruptive questions that can only be addressed when academia meets industry, and the sciences join the humanities. How do we understand ourselves, the world, and our place within it? How does technology account for gender, culture, ethnicity, art and class?

In a data-driven world, organisations such as Accenture recognise the urgent need to place the human perspectives embedded in the Arts and Humanities at the core of new developments in business and intelligent systems.

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Data is artificial intelligence's "original sin", Bell explains, when I ask about how inherent human biases and prejudices are replicated through artificial intelligence. "If you're not thinking really critically about your data sources, your assumptions," she warns, "all those things lurking within that data get built into those systems." A ProPublica investigation in 2016 found that software already used in the criminal justice system, to predict whether people arrested would break the law again, was falsely flagging black people as "future criminals" at twice the rate of white people.

During the 1950s, the power of computing grew in parallel with an existential fear that computers would replace people. Innovation was narrowly focused on the mathematical science and purely instrumentalist thinking. Could human intellect be broken down into sufficiently small pieces so a machine could replicate it? Could you teach a machine to make sense of how humans talk? Now Bell believes we need to move beyond what is strictly rational.

"Who wasn't in the conversation?" Bell asked of those times. She believes that the environmental, emotional and cultural forces need to be central considerations when designing new technologies.

She reminds me that "autonomous" artificial intelligence is still within a framework. There are autonomous elevators now that predict where people are likely to be in a building and launch themselves accordingly. "Let's be clear, though, they can only go up and down," she laughs. "They can't leave the building."

The Dock is Accenture's flagship research and development centre in Dublin. In a shiny modern office in the area of the inner city now dubbed Silicon Docks, prototypes are designed and emerging technologies incubated. The last time I was in the area was during the South Docks festival, a parade organised by the local St Andrew's Resource Centre for communities in the area, now surrounded by some of big tech's biggest headquarters. The Dock says it seeks to "pioneer new ways to fulfil human needs using emerging technology." I was interested in how tech was addressing urgent human needs such as housing.

I was led through the open-plan office space, with free-standing, phone-box-style pods for private calls. In a simple meeting room in



Professor Genevieve Bell

Photo: Tegan Osborne

the back, I meet with Claire Carroll, the Portfolio Director for The Dock.

We talked about their completed work on "Future Home", international market research on smart devices in the home that found companies needed to adopt a "human centric" approach to designing products. The research highlighted concerns about smart devices in homes increasing isolation and becoming a barrier to social interaction. Younger respondents were the most negative about the way technology was affecting their lives, concerned about their privacy and smart devices in their homes knowing too much about them.

The Dock was also involved in developing digital identification using block chain and biometric technology, as part of their ID 2020 project, in partnership with Microsoft. With a UN consortium held on ID 2020, the project aimed to address the challenges facing the estimated 1.1 billion people without formal identification.

Carroll described their challenge as showing "the art of the possible", designing the prototype, a database system enabling multiple parties to share access to data, promising a high level of security and giving individuals consent over who can access their information, without a need for a central authority.

In conclusion, could digital identity change what it means to be human? Displaced, stateless and homeless people often need identification, from maintaining legal residence and voting to accessing services and securing accommodation.

Could such a technology be used for the tracking and surveillance of migrants by governments, at a time when anti-immigration sentiment is on the rise in many countries? Once this technology was developed, how would it evolve or be commercialised? What did it mean to be a human with an identity on the block chain?

The Hub's interdisciplinary approach to technology engaging anthropologists, journalists, neuroscientists and artists attempts to ask both the how and the why.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caelainn Hogan B.A. (2011) has written for *The New York Times Magazine*, *National Geographic*, *The New Statesman* among others. Her first book, *Republic of Shame*, will be published by Penguin Random House. Follow her on Twitter @CaelainnH.

Claire Carroll,
Portfolio Director
for The Dock

Photo: Courtesy of Accenture