'The sociotechnical' is a perspective, an approach to making sense of the world that refuses to allow a separation between people and things. Humans cannot be understood without also looking at their technologies and the contexts and practices that tie us to what we do, how we do it, and why. Being sociotechnical is not new, we have always been that way, from fire to the Edison bulb to the LED.

We usually populate 'the social' with things like norms, values, feelings, interactions, collaborations, institutions, or politics. On the other hand, we populate 'the technical' with objects, science and expert knowledge, design and engineering, devices and machines. Following from that divide, we have built a vast academic enterprise that distinguishes the social sciences from the natural and engineering sciences, and in turn from the humanities. Sociologists are meant to investigate social interactions, structures and histories, engineers develop new technologies, natural scientists focus on rocks, plants and particles, and humanists on art, history and literature. From a sociotechnical perspective, these great divides have been a great mistake.

How are we supposed to understand society if we don't also focus on our technologies of communication (from mail to mobiles), of archiving (from cards to clouds), or collaboration (from whiteboards to wikis)? How are engineers to build technologies without considering their human users, their places in our ways of life, or the downstream consequences for the planet? How are humanists to make sense of literature without considering the shifting media of the book and eReader? By parsing the world into social things and technical things, we have created the two headed monster of the social and the technical —two perspectives on what is a single beast.

In the viewscreen of a camera, a photographer can choose to frame only the people or only the things, but in a sociotechnical perspective the frame must include both. What results is the ability to make sense of a whole lot more, and an insistence that we must attend to humans and things in similar ways. A sociotechnical perspective is not utopian or dystopic: 'sociotechnical' does not imply that something is good, bad or even balanced. Instead, it argues that in order to make the judgement one must inspect people, technology and their interactions. The comic artists in this volume — undergraduate and graduate students in the Human Centered Design & Engineering (HCDE) department at the University of Washington — have portrayed worlds that are hopeful and others that are fearful, technologies that are sometimes in tune with how we'd like to live, and at other times at odds. In both cases, they reveal through comedy and tragedy, the complex, entangled and evolving sociotechnical worlds we inhabit.

<div align="right">David Ribes</div>

The TWO headED MONSTeR of The SOCIOTeCHNICaL

BY JAKE FAGAN, CONCEPT BY DAVID RIBES