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Biography

Susan L. Robertson is Professor of Sociology of Education, Fellow of Wolfson College, Simon Visiting Professor at the University of Manchester, and Co-Editor in Chief of the journal *Globalisation, Societies and Education*. She is currently Affiliated Lecturer, University of Cambridge; Distinguished Professorial Fellow, Aarhus University; Adjunct Professor at OISE, Toronto; and Distinguished Professor Beijing Institute of Technology. She has written widely on the political economy of higher education including global regionalisms, multilateralism and transformations of the state and governing, market making and platform capitalism.

Title:

The New Geopolitics of Technology and Higher Education: Global Horizons, National Strategies, and New Market Players

Abstract

Just as the world of higher education inched its way out of the disarray caused by a global pandemic, Covid-19, in November 2022, a revolution of a different kind was launched, ChatGPT created by Silicon Valley based OpenAI. Ask it a question, such as ‘what is the difference between ontology and epistemology?’ and at rapid speed this ‘intelligent’ chatbot could be seen ‘confidently’ responding in fully formed sentences. According to some pundits, this was the new (AI) goldrush; an innovation more profound “...than fire or electricity” (De Vynck and Tiku 2023), and one that according to Bill Gates “will change our world” (Baughman 2023), but it will release us from work forever (USA billionaire Elon Musk). Within months China had launched its own versions of ChatGPT in a new arms race widely touted as the war of the chatbots (Rudolph et al. 2023). GAI, we might argue, is also turbo-charging techno-nationalist manoeuvrings between the USA and China, with major implications for the work of higher education institutions, their academics and for students. In this lecture I explore what is at stake for the academy if AI nationalisms are allowed to take hold. I’ll be arguing that critical scholars within the academy need to engage with the possibilities and limitations of GAI, not simply epistemically or in relation to the political nature of biases and ‘absences’, but what this means for the knowledge enterprise of the university, the reshaping already at work in its wider political economy, and geo-politics.