

## TEC 154 2014S, Class 34: Owning Biology

---

### Overview

- Preliminaries.
  - Admin.
  - Questions.
- Reviewing our visitors.
- Relationships between ideas.
- A few side notes.
- "Solving" these problems.
- Detour: Plant patents.

## Preliminaries

### Admin

- Today's note takers: LY and CO.
- No readings for Wednesday. Spend time on your smooth drafts.

### Upcoming EC

- Iowater Saturday. Contact [Iowater] for details.
- Awesome speaker tonight at 8pm in JRC 101.

## Questions

## Reviewing our visitors

*Goal: Identify important (new) ways to think about technology.*

Robertson

- Question: Do we have the wisdom to do genetic engineering? How do we gauge whether we are ready to use the technologies that we develop?
  - Florman's unintended consequences
  - Joy: Can our technologies escape our control
  - We can ask this question about any technology we develop
- There's potential: We can use genetic engineering to help with agriculture - Boost yield, make things easier for the farmer (herbicide, insects), decrease drought resistance, increase heat resistance
- Question: Whose responsibility is it when genetically engineered crops contaminate organic crops?

- Florman's unintended consequences
- Who does this help? Certainly not organic farmers. In many cases, only large-scale farmers.
- Golden rice. It's useful, but there are cultural issues that seem to be ignored.
  - Also other issues, e.g., Is this a trojan horse for biotech.
  - Pope's blessing.
- Technology can have huge social and political implications.
  - Dolly vs. other genetic engineering projects.
- Our perception of experts' knowledge affects our perception of the safety of a technology (returning to Lyons)
- We sometimes see "quantum" changes in a category of technology

#### Graham

- The development of technology is intimately influenced by the legal environment. (There's probably a stronger influence of law on technology, but technology may have influence on the law.)
  - Patents encourage/discourage the development of technology.
  - The Google patent database can change the ways in which patents are offered.
- Basic fact: Patents give a form of protection.
- Basic idea: We need mechanisms to incentivize people to create.
  - Coming up with the idea is natural.
  - Finding a way to bring it to market is hard and less natural.
- Basic idea: Over the long term, ideas should be treated as a public good.
- The patent system is flawed. What do we do about the flawed system?
  - What are the alternatives?
  - What are the main flaws?

#### Roper

- How do we utilize ideas, particularly biological ideas, from around the world while still being sensitive to cultures?
  - Can we utilize ideas without taking too capitalist an approach?
- There's technology other than Western technology.
  - Stone tools.
  - Is it simply that we've been treating technological imperative as a western trait, and so focus on the west?
- Ownership of knowledge is complicated.
- Patent system seems to challenge this.
- Technology is not just what we build, but what we use.

## Relationships between ideas

- What constitutes "common knowledge"? (Patents are part of a system to create this common good, but they also seem to infringe upon the common good.)
- Law and technology are interrelated.
  - The "spread" of GMOs is like the "spread" of indigenous knowledge.

- Large multinationals have an effect on many things.
- How do we navigate privilege and power dynamics?
  - Just as technology can privilege certain groups and reinforce power dynamics, so can the legal system around technology prefer certain groups and reinforce power dynamics.
- Capitalism significantly affects all of this.

## A few side notes

Are there other knowledge systems in which we encounter the same issues as the indigenous knowledge?

Is it worth looking at different categories differently? For example, does it matter whether or not the "innovation" makes use of the original plant, or just the model of molecules from the original plant?

## "Solving" these problems

- Can we define a new patenting system that is less Western?
- Let's be more careful about two-way flow of knowledge - Not just if something comes up here we get to use and if something flows there we charge with infringement.
  - Solution?: Acknowledge the power dynamics, acknowledge that it's a two-way street, and give patent rights to the native communities.
  - Develop the solution internally.
  - Destroy capitalism, as it is fundamentally flawed.
- Need not to have "our" legal system so influenced by corporations and such.
  - Of course, this may just make our other problems worse.
  - What do you make a prize for? Particularly in computer technology, many of the best innovations are unexpected.
- Just for patents: Maybe the prize system rather than competition.
- WE SHOULD NOT SOLVE THE PROBLEM FROM A WESTERN PERSPECTIVE; Allow each country to develop their own solution.

Copyright (c) 2014 Samuel A. Rebelsky.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 543 Howard Street, 5th Floor, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.