Master's Thesis Google Self-driving Car: Imagining Safety

Emil Angelov

Abstract

The car based mobility system has been providing considerable personal freedom for over a century now. However, it is also associated with serious side effects in terms of safety, environmental impacts, and energy consumption. Regarding safety, it is commonly accepted that human error is the dominant cause of car accidents. Despite the plethora of driver aid systems already installed in cars, innovation technology companies are using the advancements in the robotics and automation field to address this issue by developing completely autonomous cars were humans are just passengers. One such car is Google Self-driving Car that has been extensively tested in the past few years. Google is promising their car to be "safer, easier and more enjoyable" than the regular, human-operated car and is stirring quite an increase of promotional and lobbying activity surrounding the autonomous vehicle industry. However, these promises come with the risk of questioning and redefining social, legal and ethical realities so that they are aligned with the advocated future imaginaries. In the face of potential opposition to social disruption and creation of possible alliances with other actors in the field in order to provide legitimation, attract interest and foster investment in this new technology, Google has taken on a series of promotional activities to frame the self-driving car in a positive light to the public and potential stakeholders. This research investigates one such promotional effort in the form of series of videos posted on Self-driving Car Project Google+ account. Through multimodal and qualitative content analysis of four Google Self-driving Car videos this study examines the way in which safety discourse is (re)created and used to push certain visions of the future. From empirical point of view, the focus of the research was placed on in-depth consideration of three major categories of rhetorical devices identified in the videos: appeal to technology as an inherently good thing, creation of attractive and desirable futures and use of metaphors and emotions to create excitement in anticipation of these technology-optimised visions of the future. It shows that the dominant self-driving car safety narrative is coupled with Google's intentions to advocate a vision of the future radically different from the present we live in by interacting with the collectively held socio-technical imaginaries. In essence, this conception of a personalised mobility system is a technocratic fiction where software seems to be a worthy replacement for human knowledge and experience, an idea that is skilfully linked throughout the material with liberal-democratic imaginaries of progress, innovation and change. By means of promoting technological determinism, creating exciting futures and use of metaphors and sentiments Google frames the "inherent" safety features of the Self-driving Car in a positive light and positions its vanguard visions of the future at the pinnacle of implementation of autonomous vehicle technologies.