

Philosophy's influence on technology design—and why it needs to change

February 12 2016, by Constantine Sandis, University Of Hertfordshire



Something's not right about how we see communication. Credit: wiertz, CC BY

Philosophy often appears abstract and other-worldly, particularly when compared to the practical technology in our everyday lives. But there is much that technology can learn from philosophy, and vice versa.

Software is typically designed with the efficiency of communicating in

mind – whether [communication](#) within the software, or software that allows communication between people. But communication is much more than the mere exchange of information. Humans talk or write for a variety of reasons, often simply to stay in touch or just because they are friends.

The history of philosophy and psychology is full of attempts to reduce all human motivation to one ultimate principle or drive – be it survival, sex, power, or desire or satisfaction. Similar approaches are taken to communication: the 16th century English philosopher [John Locke](#) suggested we communicate in order to obtain information about each other, which in turn helps us to satisfy our desires.

Locke's [view](#) remains prevalent in the way information communication technology is designed today. But we would do better to replace this and other reductivist accounts with a more pluralistic view of why we do the things we do. Perhaps philosophers would do well to pay greater attention to human behaviour.



Don't leave me hanging. Credit: bykst

How we communicate is as important as why

Communication technology has tapped into a very human need to be liked and appreciated. Through social media we like, share, re-tweet, and comment on others – actions that are not predominantly geared towards conveying information. Precious data is given away of course, data which can be mined by advertisers for information, but it's a mistake to equate data with information. When I make a joke, I'm not typically attempting to inform anyone of anything, though I may inadvertently reveal all sorts of things about my sense of humour.

The entire greeting card industry – whatever you might make of it – has been built on the understanding that we often want to express (or be seen to express) good wishes on auspicious days. The linguistic philosopher, [Ludwig Wittgenstein](#), taught us that the public expression of a desire, wish, sentiment or belief is not a description of our mental life. This is why "this app is faulty but I don't believe that it's faulty" may be a true statement of fact, even though it [sounds paradoxical](#).

Why should any of this matter to designers, manufacturers, and users of technology? A narrow view of why we communicate inevitably limits the sorts of [communication technologies](#) we build. Interestingly, many of the things we do with technology are byproducts of what they were originally designed for (e.g. the internet emerged as the result of a US Defence project researching possibilities for network packets). Once we drop our preconceived ideas that transmitting information is their only purpose – an assumption that carries with it a shortsighted vision – the possibilities of what we could create are endless.

From communication to understanding

This misconception of communication also applies to our sense of understanding. Neither understanding nor communication can be reduced to simply the acquisition of new facts. There is a difference between understanding the words a speaker has said, and understanding the speaker – understanding the "why" as well as the "what".

Wittgenstein famously said: "[If a lion could talk, we could not understand it](#)". Not because of an insurmountable language barrier, but because we wouldn't know what it was aiming to do with its words. Apple's Siri and Microsoft's Cortana, which support voice-activation and interaction, make use of artificial intelligence. Such software stems from the hope of creating technology that can understand us, and be understood by us. But there is no point asking whether such machines

currently can or ever could understand us without first asking ourselves what we want these machines for. Why should we want to communicate with them in the first place? The answer is unlikely to require that they understand us in anything but the loosest sense. A good Hoover doesn't need to understand why I might require more powerful suction in order for it to switch to turbo when I press the appropriate button. The same is true of a web mapping service. If anything, understanding is likely to stand in the way of utility.

We need to free ourselves from approaching communication as something geared towards the transmission of information that either enables understanding between humans and machines, or that requires it. The way we design and use the increasingly ubiquitous technology we use to communicate would benefit from an approach that isn't driven by this unacknowledged assumption.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Source: The Conversation

Citation: Philosophy's influence on technology design—and why it needs to change (2016, February 12) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-02-philosophy-technology-designand.html>

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