



Philip Brey

Over the past few decades, ICT has become more and more embedded in our existence. How this has changed our lives, both individually and as a society, is being researched at the University of Twente by Philip Brey. Brey, Professor of technology philosophy, states that a number of mini-revolutions have occurred fairly recently. He is associated with CTIT and the Center for Philosophy of Technology and Engineering Science (CEPTES). The core issue for him is whether the Internet, ambient intelligence and mobile phones are really improving our quality of life.

ICT against the quality-of-life yardstick

It has happened so quickly, that you might almost forget how things used to be. Even 15 years ago, when CTIT started, information and communication technology were still playing only a modest role. The personal computer was already well established, but used first and foremost at work. The next revolution was the turn of multimedia, bringing games and music into the home. Then the phenomenon of Internet gave us the world of information. And the ever-present internet-equipped mobile phone completes the picture. Information and communication technology is now woven into the fabric of our daily existence.

In parallel, ICT was growing in versatility. Whereas the technology first gave us a fast calculator and word processor inside the PC, the availability of fast connections and growing performance of computers and memory brought countless opportunities for communication and entertainment. Ambient intelligence and smart surroundings announced their arrival. Similar developments are taking place today, in the areas of brain-computer interfaces and neuroprosthetics - medical implants and technologies to assist neural processes. Brey: "The fact is that ICT's functionality has not only increased in scope and become more inclusive, it has also visibly transformed our lives. The outward signs of this are that different areas of life increasingly spill over into each other. Work, travel and relaxation are no longer

in separate compartments. Maybe they still are for an older generation, but not for digital natives like the young people of today. As far as they are aware, ICT has always existed, and they have integrated it in all aspects of their lives."

"Now one of the tasks the philosophy of technology has taken upon itself is to assess the implications of new technologies in order to be ready for them when they are still in the design stage. This makes it inevitable to judge technology from several perspectives: ethical, economic, aesthetic, and, ultimately, the added value for our quality of life."

Whether and to what extent ICT can be measured using the latter yardstick is the subject of Brey's research into the impact of new media and its accompanying culture on the quality of life and the quality of society, as well as on culture in general. The research constitutes a broad philosophical and multidisciplinary project, being carried out by six researchers at the 3TU. Centre of Excellence for Ethics as well as the CTIT. It was judged so innovative by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research that this body awarded the project a VICI grant of €1,250 million for five years.

Brey: "The benefit of ICT for people's lives is that it often increases freedom and autonomy, while affording them better possibilities for organizing their lives. ICT can offer new options for exploration, social interaction, and fun and entertainment, alongside a whole host of business opportunities. However, at the same time it is also true that ICT often does nothing to help people develop

their personal qualities. It mostly functions as a passive medium for entertainment and satisfying their needs. Naturally, ICT can also provide a route to creativity and self-actualization, but there are many people who hardly use it all for this purpose. Although the medium can support social relationships, it seems more often to abet the fading of social contacts."

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Brey's position is that, if the use of ICT is having undesirable effects, we can counteract that by changing either the technology or its social context. Since the latter is usually difficult, it is worth first considering whether a redesign of the technology is possible.

