

Internet Neutrality?

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**Originally published as ETHIcol in the IMIS Journal Volume 10
No 2 (April 2000)**

This edition of ETHIcol draws upon a talk given by Professor Harold Thimbleby at the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists' third Colloquium on the Ethical & Spiritual Implications of the Internet held on 17th February, 2000 at the House of Lords.

The Internet is probably the largest single thing mankind has ever built. We must come to terms with its great size, its multinational, multicultural diversity, and how it impacts on the way we live now and in the future. Many people argue that the Internet, like all technology, is neutral. This view is wrong. By denying ethics has anything to do with technology, we do not stop to think about whether or not technological progress is good; it just has to be followed.

The Internet neutrality argument is analogous to how the pro-gun lobby in the US argues that guns do not kill people, but people do, and that therefore there is nothing bad about guns themselves. To many, this argument seems to be evasive: clearly, guns and gun making have a serious influence on what damage people can do to each other. Yes, people are responsible for what happens to each other, but guns make some possible courses of action more likely, and more extreme as evidenced by the recent horrific events at an American school. It is true that children do things with guns but we would not like to hold them responsible. Thus the availability of guns to children is an ethical issue, closely related to the design, manufacture and distribution of guns. In short, technology, albeit guns or computer networks, has an ethical impact on people.

The analogy with guns may be overstated. Guns are meant, at least sometimes, to kill people, whereas computers typically are meant to help people in their work and lives. Nevertheless, we are dealing with a powerful technology and we must, while acknowledging our excitement with it, try to assess the risks clearly. In particular, we need to understand how we fail to appreciate the issues objectively because of the way computers and networks affect our thinking.

We hear a lot of success stories about the Internet. Indeed, the media usually picks successes to tell us about. Our senses are bombarded with Net success. We do not hear much about failures, even though there are probably far more of them. One reason is because the Internet is a communications medium, and when it stops working, communication stops, so we cannot hear about it. Thus our thinking is biased since we

only see and hear about lots of successes on the Internet because the medium is filtering out failures.

Consider the much-heralded Internet banking. If you try to pay your credit card off using this facility it can take a very long time to complete the transaction sometimes involving several passwords of many digits. The bank does not see the time it takes. They have no reason to make it easier; in fact, while you are spending time on-line, they are advertising at you. The evolution to Internet banking has seen a transfer from a reciprocal world of one-to-one relationships in local banks, to an impersonal one that off-loads work onto customers, in the name of choice or whatever, but which increases profit for central operations.

Computers are much more than passive building blocks that are used to build, for example, the Internet. They are practically alive. In many ways computers latch into our psyches, and meet, or almost meet, some of our deepest needs. This is rather like idolatry where, instead of worshipping God, we worship some false god, something that is not a god at all. We want it to rain tomorrow, so we sacrifice a lamb on the altar of the god. But tomorrow maybe it still does not rain, and the priest says we should have sacrificed a bigger lamb or more of them. Somehow the failure of the god becomes our failure, and sure enough, next day there we are buying more sheep to sacrifice. This is exactly what goes on with computers. First, they are promoted as perfect things. Then, when we discover they do not work, we think it is our fault, and the solution is for us to learn more about the right incantations, and when that does not work, rather than buying sheep we buy more RAM or get a newer even more perfect computer.

While we continue to expect computers to have the omniscient powers of small gods, we are going to be disappointed, and probably pass more and more restrictive laws in the false hope that profound human problems can be solved by machines. When today's computers fail, we are still attached to the idea that tomorrow's will be better. Every year computers are presented as solving our problems. However, the following year these computers are obsolete and we discover that the idol computer does not work. The landfill sites, in the UK are already burying over a million tons of electronics each year. This is idolatry that is not sustainable, and with an EU directive (WEEE, "Waste from Electrical and Electronic Equipment") that comes into force around 2003, it will not be legal either. Those millions of tons of electronic rubbish represent a lot of fooled people.

While we are blind to the ethical and spiritual issues, we will continue to follow blindly so-called progress, having no idea where we are progressing to. The question to ask, is not whether technology is good, but how are we going to do good, given that we live in a world where computers and the Internet are expected to be, but are not, perfect solutions to anything?

We should encourage a consumer movement that is aware of these sorts of issues, and a system of standards so we can speak in a clear language. Cars used to be promoted as

fast and wonderful; the 1960s consumer movement forced them to be safe, and to be better for consumers. Likewise, we now need a social force that does not spend its time focused on the pinnacles of success, but which represents most peoples' ordinary lives. No doubt it would use the best community-building technologies of the Internet, but its purpose would be to help us to hope in each other today, rather than hope in the illusion of perpetually fixing today's problems with tomorrow's computers.

Further reading. A full transcript of Professor Thimbley's address can be found at (<http://www.cs.mdx.ac.uk/harold/srf/holords.html>)

Cybernauts Awake! Ethical and Spiritual Implications of Computers, Information Technology and the Internet, Church House Publishing, 1999. ISBN 0 7151 6586 0. £5.95.

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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