



Being practical

Description

The recent raid at Abbottabad has shown President Obama to be a leader capable of decisive action after all, as opposed to *just* an academic (ie a dithering nerd-in-chief), at least according to critical commentators (*The Guardian*, 7 May 2011, p.21). Having read Obama's *The Audacity of Hope*, I'm hard-pressed to think of Obama as an intellectual whose mind is hogtied by complex ideas. But, yes, astute, powerful, liberal, consensual, intelligent and pragmatic. With the latter adjective referring not only to an ability to make practical decisions, but the tradition of American thinking which Obama is undoubtedly heir.



Pragmatism is a school of philosophical thought that

embraces the primary importance of human action, the practicalities of human involvement, the materiality of the world, the interaction of the senses, and the formative power of technology. Pragmatism distinguishes itself from analytical and theoretical orientations: eg Cartesian Rationalism, dependence on logic, and single-eyed Idealism. Whereas Rationalism grants privilege to *theory* over *practice*, for the pragmatist making up *theories* is just another kind of *practice*.

The success of popular and accessible computing, digital social media and pervasive computing owe a similar debt, whether through declared allegiance or not, to Pragmatism. I argued this in *Designing Information Technology in the Postmodern Age* in 1995.

Interaction design has been influenced by Pragmatism through the philosophy of John Dewey (1859-1952). It is also sustained through the media philosophy of Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) of the 1960s, and interest in the thought of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), both of whom readily find residence in the pragmatic mind. Pragmatism is optimistic about technology, and is thereby distinguishable from other traditions of thought, such as *critical theory* and the scepticism of Jacques Derrida's *radical* theories.

Evidence for this "pragmatic turn" in politics and in design comes from McLuhan's observation about how electronic culture had ushered in new modes of philosophical thought subversive of Rationalism. For example, according to McLuhan electronic technologies are bringing about liberal approaches to education: "Paradoxically, automation makes liberal education mandatory."

According to McLuhan we are now like nomads, gathering knowledge, and involved in the total social process. We also have a new social consciousness. We are responsible for all humankind.

For McLuhan, writing in the 1960s, these and others factors produced a culture receptive to Heidegger's "anti-rationalist" stance. In a manner befitting his devotion to 1960s popular culture, McLuhan was confident to say

Heidegger surf-boards along on the electronic wave as triumphantly as Descartes rode the mechanical wave. (*Gutenberg Galaxy*, p.248)

If McLuhan is right then an engagement with the medium of computation is or will inevitably lead away from Rationalism, especially as the computer becomes more of a "cool" medium, interactive and engaging all the senses. McLuhan did not have to be right in his predictions. Because of his influence on silicon culture his prophecies fulfil themselves.

Here are some references that explore the Pragmatic orientation in design thinking, particularly in relation to computing, and against Rationalism.

- Coyne, R., *Designing Information Technology in the Postmodern Age: From Method to Metaphor*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995.
- Coyne, Richard D. 1998. *Cyberspace and Heidegger's pragmatics*. *Information Technology and People* (Special Issue: Heidegger and Information Technology), (11) 4, 338-350.
- McCarthy, J. and P. Wright, *Technology as Experience*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.
- Melles, G., "New pragmatism and the vocabulary and metaphors of scholarly design research", *Design Issues*, 24: 4, 2008, 88-101.

According to philosopher of technology Don Ihde, Pragmatism is one of the three dominant "styles" of philosophy evident in the twentieth century. The other two are Phenomenology and Logical Positivism, the latter a variant of Rationalism.

- Ihde, Don. 1993. *Philosophy of Technology: An Introduction*. New York: Paragon.

The theory/practice distinction has a long history. For Aristotle, theory (*theoria*) was both contemplation and strenuous disciplined activity, to be contrasted with practice (*praxis*), that involved doing, living well

and exercising practical wisdom.

- Bernstein, Richard J. 1971. *Praxis and Action*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Richard Rorty presents the similarities and differences between Heidegger's thought and philosophical pragmatism.

- Rorty, Richard. 1980. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

As for Pragmatism and the US President, Susan Schulten argues the link cogently.

- Schulten, Susan. 2009. Barack Obama, Abraham Lincoln, and John Dewey. *Denver University Law Review*, (86)807-818.
- Obama, Barack. 2007. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence

Tags

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2. Dewey
3. Heidegger
4. McLuhan
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