

Chapter 16

The Internet as a Normative Device for Cultural Practices

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, life and culture are matters of technological interconnectedness. This is not to say that connecting computers equals to creating a cultural environment and we might just want to consider their day to day technical efficiency and productivity. But then, how can we assess a cultural, not just practical dimension of the Internet? The question of a cultural dimension of the Internet is not that of its usefulness. Though technical craftsmanship might be a requirement for an authentic cultural networked experience, instrumentalism, as a theoretical approach, connotes exclusively the necessity of controlling the flow of data and information.

This paper aims to show that the Internet is not just a technical pattern and a normative framework aimed at producing and enacting otherwise defined cultural experiences. Information and communication technologies are complex programmed and interrelated functions eventually realised in the form of a cultural ecosystem – the Internet as such – and they do not simply form a web of industrially organised devices and services. It is then wrong to say that networks crush our minds and that nowadays acculturation prevails. The Internet is a cultural matrix generating new forms of meaningful interactions through the permanent and pervasive interconnectedness it allows for.

INTRODUCTION

We cannot anymore lead our contemporary life without utilising a rather wide range of technological devices. For professional purposes or private matters, we need to bear mobile phones,

personal digital assistants (PDA's), mini or portable computers, as well as any correlated paraphernalia such as USB keys, iPods, iPads and the like. All of these are aimed at doing something specific; many of them can do many naturally unrelated things *at the same time*: write text while drawing images, playing music, and allowing for communications or database mining. Which is exactly what a computer actually does, being to some

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extent similar to Delphian cutlery as described by Aristotle (4th c. BCE) in his *Politics*. Designing and building electronic devices, programming them and assembling them into swarms of machines make up the computing *ecosystem*. In two senses: first, because programs themselves need to be interconnected to allow for the diversity of computing usage; second, because the extensive use of these machines imply their participation in the social, economical and partially political exchanges occurring in a network.

Nowadays, life in general and culture in particular are matters of technological interconnectedness. This is not to say, though, that connecting computers equals to producing culture. We should rather consider that all of our activities, however culturally engaged, more or less relate to Information and Communication Technologies. Our everyday life, our academic life, our professional and private lives – they are all closely or loosely related to an industrial ecosystem of energy, industrial production and cognitive use of computing apparatus. There is scarcely talking and mating without e-mailing, no way to launch a business or conduct a project without electronically sharing information, no waking up or going to sleep without experiencing a call on a cellular phone or using computer regulated means of transportation – from cars that stop at traffic lights to trains and aeroplanes that cross countries and continents remotely guided by signals and data-crunching.

Under the circumstances, what exactly does it mean to interrogate the cultural efficiency of the Internet? Undoubtedly the “Network of networks” is an active, even living process of innumerable information exchanges, and a contemporary icon of shared intelligence, knowledge and Humanity. As such, is it an *instrument* for producing cultural items like text or images? Qualified by their *instrumentality*, devices are “meant for executing” or “destined to achieve” goals that we imagine beforehand and represent ourselves as more or less essential. They are accompanied by the glow of necessity, usefulness, pleasure, etc. But also,

“usability” is a form of “disposability.” We might be unable to do away with an instrument’s functions, but we certainly can replace an apparatus by another. The point to be made does not concern the particular form of a writing tool such as the Internet, it concerns its very *instrumentality* and its status within the logic of cultural goals and means. The question of the cultural dimension of the Internet is not that of its cultural usefulness or necessity. Assuredly knives and spoons are instruments for cooking; brushes and pigments are instruments for painting; paper and pencils are instruments for writing – should we in the same way consider the Internet as an instrument, even maybe a toolbox for writing, painting, and, at least, offering us communicative opportunities for sharing exotic recipes and tasting foreign food?

That the Internet is a device made for sharing through various ways of communicating is undeniable. And indeed, it *can* and it *must* be interpreted as a political device, e.g. for challenging a representative’s or a government’s choices and actions, also, as an economic device for exchanging valuable data and digital products like software or music and video, among many other things. It is equally a socialisation device allowing for unexpected encounters and the reshaping of social groups beyond geographical frontiers or sociological boundaries. Why not, then, consider it a cultural device? In doing so, though, we tend to consider the Internet and its industrial infrastructure, its coded architecture as well, as a series of neutral and transparent *means* to reach *ends* or goals otherwise substantiated: Truth through knowledge and science, the Good through morals and metaphysics, what is ethically relevant or sustainable, and the like. Our means for giving rise to cultural products are extremely varied. Should we consider the Internet as one particular and privileged of them? The question is: “is it really only a very complex device and a series of controllable means to a series of identifiable ends?” That it is of an utmost cultural importance is indisputable. Yet, beyond its instrumentality lies

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