Theorizing the Cultural Quality of New Media

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1. Introduction: Normative and Critical Studies of New Media

The past thirty years have witnessed the emergence of new media: interactive, computer-based devices like multimedia PCs, digital (mobile) telephones, the Internet, hand-held computers and game computers. All of these are made possible through new advances in information technology. These devices are now regularly used at work or at home by a majority of people, and their influence has extended deeply to all sectors of society, including work, leisure, education, health care, government and the arts. New media have become new mass media, contrasting with "old" electronic and print media, like the radio, television, telephone and newspaper. It is widely recognized that the social, cultural and political implications of new media are significant, and it has even been argued by many that their rise has enabled the emergence of a new, postindustrial model of society, the information society, with its own principles of social and economic organization and cultural practices (Castells, 1996). The social, cultural and political implications of new media have now become a major topic in academic research, in both the social sciences, humanities and arts. In recent years, an interdisciplinary field of new media studies has even emerged (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002; Lister et al., 2003; Wardrip-Fruin & Montfort, 2003).

Whereas most research on new media is descriptive and empirical, part of it is normative and evaluative: it proposes normative criteria for the evaluation of social and cultural implications of new media use and evaluates such implications so as to assess their value, desirability, quality or worth. A survey of such normative analyses shows three major traditions: ethical analysis, normative political analysis, and aesthetic analysis.[1] Ethical analysis of information technology has been the province of the field of computer ethics (Johnson, 2000; Tavani 2003). Computer ethics is a field that emerged in the 1980s out of worries stemming from unethical uses of computers, for instance in computer crime, privacy violations, free speech and censorship, and property rights, and is mainly concerned with the analysis right and wrong conduct in the use of computer technology and the formulation and justification of policies for its ethical use. Normative political analysis, which sometimes overlaps with ethical analysis, develops conceptions and arguments concerning the role of the state in the regulation of computer technology, the role of the law in such regulation, and the distribution of powers and responsibilities between citizens, corporations and the state in the use of such technology (Hill and Hughes, 1998; Saco, 2002; Mossberger et al., 2003; Fountain, 2001). It discusses issues like cyberdemocracy, distributive justice and the digital divide, liberal vs. conservative policies for regulating free speech on the internet, the protection of property rights, national security, and the common good in cyberspace. Aesthetic analysis finally, discusses the aesthetic and literary properties of new media creations and evaluates the impact of new media on our conception of art and literature (Gumbrecht and Marrinan, 2003; Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigon, 2004; Dyson and Homolka, 1996).

[1] Epistemological analyses could constitute a fourth class, but very few epistemological studies of new media exist.

Critiques that Do Not Fit the Mold

There is a growing number of studies that critically examines the social and cultural impacts of new media that cannot be seen to fall in any of these three established categories, the ethical, the political, or the aesthetic, even though they voice normative and evaluative criticism:

- In *Holding on to Reality,* Albert Borgmann develops a critique of cyberspace (Borgmann, 1999). Borgmann argues that cyberspace presents an illusory escape into another reality. He claims that it tends to trivialize and glamorize facets of reality that appear to one detached from their context and setting, and that it blurs the distinction between fact and fiction.

- In discussing the implications of cyberspace for identity, Sherry Turkle has argued that the multiple virtual personalities that people may adopt on the net may promote the emergence of a nonunitary, multiple self. This, she says, can be evaluated negatively if one adopts the ideal of a unitary, autonomous, modernist self, but which is evaluated positively by her because being able to emphasize different aspects of oneself in different identities can be liberatory and can help us better acknowledge diversity (Turkle, 1995).

- Hubert Dreyfus has critiqued computer-mediated education (Dreyfus, 1999). He argues that education centrally involves the transmission of skills and a process by which educators foster commitments in their students and stimulate them to develop strong identities. He then argues that such skills, commitments and identities cannot adequately be transferred in distance education since they require bodily presence and localized interactions between students and teachers. This requires a relation of apprenticeship, which according to Dreyfus cannot be attained on-line.

- Paul Virilio has argued that electronic media, developed and used in a capitalist consumer society, combine with other technologies in speeding up the process of production and consumption so as to create a culture of speed (Virilio, 1994). The immediate availability of information and the continuous production and consumption of new information ultimately lead, according to Virilio, to a feeling of confinement or incarceration in the world. Virilio also holds that the culture of speed threatens writing and the author, because the speed with which information is produced and consumed only allows for shallowness.

- Langdon Winner has argued against a conception of virtual communities as real communities, arguing that most of them do not include the obligations, responsibilities and constraints found in ordinary communities, while they may well end up undermining real communities, which makes all of us lose (Winner, 1997).

- Ben-Ze'ev, finally, has argued that cyberspace has revolutionized the role of imagination in personal relationships by coupling imagination with real interactivity, allowing us to have meaningful online relationships in which we can both express ourselves in more direct ways than we would otherwise and live out fantasies, which he evaluates mostly in a positive way (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004).

None of these critiques, I want to claim, fall clearly within the traditional categories of ethical,

political or aesthetic analysis. So what kind of critique are they? The most obvious answer seems to be that they are *cultural critiques*, since they seem to have as their object cultural practices, symbols, meanings and configurations; that is, they critique culture. While, I will admit, one could describe them as cultural critiques, such a description is not sufficient in distinguishing them from other types of normative critique. The problem is that a "cultural critique" may simultaneously also be political, ethical, or aesthetic. There is a long tradition, dating back to Marx and the Frankfurt School, of cultural critique as political critique, and with the exception of occasional aesthetic critiques of the natural world, all aesthetic critiques are also cultural because they are directed at products of culture. Critiques of culture can also be ethical critiques. For instance, it can be and has been argued that a corporate culture that promotes greed leads to morally impermissible behavior and is therefore wrong.[2] So if the above critiques do not form a distinct class of cultural critiques, how can the instead be categorized? Or do they not form a distinct class at all? In the next section, I will argue that they do form a special class, and that recognition that this is the case will help this kind of criticism gain a higher profile and create more coherence and dialogue in the area of research in which these critiques can be located.

2. Theories of the Good and their Relation to Culture

The main question raised in the previous section is whether the examples that were given constitute a particular type of normative critique. Let me try to answer the question by asking how certain normative questions and issues gain coherence and become recognized as separate fields. This occurs, I claim, when they are centered around a particular normative ideal that is valued widely. Ethical analysis is concerned with the Right: it is based on a drive to understand what kinds of actions are right and therefore obligatory, and which ones are wrong and therefore impermissible. Normative political analysis is concerned with the Just: it is based on a drive to understand how the state ought to operate in relation to its citizens and how it should distribute powers and goods. Aesthetic analysis is concerned with the Beautiful, where "beautiful" is our most general term to express that something is pleasing or moving to observe.[3]

Could it be argued that the cultural analyses of the sort discussed above are all governed by a similar sort of ideal? I believe that this is the case, not because they are governed by a specific ideal, but because they are governed by our most general ideal, which is the Good. "Good" is our most general term of positive evaluation, and in philosophy a *theory of the good* specifies what sorts of things in life are good and therefore worth striving for (Ross, 1930; Larmore, 1996). What these examples therefore have in common is two things: (a) they critique culture; and (b) they do so in light of an ideal of the Good. That is, they employ some conception of what would be good or bad for individuals or for society and they criticize cultural developments in light of this conception.

Theories of the good have a long history in philosophy, beginning with Plato's view that the good is the principle of reality and Aristotle's assertion that the goodness of things is determined by the question of how well they live up to their final cause or function. Aristotle also famously claimed that the good for human beings is found in the cultivation of human virtues, being human

[2] It will also not do to argue that some of these critiques are metaphysical or epistemological in nature. Borgmann and Baudrillard may be claimed to be tackling metaphysical issues, but their ultimate aim is not to investigate reality; it is to critique worrisome changes in our relation of and conception of reality that they believe have bad cultural effects. Likewise, Dreyfus discusses epistemological issues in his critique of learning, but is more broadly concerned with the transfer of skills and academic values.

[3] Epistemological critiques, one may add, are concerned with the True and with justifying that our beliefs are true.

capacities that are part of their final cause, and particularly in the cultivation of rationality. This would result in the highest good for human beings, which he called *eudaimonia*, or personal flourishing. In the modern era, theories of the good have often been developed in the context of consequentialist ethical theory, particularly in utilitarianism. These have resulted in various sorts of hedonist and preference-satisfactionist theories of the good. The recent revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics has also resulted in new varieties of virtue-based (or perfectionist) conceptions of goodness and the good life (Nussbaum, 1986; Hurka, 1993).

Theories of the good have a somewhat ambiguous status in philosophy. They are usually considered to be part of ethics, specifically normative ethics, which has traditionally been defined as consisting of a theory of the good and a theory of the right. Normative ethics is then held to have two tasks: to develop a theory of the good, which specifies what is good and therefore worth striving for, and to develop a theory of the right, which directs itself at human action and aims to determine which actions are right or wrong. In popular conceptions of normative ethics, however, normative ethics is primarily if not exclusively concerned with the *rightness or wrongness of actions*, and theories of the good are not conceived of as having a separate status in ethics. At best, such theories are then conceived of as prerequisites to the development of a theory of the right. This is a particular necessity for consequentialist theories of ethics, such as utilitarianism, which as they evaluate the morality of actions by the goodness or badness of their consequences, and therefore must be grounded in a theory of the good. Deontological theories, in contrast, hold the right to be prior to the good and therefore do not require a theory of the good. Virtue ethics, as a third major type, grounds both a theory of the good (*eudaimonia*) and of the right (virtuous action) in the notion of a virtuous character. A virtuous person is twice lucky: he or she is compelled to behave morally and he or she has well-being because of one's balanced character.

Theories of the good are sometimes also placed under the heading of the theory of value, or axiology, which is a branch of philosophy concerned with a general analysis of value or quality. Ethics and aesthetics are sometimes even classified as the two major branches of axiology. Goodness is of course itself a value, like beauty, rightness and justice, and it can even be claimed to be our highest term for evaluation. It is fair to say that theories of the good are located at the intersection of ethics and theory of value. However, ethics is often defined narrowly as the study of morality, or of right and wrong action, which would exclude an independent consideration of (nonmoral) goodness. It is therefore perhaps better to categorize studies of the good as a separate branch of axiology or theory of value (Carson, 2000; Rescher, 2004).

What critical discussions of new media show, more than anything, is that the transformative effect of new media on human culture is so profound that general questions about the good are being raised that cannot be answered in terms of the more narrow categories of ethics, politics, or aesthetics (Brey, 1998). What I am therefore proposing is the development of an applied area of research where theories of the good are applied and developed in relation to new media and new media culture. Framing existing cultural critiques of new media, such as the ones discussed in the previous section, in this way will make it possible to relate them to the general and explicit accounts of the good that have been developed in philosophy over the course of several thousand years. Current cultural critiques of new media often leave their conceptions of the good implicit, and rely on an intuitive recognition of the validity of their critiques in the reader. Partially because of this, studies in this area lack unity and a common vocabulary, making reasoned discussion of and comparison between them difficult. It would therefore be better if the conceptions of the good used in these critiques could be made explicit and could be discussed in

relation to existing accounts of the good in philosophy. This could both lead to a better understanding of such critiques and facilitate comparison of and dialogue between them.

In the remainder of this section, I will review major theories of the good that have been developed in philosophy, after which I will discuss how such theories may be useful in constructing a theory of the goodness of culture. In section 3, I will then go on to analyze how theories of the good may be applied to the analysis of technology in general, and more specifically to new media and new media culture.

The Good as the Human Good: Theories of Well-Being and the Good Life

The question "what is good?" is often understood under an implicit assumption that human beings are the measure for goodness, and is then interpreted to mean "what is good for human beings," which is then translated as "what is the good life" or "what is well-being"? Most theories of the good, therefore, are actually theories of the good life or well-being: they assume that only good lives have intrinsic worth, and the things we call good are things that contribute to a good life, which is a life in which individuals have well-being (welfare, quality of life). Well-being is a kind of value which is sometimes called "prudential value," a type of value that exists alongside aesthetic and moral value, amongst others, and which has the characteristic property of being *good for* someone. It is generally recognized in philosophy that there are three major types of theories of the good life: hedonist, desire-fulfillment and objective theories (Parfit, 1986).

Hedonist theories hold that only pleasure is intrinsically good, and pain is the only intrinsic bad. Several varieties of hedonism exist, including *quantitative hedonism* (or simple hedonism), which holds that the value of pleasure is only determined by its duration and intensity, and *qualitative hedonism*, which holds that some pleasures (for instance those related to contemplation and intelligence) are more valuable or pleasurable than others. One prominent objection to hedonism has been proposed by Robert Nozick, who hypothesis an "experience machine" that simulates a nonexistent world in which one has all experiences of whatever kind one finds most enjoyable (Nozick, 1974). Many agree that it would be undesirable to plug in to such a machine, since one's experiences are not based on actual events but on simulations, and therefore less valuable.

Desire-fulfillment theories, also called *preference-satisfaction theories*, hold that well-being lies in the fulfillment of one's desires. They are favored by some over hedonism because they are capable of avoiding the "experience machine" dilemma: if one desires to be loved by friends, and an "experience machine" simulates loving friends, then one's desire is not fulfilled, and this experience is therefore less valuable than one that really fulfills one's desire. A major impetus for the development of desire-fulfillment theories instead of hedonist theories has been economists looking for a more objective measure for welfare. Happiness and pain are, after all, in the head, and cannot easily be measured. Statements about one's preferences, and the rankings one assigns to them, can be more objectively determined. A distinction can be made between *simple desire-fulfillment theories*, which merely hold that the best life is the life in which all one's desires are fulfilled, and *informed desire-fulfillment theories*, which holds that the best life one could lead is the life in which all desires are fulfilled that one would have if one were fully informed of one's situation.

Objective theories, which have also been called *objective list* theories, hold that well-being is the result of a number of objective conditions of persons rather than the subjective experience of pleasure or the fulfillment of their subjective desires. They propose that some things contribute

to our well-being even if they do not give us pleasure or correspond to our desires. Conditions that have been proposed as part of such a list of conditions include knowledge, friendship, the development of one's abilities, having children and being a good parent, the awareness of true beauty, and moral goodness. *Perfectionism* is an influential kind of objective theory that proposes that what makes things constituents of well-being is their perfecting human nature. On this conception, humans are held to have a *telos* or end that can be attained if the right conditions are met. When they are met, the person has attained a state of well-being. One famous perfectionist theory is Aristotle's theory of *eudaimonia*, as mentioned previously.

Other Conceptions of the Good

Theories of the good that hold that the only intrinsic good is individual well-being may be called *individualist*. Although they have not drawn much attention in philosophy, other conceptions of the good are possible, and instead can be located in various value systems, that (also) hold things to be intrinsically good that do not contribute to human well-being. Two general kinds of theories may be distinguished, which I will call collectivist and transcendent. *Collectivist theories* hold that the greatest good is not the good of individual human beings but the good of the larger collective, such as a tribe, a community, or society at large. It is doubtful however, that existing ideologies that emphasize the common good or the good of society, like communitarianism, socialism and communism, truly hold that only the good of the larger collective is intrinsically valuable. These ideologies usually make the additional claim that the good of society is only a shorthand for the good of the individual members of society. When this additional claim is made, these ideologies turn out to be individualist after all. They only disagree with more liberal ideologies about the best way to realize the good for individuals, arguing that this is to be attained through promotion of the common good.

Transcendent theories, finally, hold that humans, whether as individuals or as collectives, are not the measure of goodness. Such theories point to one or more transcendent state-of-affairs or qualities that are held to constitute the highest good. Alternatively, they may hold that certain things are intrinsically valuable in addition to, and independently of, the human good. Transcendent goods that have been proposed include the glory of God or obedience to God's law (in Christianity and Judaism); the natural order of things (Taoism); the realization of its *telos* by all of life; ecosystemic integrity, or the well-being of Gaia (mother earth, conceived of as a living being); truth, knowledge or information (e.g., Floridi, 2002); artistic or natural beauty (radical varieties of aestheticism). Some mystics also hold that the universe has a purpose or value according to the will of a creator, but which lies beyond human understanding.

Conceptions of the Good and Cultural Quality

As a next step, I will now consider how theories of the good apply to culture. I will explore this by first defining culture and then analyzing how aspects of culture can be evaluated based on particular conceptions of the good. Encyclopedia articles on culture usually begin with a discussion of various definitions of culture that have been proposed over time. "Culture" is indeed a vague and ambiguous concept. What the various definitions of culture have in common is a recognition that culture is human-made, that it is learned or acquired, that it is shared by the members of a society, and that it is transmitted by nongenetic means from generation to generation (notably, by learning). There is also considerable agreement that culture is an adaptation mechanism that enables societies to better adapt to the environment and to maintain social order and stability.

In addition, there is a rather broad recognition that culture is made up of at least three types of entities: symbols, behaviors and artifacts. Symbols are arbitrary signs used to convey meaning, and whose meaning is determined by social convention and learning. They include human language, symbolic gestures, symbolic images and markings, and all kinds of nonlinguistic signs in artifacts, like traffic signs, flags, or crucifixes. Cultural behaviors or practices or customs are socially learned actions or scripted patterns of action that may or may not involve specific settings and artifacts, and may be individual or collective (refs.) Most behaviors, ranging from the way one holds a cigarette in one's mouth to eating with a fork and a knife to courtship and marriage, are strongly conditioned by social learning. Artifacts, finally, are products of material culture: they are human-made material goods like clothing, furniture, tools, jewelry, artworks, and dwellings. Symbols could also be conceived of as artifacts, because they have in common with material artifacts that they are human creations that serve a purpose, and in a still broader sense, everything about culture can be considered an artifact, since it is a product of human making.

Other entities that are often held to be components of culture are beliefs, values, norms and institutions. Cultural beliefs are socially transmitted beliefs in a culture that may range from mundane beliefs about the poisonousness of certain berries to deeply held religious and metaphysical beliefs about the universe and one's place in it. Cultural values are shared, socially transmitted values that are ideals about what is important in life. They may, like beliefs, range from the mundane to the religious and metaphysical. Values can specify things that are valued (desirable behaviors, attitudes or conditions) or abstract ideals. Examples of cultural values are humbleness, rationality, honor, spirituality, efficiency, punctuality, individuality, happiness, peace, tradition, family closeness and professionalism. Norms, which tend to be related to a culture's values, consist of expectations of how people will behave in different situations. Norms may be formal or informal, and cultures have different methods, called sanctions, of enforcing their norms. Institutions, finally, are more or less permanent mechanisms of social structure that maintain social order by imposing and enforcing norms and corresponding cultural behaviors. Examples of institutions are the family, the state, law, religion, economic systems and the military. Institutions can be understood as nothing more than interrelated sets of norms and practices, and the mechanisms (artifacts, buildings, people) that are used to enforce them.

Taking these six elements of culture into account, we may now define culture as the system of shared symbols, behaviors, beliefs, values, norms, artifacts and institutions that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning. This is a broad, anthropological definition of culture that is considerably broader and more profound than some more popular definitions of culture as more narrowly describe it as consisting of the arts and literature, or of the tastes in art, manners and lifestyle favored by a social group. It will be this broad, anthropological notion of culture that will be used in the remainder of this paper.

We may define a *theory of cultural quality*, or of the culturally good, as a theory of the good of culture in relation to some conception of the good. Such a theory would state the role or function or culture relative to the good, and the conditions that have to be satisfied by a culture for it to contribute well to some intrinsic good. Culture is a human-made artifact, or more precisely, a configuration of human-made artifacts, that may function either well or poorly. On most conceptions of the good, culture is an instrumental good: its function is to contribute to some higher good extrinsic to it, such as the satisfaction of individual desires or the good of society.

On an objective list or transcendent conception of culture, some aspects or products of culture, like knowledge or art, may also have intrinsic value.

Constructing a theory of cultural quality is difficult in the absence of an anthropological understanding of the functioning of culture and its specific cultural forms and artifacts in human societies. A theory of cultural quality has a different aim than an anthropological theory of culture that seeks to understand the proper function of culture in relation to human societies. Anthropological theories aim to give an objective account of the functioning of culture that is not guided by some normative conception of the good. Their aims are descriptive and explanatory: to understand why certain cultural forms have evolved and to understand their contribution to the functioning of society. It would be a naturalistic fallacy to translate such an anthropological conception of function into a normative conception of cultural quality: this would be deriving an "ought" from an "is". On a sociobiological conception of culture, for example, the function of culture is merely to help the human species adapt to its environment and propagate itself more successfully. It would obviously be wrong to say that because culture has historically had this function, we therefore ought to hold that the highest good of culture is its contribution to environmental adaptation and reproduction of the species.

Nevertheless, an anthropological understanding of the role of culture in human society is indispensable in constructing an account of cultural quality, because it gives one insight into what culture is and how it actually functions in human societies. Specifically, it may give insight into functions of culture that are not immediately obvious. The members of a society are normally only aware of what have been called the *manifest* or *conscious functions* of their culture: the functions that have been consciously and publicly assigned to it. Anthropologists, however, have tended to focus on *latent functions* of culture, which are functions about which the members of the community are not aware and which tend to benefit not individuals but the community as a whole (Merton, 1957). To evaluate the quality of cultural practices and meanings, an awareness of such latent functions is obviously needed.

Early functionalist accounts in anthropology held that culture was a collective means to satisfy individual (biological) needs. Bronislaw Malinowski, founder of the functionalist tradition in anthropology, held that the function of culture was to fulfill the needs of members of the culture (Malinowski, 1944). He held that humans have four basic biological needs that are common to all and that directly relate to survival, being the need for nutrition, safety, shelter and reproduction, and a larger number of derived needs that are culturally mediated or constructed, such as the need for psychological belonging to group, magic, religion and descent. Malinowski held that the satisfaction of these derived needs was ultimately to the benefit of the more basic needs. For example, he held that the extensive use of magic by Trobriand Islanders functioned to reduce their tensions and anxieties resulting form the uncertainties of life, which indirectly benefited their pursuit of their more basic biological needs. A functionalist account such as Malinowski's would fit well with an individualist account of the good, as it would imply that human culture already functions to promote human welfare, or some conception of it, so that the gap between the way culture functions and the way it ought to function may not be very large. However, functionalist accounts have largely been discredited as too much focused on the individual and insufficiently cognizant of sociocultural forces that transcend the individual.

Functionalism in anthropology has been succeeded by *structural-functionalism*, which was originated by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. Radcliffe-Brown followed Emile Durkheim in proposing that a society is an integrated, organic system of interrelated parts that make a functional

contribution to the whole, and that culture exists for the benefit of communities rather than for individuals. Culture is held to have a social function, which is, in general terms, that it contributes to social order and equilibrium. Culture, in other words, functions to fulfill the "needs" of a social system, and not the needs of individuals. Of course, it is not denied by structural-functionalists that the contribution of culture to a well-ordered society could not also indirectly benefit individuals. Often, such benefits will materialize, but there is no necessity in this. A structural-functionalist account of culture would go well with a collectivist conception of the good, and would remind individualist theories that culture has a social function that, when neglected, could lead to social dysfunction and social instability, with possibly detrimental effects on individual well-being.

Much is still to be learned about the functions of culture in human society, including it various composite elements, like religion, language and art. Theories on these matters still often contradict each other, and are underdetermined by empirical evidence. However, it will be clear that an informed theory of cultural quality is dependent on anthropological studies on the functions of culture, and cannot neglect anthropology's best theories on this matter. Let me emphasize again that anthropological theories do not in themselves prescribe any conception of the good. A particular concept of the good, however, requires an anthropological theory of culture for a successful translation of this concept of the good to a theory of cultural quality. Such an anthropological theory can point to latent social functions of cultural forms and practices that have implications for one's normative conception of culture, as they give insight into the instrumental roles that culture does, can and must play.

3. The Good and New Media Culture

It may now start to become evident by now why new media are so much more transformative of culture than other modern technologies. New media, being media for information and communication, have become major carriers of cultural symbols; together with the "old" media, they have become culture's circulatory system. Even more so, in line with Marshall McLuhan's dictum that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964), it is undeniably so that new media are by no means neutral transmission media. They include new for techniques storing, representing, categorizing, transforming and communicating signs that have put their mark both the shape and the interpretation of cultural signs. Also, because they are interactive and capable of representing multimedial content and graphical environments, new media are used for much more than just communication and information transmission. They have become a medium for new individual and social practices and media in and through which institutions are realized (Mitchell, 1995; Brey, 2003). The technological infrastructure of new media even enforces norms though the structure of its hardware and software.

Having applied theories of the good to culture the previous section, I will now undertake a further application to technology, and then on to new media and new media culture.

Thick Conceptions of the Good and Comprehensive Doctrines

The theories of the good discussed in the previous section contain rather abstract proposals of particular notions of the good that are the product of the labor of philosophers. They are not, as such, actual conceptions of the good that are held and acted on by people in their everyday lives. Such conceptions of the good have been called *"thick" conceptions of the good*, which are

detailed systems of value that define what one finds valuable, including at least those things one finds intrinsically valuable, and possibly also one's conceptions of instrumental value, orderings between values, and one's attachments and loyalties to other humans, organizations and associations. Thick conception of the good are often part of more comprehensive ideologies or value systems that have been formed over time, possibly over centuries, that have attained some degree of institutionalization and that are shared by a larger group of people. I will call such ideologies, after Rawls (1993), *comprehensive doctrines.* (Another name may be worldview or ideology.) Comprehensive doctrines are systems of value, be they religious, moral or ideological, that contain a thick conception of the good which is often accompanied by norms for conduct and a system of (metaphysical) beliefs. People always have some thick conception of the good, and this conception may or may not be part of a comprehensive doctrine of which they are a follower. It is safe to say that people cannot develop a conception of the good out of the blue, and that their conceptions of the good, even if uniquely their own, are always indebted to one or more comprehensive doctrines to which they have been exposed.

Examples of comprehensive doctrines are world religions like Christianity and Islam and their different strands, and secular humanism. Religious systems often include a transcendent conception of the good (e.g. the glory of God, or obedience to God's law), but usually hold as well that humans have intrinsic value (for instance, because they are made in the image of God) and that their well-being is therefore important. Secular humanists do not recognize a God, and hold that the only good is the human good, implying that their highest good is individual well-being. The rise of a consumer society has lead scholars to characterize contemporary culture as a consumer culture, which carries its own set of values about what is important in life (Slater, 1997; Featherstone, 1991). Consumerism can be defined as an ideology that holds that physical well-being and the collection and consumption of material goods is the greatest good and highest value in life. In a secularized consumer society, it can be argued, advertisers have replaced the minister in advocating a particular conception of the good, or they are competing with him and winning. Consumerism can therefore be considered a new comprehensive doctrine being promoted by the modern market. Consumerism has been criticized because of its hedonism, individualism and self-interestedness, and its definition of the good life in terms of material goods, which critics have claimed should be considered instrumental goods rather than ends. Based in part on extensive empirical research, it has been argued that in the contemporary West, a new, postmaterialist doctrine is emerging in which people place greater values on ideas than on physical pleasure and material goods (Inglehart, 1990, 1997). Postmaterialists emphasize nonmaterial and nonhedonistic values like personal growth, quality leisure time, contemplation, meaningful relationships, care for the environment, social equality, and spirituality. The New Age movement can be seen as a manifestation of this, as well as the more recent voluntary simplicity movement, which embraces a lifestyle of lower consumption, less paid work, greater sustainability, less reliance on media technologies, and more self-reliance, which is argued to enhance the quality of life (Etzioni, 1998; Shaw and Newton, 2002).[4]

Political ideologies, like liberalism and socialism, are usually not comprehensive doctrines,

[4] It has been claimed that in a liberal capitalist consumer society, most people are no longer captivated by major comprehensive doctrines or ideologies, except for the general sort of consumerist attitude that comes with the culture. They are bestowed with considerable freedom to develop their own "rational life plans," as Rawls has called them, which has lead to the importance of developing one's own "lifestyle" in which personal values and beliefs become the basis for a way of life. Such lifestyles tend to become group phenomena that undergo a degree of institutionalization, in part because they often involve a consumptive element supported by commercial industries. One can often identify an ideological basis in them that can function as a limited kind of comprehensive doctrine. E.g., hippies, goths, bohemians, punks, yuppies, ravers, gamers, hackers (cf. Chaney, 1996).

because their aim is to specify the role of the state in realizing and distributing goods, and they often do so without advocating a particular thick conception of the good. However, sometimes they do presuppose a conception of the good, or at least a partial conception. Communitarianism, a political ideology that holds that the state should preserve communities and should often prioritize the interests of communities over those of individuals, presupposes a limited concept of the good according to which individual well-being is dependent on the well-being of communities. Communitarians have criticized the atomistic conception of the individual in libertarianism and liberalism, which seem to hold that well-being is an individual pursuit that can be defined without reference to one's membership in a community. Liberalism, in addition, famously employs a "thin theory of the good" according to which the principal task of government is to create the political and economic conditions under which individuals are freely able to pursue their own conception of the good (Rawls, 1971).

Conservatism, finally, can be understood as an ideology that strives to preserve existing social order and the institutions that sustain it. When these institutions embody a particular conception of the good, which is often the case, conservatism may take on the form of a comprehensive doctrine that seeks to uphold a particular conception of the good. However, different conservatisms may correspond to quite different concepts of the good. In Iran or China, traditional institutions embody ideals of the good that are quite different than those in the United States, so conservatism in these countries also means something different.

Studying Technology, Culture and the Good

Thick conceptions of the good, whether held individually or held collectively as part of comprehensive doctrines, find their first and foremost realization in the thoughts and behaviors of the people that hold them. However, they may also institutionalize and become embedded in a society's social structure and culture, including a society's customs, enforced norms, symbol systems and artifacts. Thus, a skyscraper is an artifact that is expressive of a particular value system, both in its symbolic meaning as icon of modernity, rationality, and transcendence, and in its compatibility with and support of particular practices and customs of modernity that are themselves in turn related to a particular conception of the good. The social and cultural shaping of human artifacts and technological systems is a central assumption in contemporary science and technology studies (STS), which took a constructivist turn in the mid-1980s and has since then been preoccupied with studying the social construction of modern technologies (Bijker, Pinch and Hughes, 1987; McKenzie and Wajcman, 1999). Yet, as is recognized in these studies, technology also has a role in shaping society and culture, although this role is always mediated by human action, and technology may have unintended consequences that are not compatible with the conceptions of the good and the intentions of those responsible for developing and using the technology. Technology hence embodies the values of a culture but may also affect culture in unintended ways and in divergence from these values.

Many studies in STS analyze political, cultural and aesthetic values embedded in technology and in the practices and meanings that have co-evolved with these technologies (McKenzie and Wajcman, 1999; Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002; Misa, Brey and Feenberg, 2003), but so far these studies have not attempted to incorporate concepts and methods from the philosophical study of value and the good. In computer ethics, some philosophers inspired by STS have attempted to use concepts of ethics to develop approaches to the study of information technology that analyze the embedded moral values and norms in these technologies. This has resulted in

"values in design" approaches (Johnson, 1997; Nissenbaum, 1998) and "disclosive computer ethics" (Brey, 2000, 2001). These approaches have tended to focus on moral and political values and norms embedded in technologies that are analyzed in the context of theories of the right and normative political theory (e.g., values and norms relating to liberty, privacy, responsibility, democracy and justice) but have sometimes also considered values in the context of theories of the good (e.g., trust, community, or privacy and liberty understood as a components of a good life). What I propose here is to extend these approaches to focus more specifically and extensively on the good and the good life, rather than the ethics of obligation. Such studies will have to consider not just embedded values in technology, but also the embedded values in cultural practices, norms, symbols and institutions that co-evolve with these technologies and that may come to define them.

We may define an *axiology of technology,* or a *theory of values in technology*, as a general study of values embedded in technology, with an emphasis on those values that define notions of the good. An *axiology of technological culture* is an analysis of the practices, symbols, and other cultural forms that have co-evolved with specific technologies. An *axiology of new media* is a study of embedded values in new media technologies, and an *axiology of new media culture* (or *cyberculture*) is a study of values in the digital culture that has co-evolved with the rise of new media. A methodological assumption that I am making here, controversially, is that it is possible to perform an axiology of technology independently of, and prior to, an axiology of its co-constructed culture, that is, independently of its cultural embedding and use. Radical constructivists have argued that technology is social throughout, and that it makes no sense to speak of embedded values or inherent consequences in technology (cf. Brey, 1997). However, I propose to retain, as a working hypothesis, a very limited conception of autonomous technology according to which we can sometimes usefully refer to technologies as embodying values, meaning that technologies sometimes have normative consequences that do not co-vary greatly with their embeddedness in different social and cultural settings (Winner, 1980; Brey, 2005; Sclove, 1995). For example, I would want to hold that a web server that places and reads cookies on your computer is less protective of privacy than a web server that does not use cookies, or that a browser that does not display web pages that contain certain forbidden keywords is less protective of free speech than one who does display such pages.

A further relevant distinction, mirroring the distinction between normative and descriptive ethics, is that between a *normative* and a *descriptive axiology*. A descriptive axiology of technology or culture merely analyzes implicit values and norms, whereas a normative axiology utilizes a certain value system or thick conception of the good to critique particular value implications of technology or culture. For example, a normative axiology of video games could analyze them as embodying or promoting hedonism and weakening community (which would be a descriptive axiology), and subsequently fault them for this from a perfectionist and communitarian point of view (normative axiology). In addition to a need for axiological studies of technology and its co-evolved cultural forms, there is also a need for an axiological analysis of attitudes to and critiques of technology and technological culture in public and academic discourse.

An axiology of technology appraisals by comprehensive doctrines would study the value judgments and value discourses by representatives of comprehensive doctrines in their response to new technologies and their co-evolved cultural forms. For example, an axiology of protestant-Christian responses to the Internet and its culture would analyze the value judgments of representatives of this religious tradition in various writings and discourses. A extensive analysis of this sort may end up involving a detailed study of the doctrine's beliefs about and attitudes to

other cultural phenomena and artifacts to which the Internet is related: attitudes to and value judgments about modernity, the city, popular culture, technology in general, liberalism, and so on. Axiologies may also be performed of technology critiques of independent critics whose views are not tied to a comprehensive doctrine. Such axiologies would lay out and criticize the implicit value assumptions and conceptions of the good in a critique. Axiologies of technology critiques may be either descriptive, merely analyzing values implicit in these critiques, normative, critiquing these values from the point of view of a particular conception of the good, or *critical*, challenging the internal consistency of a critique and the validity of a its empirical assumptions regarding the relation between means and valued ends.

Implications for the Cultural Analysis of New Media

By means of illustration, I will now discuss four controversies in the cultural assessment of new media and will attempt to show how an axiological analysis can be of use in clarifying and critiquing the assumptions, arguments and presuppositions in these controversies.

Virtual reality and hedonism: The emergence of virtual reality technology has yielded a situation in which Nozick's "experience machine" is no longer an idea in a thought experiment but is becoming a real technology that tests our beliefs about the good life. While truly immersive VR still has technological limitations, the reality is that hundreds of millions children and adults spend a large part of their waking lives playing video games, which constitute a less immersive but still absorbing kind of virtual reality. Are these people wasting their lives or are they instead living the good life? Albert Borgmann's claim that virtual reality and cyberspace presents an illusory escape into another reality can be contrasted with Philip Zhai's claim to the effect that we should not be afraid to embrace Nozick's experience machine. Zhai presents an extended argument that one could recreate the whole empirical world in virtual reality, and that the distinction between such a world and the real world is no longer meaningful (Zhai, 1998). Yet, in spite of Zhai's best effort to create a metaphysical argument for his position, it will be clear that any choice for or against living a large part of one's life in virtual reality will depend on precisely one's attitude towards hedonism: is pleasure one's highest good or does one's well-being also depend on the veracity of one's pleasurable experiences? A hedonist reply can be contrasted with Albert Borgmann's objective, Aristotelian account of well-being, which commits him to deny that such virtual experiences can have great worth.

The instrumental value of cyberspace: An assessment of the instrumental value of a technology in relation to one's conception of the good may be difficult, because the meaning and consequences of (new) technologies may be ambiguous and opaque. In a critique of Borgmann's critical stance to cyberspace, Peter Paul Verbeek has argued that Borgmann wrongly holds that cyberspace offers us a substitute for reality that, in Borgmann's words, has cast a "lamentable pallor" on reality (Borgmann, 1999). Verbeek here does not attempt to counter Borgmann's Aristotelian account of well-being, but merely argues that Borgmann's negative assessment of the instrumental value of cyberspace for Aristotelian *eudaimonia* is false. According to Verbeek, cyberspace does not so much create an alternate reality as mediate existing reality, and can for this reason be as engaging. Borgmann (2002) responds that he holds that cyberspace both mediates reality, which he rates positively, and substitutes for it, which he rates negatively. He concedes, however, that the preponderance between these two uses will depends on actual uses of the technology, and acknowledges the relevance of social science data to settle this point.

Virtual communities and conditions for well-being: The debate on whether virtual communities

can serve as good substitutes for geographically localized communities is another debate that can be understood better by using axiological concepts and theories. In these debates, on can find two kinds of disagreement: disagreements about intrinsic goods and disagreements about instrumental goods. Disagreements about intrinsic goods concern the necessary ingredients for well-being. Communitarian critics of virtual communities, like Langdon Winner, have argued that strong community ties are an important ingredient for well-being, that such ties are not realized in most virtual communities, and that virtual communities negatively affect the formation and maintenance of geographical communities. Proponents of virtual communities have either denied the first or the second claim, and have either denied or ignored the third claim. Here, again, we see disagreements about intrinsic value as well as about instrumental value.

The Internet and Orthodox Judaism: In 2000, a group of leading orthodox rabbis in Israel, the Council of Torah Sages, issued a ruling banning the internet from Jewish homes, claiming that it is "1,000 times more dangerous than television" (which they banned thirty years earlier). The ruling required that all persons not given permission for Internet use by the Council to delete the Internet browser from their Windows program. The Council described the Internet as "the world's leading cause of temptation" and "a deadly poison which burns souls" that "incites and encourages sin and abomination of the worst kind." The Council explained that it recognized benefits in the Internet, but saw no way of balancing these with the potential cost, which they defined as exposure to "moral pollution" and possible addiction to Internet use that could quash the motivation to learn Torah, especially among children.[5] Using the framework that has been developed here, this ruling can be analyzed as a defensive action by leading figures in a comprehensive doctrine, a variety of orthodox Judaism called Hareidi, aimed at preserving the central values of this doctrine, including the highest good, which is obedience to God's law as laid out in the Torah. These leading figures perceived both instrumental benefits and harms in the Internet, relative to their doctrine's conception of the good, went on to conclude that the harms were greater than the benefits, and concluded that it was not possible to make changes in the technology nor adaptations in the practices and norms of their doctrine to preserve these benefits while minimizing the harms, leading them to the strong sanction of prohibiting Internet use.

4. Conclusion

It was argued in this essay that an important class of normative and evaluative analyses of new media cannot be classified as either belonging to ethics, political theory, or aesthetics, and that while these critiques concern cultural aspects of new media, this is not a distinguishing feature of them, because cultural critiques can also be political, ethical or aesthetic. It was argued that these analyses are characterized because they address our general idea of the good. It was then argued that these analyses could be usefully related to philosophical theories of the good and theories of value, of which an account was subsequently given. This account was then applied to the notion of culture to develop the idea of a theory of the culturally good, or cultural quality, and further applied to technology to develop the concept of an axiological study and critique of technology and technological culture. The axiological study of new media, new media culture, and appraisals of new media (culture) was presented as a specific variety of such studies of technology, with special importance because of the profound cultural transformations that have accompanied the diffusion of new media. It was argued that axiological analyses of new media and their appraisals can help clarify current debates on new media, and can help in the development of better critiques of new media (culture). Some example analyses were given to support this claim. Obviously, the present account is still sketchy and programmatic, but it has

[5] *Ha'aretz,* January 7, 2000.

both a solid basis in moral theory and philosophy and in science and technology studies, and seems to be helpful in analyzing, clarifying and critiquing issues in new media and new media culture. It is to be hoped, then, that this account can be developed further for the philosophical study of new media and technology at large.

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