2012-2013 Topics

Culture of Celebrity
PP1

We are currently surrounded by images of people who are "famous for being famous." Magazines, TV, and the Internet are flooded by minute details of celebrities' lives. Young people see many of these celebrities as their role models even though these celebrities may indulge in destructive behaviors. Research has documented a celebrity-worship syndrome (CWS) where the person's idolatry becomes all-consuming. At its worst, this can lead to the stalking of celebrities, whilst others spend their lives learning everything they can about "their" celebrity, collecting memorabilia, making websites, or writing "fan fiction." While there are a variety of negative impacts resulting from celebrities' actions, they are also able to bring widespread attention to worthwhile causes around the globe. As the media finds more and more ways to exploit celebrities for profit, what will the effect be on the lives of those susceptible to "celebrity worship"? What extreme measures might celebrities take to stay out of the public eye? Can this trend continue to escalate without dire consequences?

Robotic Age
PP2

Science fiction stories often depict a futuristic world run by computer programs and machines. How realistic is it that we will one day refer to robots as our colleagues, our neighbors, or our friends? Already robotic innovations have transformed the way cars are built and how a wide array of products are made. Will such innovations in the future produce a net increase or a net decrease in jobs? What will happen to workers who are laid-off as jobs are downsized in favor of machines that do not require a pension or vacation days? To what extent can robots truly be endowed with artificial intelligence? Are there ethical limits to the types of decisions that should be left to intelligent pieces of technology?

Megacities
QP

Megacities are cities of over 10 million people that have grown rapidly and have a dense population, often 2000 or more people per square mile (772.2 per square km). By 2030, it is estimated that 3 out of 5 humans on the planet will live in cities - many, if not most, in megacities. Urban environments offer a wide variety of amenities: arts and culture, educational institutions, and high-paying jobs. But big cities are often also home to high levels of poverty, unemployment, and crime. Many urban areas contain slums and sprawling shantytowns where the infrastructure is limited or breaking down and where unsanitary conditions and a lack of public services lead to malnutrition, poor health, and limited educational opportunities. Often two smaller cities simply grow together to form a vast urban sprawl. Should this immense growth be a concern? What special methods are required to govern such highly populated places, particularly where the residents hail from a diverse range of ethnic and religious backgrounds? What other problems will challenge the urban citizens?

Ocean Soup
AB

In the North Pacific, a large area known as the 'Garbage Patch' has become 'Ocean Soup' and is so polluted by remnants of plastic that samples show 48 parts plastic for every part of plankton. As the plastics drift further and further into the 'garbage patch,' they break down into smaller and smaller pieces like confetti and cannot be tracked from the air. These floating fragments accumulate the manufactured poisons that are not water-soluble. Plastics have entangled birds and turned up in the bellies of fish.

One paper cited by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) estimated 100,000 marine mammals die of trash-related deaths each year. NOAA has been contacted regarding cleanup of the debris in the "garbage patch" and other areas of the North Pacific; however, cleanup is likely to be difficult. What might happen to the food chain if action is not taken to clean up the Ocean Soup? What is the future of our oceans if plastics continue to contaminate the waters and wildlife?