

Chapter 14

Information Technology: The Good and Modernity

Pak-Hang Wong

University of Twente, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In Information and Computer Ethics (ICE), and, in fact, in normative and evaluative research of Information Technology (IT) in general, researchers have paid few attentions to the prudential values of IT. Hence, analyses of the prudential values of IT are mostly found in popular discourse. Yet, the analyses of the prudential values of IT are important for answering normative questions about people's well-being. In this chapter, the author urges researchers in ICE to take the analyses of the prudential values of IT seriously. A serious study of the analyses, he argues, will enrich the research of ICE. But, what are the analyses? The author will distinguish the analyses of the prudential values of IT, i.e. the prudential analysis, from other types of normative and evaluative analysis of IT. Then, the author will explain why prudential analyses are not taken seriously by the researchers in ICE, and argue why they deserve more attentions. After that, he will outline a framework to analyse and evaluate prudential analyses, and he will apply the framework to an actual prudential analysis. Finally, he will briefly conclude this chapter by highlighting the limits of the proposed framework and identifying the directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

In “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”, an article published in *The Atlantic*, Nicholas Carr (2008) described the possible impact of Information Tech-

nology (IT) on people's cognition. He argued that the Internet has altered the way in which people read and think that makes a specific way of reading and thinking, i.e. *deep reading* and *deep thinking*, difficult. The aim of Carr's article, in other words, is to explicate what he believed to be one of the detrimental effects of the Internet on a person's

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quality of life. It should be clear that the aim of Carr's article is *normative*, as he explicitly argued against a particular form of online practice. If one understands *morality* in the broad sense, which encompasses the questions about *how one should live*, then Carr's argument should also be included in the domain of morality. While Carr's article has generated heated debates on the Internet, researchers in Information and Computer Ethics (ICE) have not responded as enthusiastically. In fact, Carr's article is only one of the more visible examples among various appraisals of IT.¹ As the amount of similar appraisals of IT continues to grow, I think, more attentions should be given to them. The insufficient attentions to the appraisals of IT seem to reiterate Charles Taylor's characterisation of contemporary moral philosophy, which he claimed "tended to focus on what is right to do rather than on what is good to be, on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life" (Taylor 1989, 3), and, as a result, the domain of morality in contemporary moral philosophy becomes "cramped and truncated" (*ibid.*). By turning the focus to the appraisals, which discuss the possible impacts of IT on people's quality of life, it will broaden the scope of ICE and alleviate the worry expressed by Taylor.

Hence, the aim of this paper is to urge researchers in ICE to take seriously the appraisals similar to Carr's. A serious study of the appraisals will enrich the research in ICE. Yet, what exactly are the appraisals? Using Brey's categorisation (Brey 2007), I distinguish Carr's and similar appraisals from other types of normative analysis of IT. And then, I will explain why the appraisals are not taken seriously by the researchers in ICE, and argue why they deserve more attentions. After that, I will outline a framework to analyse and evaluate the appraisals, and apply the framework to Carr's appraisal. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by highlighting the limits of the proposed framework proposed and identifying the directions for future research.

PRUDENTIAL ANALYSIS OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

I have pointed out that the aim of Carr's appraisal of the Internet and other appraisals similar to his are normative. Yet, an important question remains, that is – *what distinguish the appraisals from other normative analyses of IT?* According to Brey (2007), the current normative and evaluative research of IT can generally be divided into four types, namely ethical analysis, normative political analysis, aesthetic analysis and epistemological analysis. Brey's division is based on the observation that these analyses are guided by different *ideals*. For example, ethical analyses of IT are generally grounded in ethical theories such as deontology, utilitarianism and virtue-based theories, and IT-related ethical issues, e.g. issues on privacy and anonymity, intellectual property, etc. are scrutinised using these ethical theories.² Accordingly, the guiding ideal for ethical analyses of IT is *the Right*. Similarly, for their specific domains of inquiry, the guiding ideals for normative political analyses, aesthetic analyses and epistemological analyses are *the Just*, *the Beauty* and *the True* respectively. (Brey 2007)

However, as Brey rightly pointed out, the division as such does not exhaust all forms of normative and evaluative research that are currently being undertaken. Particularly, he has identified what he labelled 'cultural critique' as a specific form of normative and evaluative analyses of IT that is distinct from the aforementioned types. According to Brey, cultural critiques are directed at the culture itself. And, in the current context, cultural critiques of IT take cultural issues generated by the development and use of IT as their object of inquiry. Yet, what precisely distinguishes cultural critiques from other types of normative and evaluative analysis of IT is not merely its object of inquiry, but, rather, it is the different guiding ideal. Cultural critiques are different from other types of normative and evaluative analysis, precisely

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