

Chapter XXX

Philosophy of Web–Based Mediation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter deals with the influence of mediation in different kinds of virtual environments such as virtual conferences, e-learning platforms, distance learning environments and surroundings, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), and various other user interfaces. Mediation is a means in which messages, discussion, and behaviour are becoming more and more conceptual and abstract and have an effect on our social being. As a result of mediation there is no first-hand experience of reality; everything is constructed, and in virtual reality we have receded a long way off from real life. Mediation affects our capability to make independent ethical decisions. The same process is discerned in all the social and commercial practices where it is rationalized by processing techniques or when it is made virtual. Here mediation is studied from a phenomenological perspective. Quantification, modelling, and regulation also describe aspects of mediation. This chapter is a review article and an opening in mediational ethics based on classical philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the concept or the problem of mediation is approached at different levels. To begin with, the etymology and metaphysical meaning of the concept of mediation is studied. Secondly, some of the different aspects of mediation are illustrated. And thirdly, mediational practice is

presented in new and modern environments, such as distance learning environments, different virtual environments, and in user interfaces for the customers of libraries and social services.

The aim of this research is--in accordance with Critical Theory--to take a stand. The goal is, as the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244) emphasized, human emancipation “to

liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them.” As Horkheimer pointed out the normative task of Critical Theory cannot be accomplished apart from the interplay between philosophy and social science through interdisciplinary empirical social research (Bohman, 2005; Horkheimer, 1993, p. 19-21). Horkheimer’s thesis emphasized that Critical Theory is adequate only if it meets three criteria--it must be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time. This declaration is followed also in this study, so the point of departure is both normative and ethical. The study is, however, also descriptive; the aim is to find the different variations of mediation. Partly because of the aims of Critical Theory the phenomenon of digital divide is also treated in this chapter.

Mediation is a means in which messages, discussion, discourse, and behaviour are becoming more and more conceptual and abstract and have an effect on our social being. Methodologically this research is phenomenological. In addition, an empirical study and some cases dealing with mediation are presented (e-learning platforms, distance learning environments and surroundings, two user interfaces, namely the web 2.0 of Stockholm City Library, and the interface between customers and social services in the City of Helsinki). Phenomenological bracketing has been chosen as a research method particularly because of its “being behindhand” (Mays, 2002, p. 177-186). In phenomenology central concepts or phenomena are taken into consideration from different perspectives. It is quite obvious that for example the concept mediation has a number of meanings depending on chosen discipline, or viewpoint. In phenomenological reduction, the attempt to define significance and discipline becomes a systematic attempt on controlling chaos (Ricoeur, 1984; Zahavi, 2003).

The background materials for this research are retrieved from classical philosophy but mostly from Jean Baudrillard, renowned for his analyses

of modes of mediation and of technological communication and mediation. Baudrillard (1993) claimed that mediation accelerated because of the fast transfer to virtuality or hyperreality. He describes pessimistically the effect of mediation technologies on the human experience of reality. We do not meet our fellow men face to face any more but in different kinds of virtual environments. This has certainly both alienated us from traditional ethical decisions and at the same time brought about new ways how to make a choice. (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 20-21; Chandler, 1995, p. 89) Baudrillard’s most important works dealing with mediation are *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976) and *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981).

However, mediation is an ongoing process. Our life is changing into more and more abstract direction. Mediation is an obligatory way that controls our lives and ever-increasing complexity in society (the world), and transforms and changes our life-world.

Existentialism dealt with practical philosophy, for example, ethics, and therefore mediation is studied for instance in the light of the thoughts by Søren Kierkegaard.

Mediation has an influence on different everyday social and commercial practices and virtual environments. Distance learning is used to respond to the challenges of life-long learning. In distance learning, virtual learning environments are used to rationalize and standardize education. Virtual learning may cause alienation and estrangement, when the traditional social contacts are missing. But it has its advantages, too. Virtual education is dealt with in the light of a case study made in the Tritonia Academic Library in 2005-2006.

The research area of the topic “mediational ethics,” which has been taken into account in this study, is difficult to define. It certainly has to deal with virtuality. The main focus is to try to understand how mediation influences our life-world where the ethical decisions are made. When

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