



Hermeneutics and ethics

Description

Some ethical problems: uneven access, inflated claims of egalitarian access, presumption of growth, the deception of conspicuous simulations, the primacy of calculative reason, and obsessions with devices rather than the socio-technical systems of which they are a part.

The **critical theorists** (see [Wired-up Words](#)) identify potent areas of critique, but a hermeneutical perspective presents an ethical encounter with digital media not so much an unmasking of deceit as an engagement in the game of interpretation, and an engagement with differences in interpretation. For Alasdair MacIntyre, ethical questions are not so much decided once and for all. They are to be resolved in practical situations.



Entrance to Cyber Club, Fez, Morocco

Critical theory is right in identifying the problem of uneven access to information technology, in so far as it is a **situated** complaint. One can ask to whom the supposed benefits of digital media apply and in what situations. To be blind to the question of access, including questions of literacy, is to succumb to a particular prejudice that everyone in the world has the same opportunities. The appropriate ethical response is to subject those prejudices to challenge and revision. One could forgive the pundits their enthusiastic and utopian rhetoric in the first flush of the development of the Internet, but now there is more information to hand, more voices to be heard. It is the failure to listen to those voices that

constitutes the nub of any ethical problem on the issue of uneven access to digital media.

The hermeneutical perspective reconfigures the critical theorists's complaint against all rhetoric applauding the supposed democratisation of communications systems. The digital media enthusiasts, particularly those who stand to gain most by its promotion, should seek to challenge their own presuppositions. Conversations about digital social networking ushering in a new democracy and sociability deny the ethical to the extent that they rely on old assumptions and to the extent that they deny evidence to the contrary.

On the concealment of big business and consumer culture, the critical theorist's complaint is clearly one limited interpretation of the current commercial climate. Social theorists such as Anthony Giddens have pointed to alternative constructions, situating the neo-Marxist critique within its own historical horizon. One can see the problem (of capitalism) in terms of a reconfiguration of relations between the local and the global: commercial relations that operate in global and local contexts. This emphasis on the differences in various commercial situations takes the emphasis away from universalising claims, and identifies the relation between the particular and the universal as at the nub of the ethical problems of commerce, rather than the deceptive cloak of a chimerical "capitalist system" to which everyone unwittingly submits.

What of the question of conspicuous simulation as deception, particularly as a mask to the unreality of everyday existence? This is one of a number of interpretations of how simulation operates. A simulation also operates as a game. One of the characteristics of the game is that it repeats. The game player is engaged in re-enactment, even ritual repetition. But as long as the game is alive as play, each encounter is new, and even renews our experience of life outside the game. After experiencing the impoverished sensory world of SecondLife one may be impressed anew with the textures and responsiveness of the world outside the virtual reality game.

The metanarrative of calculative logic that imbues information technology rhetorics (critical theory's further complaint) is not so much a deception as an attempt to apply a universalising schema to the particular without allowing for the to-and-fro movement of interpretive practice.

The hermeneutical position agrees with critical theorists who assert that it is the whole technological system that comes under scrutiny and that social transformations are not determined simply by the autonomous introduction of the latest device. Certain social conditions have prepared the way for the development and introduction of the personal computer and the Internet. Rather than looking for the oppression lurking beneath the surface, hermeneutics recognises the way understanding, the interpretive process, operates. And when we let interpretation run its course we are always operating ethically. To engage with issues ethically is to be caught up in a restless movement.

This restless hermeneutical movement is not the same as the incessant unmasking of critical theory, that seeks to peel back the layers to get to the truth, leaving a trail of perpetual suspicion and cynicism. The hermeneutical movement is an attempt to keep the conversation going. We continue to operate ethically so long as we listen and act, engaging in the hermeneutics of understanding.

See Coyne, Richard, and Dorian Wiszniewski. 2000. Technical deceptions: critical theory, hermeneutics and the ethics of information technology. *International Journal of Design Sciences and Technology*, (8) 1, 9-18. [Article in academia.edu](#)

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