

The Refusal Conference: A Reading List

List composed by participants at [the Refusal Conference](#), hosted by the Algorithmic Fairness and Opacity Group at the School of Information, UC-Berkeley (Oct 14 - 16, 2020)

Statement on how we are thinking about refusal: The idea of rejecting or refusing technology runs against the grain of the celebrated role tech has generally occupied in the West, wedded closely to the notion of progress itself ([Marx 1997](#)). By this cultural logic, refusal is cast as unwise because it is anti-innovation or it is cast as impossible because technological developments are presumed to be inevitable. And yet, this view is contradicted in practice. Research directions narrow the pathways of tech development through disciplinary logics, market possibilities, and life experience. In industry, projects are frequently cancelled when they cannot generate a profit. This financial logic is a kind of value that motivates refusal. What other values currently guide refusal or could in the future? What forms of justification are useful? What practices make refusal possible? At this conference we lean into the idea that sometimes making a more just and equitable society means *refusing* certain technologies or certain applications of technology.

One challenge those of us seeking to understand refusal confront is the difficulty in disentangling the untapped possibilities of tech from the embedded values that have the habit of guiding tech trajectories in narrower, recurring directions. These values include, for example, control over people, obligatory openness, surveillance, extraction, and secrecy. Refusal may turn productively toward technological alternatives when they refuse entrenched and problematic values in order to center other values. The space of possibility, however, is always much broader than replacing harmful tech with better tech. Ways of acting in the world productively includes legislation, organizational structures, discursive interventions that shift language use and the way issues are framed, as well as social movements and other forms of direct action.

We are especially interested in exploring collective and structural efforts toward tech refusal. Refusal, where individualized as conscientious non-use, is inadequate in a landscape of massively scaled, monopoly platforms or environmental installations that are hard (or impossible) to opt-out of. In other cases people are subjected to technology in ways that are hidden from view. Attempted and successful practices of refusal in recent years take place at the level of collectives and organizations - through social movements, and organizational processes including refusals that happen (or could) within corporate firms, particularly in the Big 5 Tech Firms which have incredible power to shape tech trajectories.

The following is a list of readings organized thematically to help move us toward more expansive ways of thinking about refusal

Last updated November 1, 2020

Have a reading to suggest? [Fill out this form.](#)



General Refusal: Theory and Concept

Barabas, Chelsea, (2020) [Refusal: a beginning that starts with an end](#)

Benjamin, Ruha (2019). [Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code](#)

Benjamin, Ruha (2016). [Informed Refusal: toward a justice based bioethics](#)

Cifor, M., Garcia, P., Cowan, T.L., Rault, J., Sutherland, T., Chan, A., Rode, J., Hoffmann, A.L., Salehi, N., Nakamura, L. (2019). [Feminist Data Manifesto](#)

Gangadharan, Seeta Pena, (2020) [Context. Research. Refusal: perspectives on abstract problem-solving](#)

Milner, Yeshimabeit (2019) [Abolish Big Data](#) *Medium* post

History of Refusal

Conniff Richard (2011) "[What The Luddites Really Fought Against](#)" *Smithsonian Magazine*.

Librarian Shipwreck blog - [Why the Luddites Matter](#)

Linton, David (1985) "[Luddism Reconsidered.](#)" *Et cetera*

Marx, Leo (1997). "[Technology](#)": The emergence of a hazardous concept. *Social Research*, 64 (3), 965–988.

Tierney, Matt. [Dismantlings](#): Words Against Machines in the American Long Seventies (and review by Zachary Loeb - [General Ludd in the Long Seventies](#))

Social Movements About or Opposing Particular Technologies

[Data for Black Lives](#) began as a conference in 2017 at the MIT Media Lab with activists, technologists, and policymakers to discuss the ways technology has impacted Black people. The theme of the 2019 conference was Abolition. I strongly recommend looking through the org and their work for both a model and resources.

Glaser, April. (2019). [Another Network is Possible](#). On the rise (and somewhat of a fall) of IndyMedia.

Hess, David, Steve Breyman, Nancy Campbell, and Brian Martin (2008) "[Science, Technology, and Social Movements](#)" in Hackett, Edward J et al (Eds) *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*

Maass, Dave. (2019) [Victory: San Diego to Suspend Face Recognition Program, Limits ICE Access To Criminal Justice Data](#)

Meadway, James (2020) ['F*** the Algorithm': How A-Level Students Have Shown the Future of Protest](#)

(2017) [Now Is the Time for 'Nobodies'](#) - a conversation between Sarah Lazare and Dean Spade on getting into the muck of local systems.

Walker, Edward et al (2015) [What worked in the fight for network neutrality?](#) - on coalition building and more

Organizational Refusal and Reform

Allison-Hope, Dunstan (2018) [Human Rights Impact Assessment of Facebook in Myanmar](#) by Businesses for Social Responsibility (BSR) a non-profit that works with companies to apply human rights frameworks to organizational decision-making

Cramer et al (2019) [Translation, Tracks & Data: an Algorithmic Bias Effort in Practice](#) - this paper from Spotify is an example of practitioners taking frameworks, principles etc and putting them into practice voluntarily when it could have gone a less accountable/transparent way.

[Google's AI Principles](#) - and four AI applications they will not pursue

Witt, Emily [A User Researcher's Guide to Getting Started With Ethics: How to Incorporate Ethics into your Design Process](#)

Statements of Professional Ethics: statements of principles like ACM' s Statement on Algorithmic Transparency and Accountability, although short, did give working practitioners some support/something they could point to at work to advocate for building in support for explanation, redress, etc. Of course it is important to move beyond simple statements of principles but when a professional society publishes a code of ethics or statement of best practice I think it can help practitioners who want to refuse but feel they need something they can point to.

ACM policy council's [Statement on Algorithmic Transparency and Accountability](#) (and [explainer in the CACM](#)) as well as the [Statement on Facial Recognition Technologies](#).

Requiring Researchers To Discuss Harms as a Key Academic Contribution: there's a movement underway at many conferences to require researchers to talk not just about the possible good uses of their work but also about the possible negative uses of their work when submitting papers. Look at [NeurIPS](#), AAI and others. The [ACM Future of Computing Academy](#) folks are thinking in this space.

New York City Automated Decision Systems (ADS) Task Force: mandated to provide recommendations to the New York City mayor and city council. [Here](#) is their report from November 2019. See also Richardson, Rashida ed., "[Confronting Black Boxes: A Shadow Report of the New York City Automated Decision System Task Force](#)," by the AI Now Institute

Laws and Legislative Activity

Different legal frameworks provide rationales for refusal, for example

Human rights:

- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)
- [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#)
- [International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights](#)
- [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#)

Data Protection and Information Privacy:

- [General Data Protection Regulation \(EU\) 2016/679](#)
- [EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#)
- [California Consumer Privacy Act of 2018](#)

Surveillance Oversight:

- [Oakland Surveillance Technology Ordinance](#)
- [Seattle Surveillance Ordinance](#)

Existing law at times prohibits certain kinds of technology, or certain applications of it. A few examples:

[CA AB-1215 Law enforcement: facial recognition and other biometric surveillance](#) - Establishes a 3 year moratorium on law enforcement agencies and officers installing, activating, or using any biometric surveillance system in connection with an officer camera or data collected by an officer camera

San Francisco's [Stop Secret Surveillance ordinance](#) banning the use of facial recognition technology by city agencies, including police.

[California Civil Code section 52.7 Identification Devices, Prohibition on Bodily Implanting](#) - Prohibits a person from requiring, coercing, or compelling any other individual to undergo the subcutaneous implanting of an identification device (radio frequency identification chips were the impetus).

[Illinois Biometric Information Privacy Act](#) - Requiring companies to obtain consumers' explicit consent before collecting or sharing biometric information

[18 U.S.C.S. § 2512](#) - Prohibiting the manufacture, distribution, possession, and advertising of wire, oral, or electronic communication intercepting devices primarily used for surreptitious surveillance. A law that exists on the books but has rarely been used.

Sometimes legislators will introduce bills with little hope of immediately enacting them, but seeking to start a public conversation. Such bills, legislative activity around them, and media coverage, like other movement building activity, can forge alliances, build momentum, develop new knowledge about the inner workings of technology, and create pressure for different kinds of action. Recent efforts of interest include, for example,

[H.R.7120 - George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020](#) - among other things, prohibits equipping police body-worn and in-car cameras with facial recognition technology, or subjecting their footage to facial recognition technology

[H.R. 2231 - The Algorithmic Accountability Act of 2019](#)

Technical Protocols and Standards

Internet Architecture Board (IAB) [recommendation on Encryption-by-Default for the Internet](#)

Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF):

- [Human Rights Protocol Consideration](#)
- [RFC7258](#) Pervasive Monitoring Is an Attack, 2014.
- [RFC6973](#) Privacy Considerations for Internet Protocols, 2013.

World Wide Web Consortium [privacy standards and do not track](#)

Data Management & Control: the Limits of Individual Refusal

Acquisti, Alessandro, Laura Brandimarte, and George Loewenstein. [Secrets and Likes: The Drive for Privacy and the Difficulty of Achieving It in the Digital Age](#) *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

Barocas, Solon, and Helen Nissenbaum. [Big data's end run around procedural privacy protections](#) *Communications of the ACM* 57.11 (2014): 31-33.

Baumer, Eric et al (2015) [On the Importance and Implications of Studying Technology Non-Use in Interactions](#).

Draper, Nora and Joseph Turow (2019) [The Corporate Cultivation of Digital Resignation](#) *New Media and Society*

Gillmor, Dan, [Facebook Is Tracking Me Even Though I'm Not on Facebook](#) *ACLU*

Hill, Kashmir [Goodbye Big Five](#) - a series on resisting each of the major tech platforms from the Gizmodo tech blog.

Woodruff, Allison. (2014). [Necessary, unpleasant, and disempowering: reputation management in the internet age](#). *CHI conference*.

Design Refusals and Alternatives

Baumer, Eric and Six Silberman (2011). [When the implication is not to design](#)

Densmore, Melissa (2012) [Claim mobile: when to fail a technology](#)

Graeff, Erhardt. 2020. [The Responsibility to Not Design and the Need for Citizen Professionalism](#) *Computing Professionals for Social Responsibility: The Past, Present and Future Values of Participatory Design*.

Grasso et al (2020) [Applying Algorithmic Accountability Frameworks with Domain-specific Codes of Ethics](#): A Case Study in Ecosystem Forecasting for Shellfish Toxicity in the Gulf of Maine - combining an algorithmic accountability framework with a domain-specific code of ethics

Homewood, Sarah (2019) [Inaction as a Design Decision: Reflections on Not Designing Self-Tracking Tools for Menopause](#)

Hope et al (2019) [Hackathons as Participatory Design: Iterating Feminist Utopias](#)

Jacobs, Jane (1961) [The Death and Life of Great American Cities](#) - instead of automated surveillance, can architectural design facilitate community and human connection? Could it help neighbors to know and help one another out? See below “green chairs not green lights” as an attempt along these lines.

[Green Chairs not Green Lights](#) - designing an alternative to tech surveillance in Detroit

Kluttz, Daniel et al (2018) “[The limits of the technical ‘fix’ for fairness](#)” - a workshop report from the [2018 AFOG summer workshop](#).

Pedagogy: Teaching Refusal

[Beautiful Trouble: a toolbox for revolution](#) - instructions for how social movements can make change

[Race, Policing, and Detroit’s Project Green Light](#) - a case study of Detroit’s Project Green Light designed as a curriculum unit for University undergraduates or (possibly) high school students. Interview with Tawana Petty of Detroit Community Technology Project.

[Secrets of a Successful Organizer](#) - for teaching refusal organizing to future technologists

Simpson, Audra (2007) [On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, Voice, and Colonial Citizenship](#) in *Junctures*

Tuck and Yang (2014) [Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research](#), in *Qualitative Inquiry*

Zahara, Alex (2016) [Refusal as Research Method in Discard Studies](#) - a good overview and introduction from the “Discard Studies” blog about refusal in research. Includes a list and summary of some of the key readings.

Refused Values

Refusing the Efficiency Imperative

Gordon and Mugar, [Meaningful Efficiencies: civic design in an age of digital expediency](#)

Christen, Kimberly and Jane Anderson (2019). [Toward Slow Archives](#)

O’Dell, Jenny (2019) [How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy](#)

Smart, Andrew (2013) [Autopilot: the art and science of doing nothing](#)

Gregg, Mel (2018) [Counterproductive: Time management in the Knowledge Economy](#) - less of a manifesto or guidebook to refusing, but a helpful analysis of how we've gotten to this state of desperate efficiency and self-disciplining by white collar workers

Weeks, Kathi (2011) [The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries](#)

Illich, Ivan (1973) [Tools for Conviviality](#)

Refusing the Imperative to Scale

Gillespie, Tarlton (2018) [The Scale Is Just Unfathomable](#)

Gillespie, Tarleton (2020) [Content Moderation, AI, and the Question of Scale](#), *Big Data & Society* - one subsection is titled "Maybe we should not automate"

Hanna, Alex & Park, Tina (2020) [Against Scale: Provocations and Resistances to Scale Thinking](#) *arXiv*

Refusing the Default to Openness

Christen, Kimberly (2007) [The Politics of Search: Archival Accountability in Aboriginal Australia](#)

[Mukurtu](#) - a CMS for managing indigenous information and knowledge

Wemigwans, Jennifer. (2019). [A Digital Bundle Protecting and Promoting Indigenous Knowledge on the Internet](#). (University of Regina Press) -- indigenous theorizing on new approaches to technologies. Creating space for Indigenous Knowledge on its own terms.

Refusing the Default to Centralized (Big) Tech

Duarte, Marisa Elena (2017) [Network Sovereignty: Building the Internet Across Indian Country](#)

Varia.zone: [Collective approaches to everyday technologies](#) based in Rotterdam -- [feminist hack meetings](#)

Vigil-Hayes, Morgan et al (2017) [Reflections on Alternative Internet Models and How They Inform More Mindful Connectivity](#) -- could also fit under 'design refusals and alternatives' and under 'refusing the efficiency imperative'

Zuckerman, Ethan (2019) [Building a More Honest Internet](#) -- what if we built an alternative public-interest search engine with audits built in?

Zuckerman, Ethan (2020) [The Case for Digital Public Infrastructure](#)

Refusing Surveillance

Brunton, Finn, and Helen Nissenbaum. [*Obfuscation: A user's guide for privacy and protest*](#). MIT Press, 2015.

Lyon, David. "Resisting surveillance." [*The surveillance studies reader*](#) (2007): 368-377.

Marx, Gary T. [*A tack in the shoe: Neutralizing and resisting the new surveillance*](#) *Journal of social issues* 59.2 (2003): 369-390.