The ontology of internet user interactions

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Abstract

Internet communication, like traditional mediated communication, places a barrier between the message’s sender and receiver. However, where traditional mediated communication (television, magazines) is unidirectional, internet technologies provide for one-on-one communication albeit with a high degree of mediation. The basic ontology of this interaction has yet to be fully explicated. Traditional communication theory focuses on interactions that are face-to-face while mass communication theory looks at communication situations where feedback is delayed or completely absent. Internet interactions are both interpersonal and mediated and, at the same time, are neither of these. The paper will use the framework of self- and other-informed theories of Edmund Husserl and Mikhail Bakhtin to understand how users construct “faces” for all parties involved in the internet communication interaction. In addition, the paper will use the theories of Nicolai Hartmann to discuss how this ontology is, on the one hand, stratified and, on the other hand, unified. The paper will discuss how the user actively constructs a self-identity which is then portrayed to other people involved in the interaction and how the individual deconstructs the identities of other users.

1 Introduction

“. . . just as there is a sole universal nature as a self-enclosed framework of unity, so there is a sole psychic framework, a total framework of all souls, which are united not externally but internally, namely, through the intentional interpenetration which is the communalization of their lives” [2].

“The highest architectonic principle of the actual world of the performed act or deed is the concrete and architectonically valid or operative contraposition of I and the other . . . it is around these two centers that all of the concrete moments of Being are distributed and arranged” [3].

We live in a world of connections and relations. Every moment of every day we interact with others or are the object of interactions for others. Communication
theory attempts to explicate these moments in order to predict or understand how human beings exchange ideas, concepts and worldviews. The most vexing phenomena that communication faces is not traditional interpersonal communication but interpersonal communication that is mediated through technology. Edmund Husserl, in the first quote above, notes that our interactions take place in a unified world of experience. But how is that world unified when both parties are separated by thousands of miles of distance? Mikhail Bakhtin, in the second quote, states that interactions bring together two contraposed positions—the self and the other. But how can two people who are not in close physical contact share a similar horizon of an event?

There is a real need in computer mediated communication (CMC) to understand both the relationship between the user and the computer and the relationships between users who employ the computer as a means of interacting with others. CMC presents a problem because it is neither truly an interpersonal nor mediated communication process but a combination of both. I believe that what is needed is an ontology of communication that encompasses all areas of communication. I refer to this ontology as a stratified dialogic model, borrowing both from the dialogic method employed by Mikhail Bakhtin and a stratified ontology employed by Nicolai Hartmann. This model focuses on the “act” or interaction in communication as opposed to just either the sender/author or the listener/receiver. The stratified dialogic model sees the act communication as a unified event consisting of several layers.

2 Bakhtin and the dialogic

2.1 Self and other

Bakhtin does not base his ontology on being qua being, but instead focuses on the being of the event of interaction between two concrete individuals. According to Bakhtin, the “act is truly real . . . only in its entirety” [3]. Bakhtin uses the term “act” very loosely—any thought that I have or task I undertake is labelled as an “act.” I am unable to abstract anything from the interaction/act and still maintain the integrity and uniqueness of the act—I must consider the act as a unity or a whole. Acts are historical; they take place in a particular time and a defined place [3]. Each act is unique and non-repeatable [3]. What I accomplish cannot be replicated since the “unity of the event” will have changed. An individual involved in the act realizes the uniqueness of the act [3] and the value of the act. Individual acts combine both universal and particular moments—it is universal in that the individual employs values and value systems that transcend time and it is particular in relating of the situation, time, and context to the transcendental moment [3].

Within the interaction are two necessary positions: self and other [2, 3]. Both I, as a self, and the other must be viewed as concrete individuals: “Man-in-general does not exist; I exist and particular concrete others exist—my intimates, my contemporary” [3]. I must be able to strike a relationship towards the other as a subject or object; I can form this relationship only with an actual, concrete
other, not a possible other [3]. The other, if a subject, will reveal a portion of herself to me—the other-for-me. If the other is an object, I will be able to see only the outside of it, superficial characteristics. I, also, retain a portion of myself that cannot be seen by the other—the I-for-myself. Dialogue is how I am able to bridge the gap between self and other. Michael Bernard-Donals writes, “dialogue begins when the self’s non-coincidence with itself and with other selves requires a bridge between the I-for-myself and I-for-other” [4]. Dialogue requires an exchange of selves—the I-for-other and the other-for-me “overlap” in the interaction (see figure 1).

2.2 Dialogic relationships

Bakhtin focuses on the body as the site of overlap—it is the extension of the self into the world. The I-for-myself and the unknown component of the other can only be seen if they are embodied. If the other is a person, the unknown portion will most likely involve her thoughts and emotions. I can only know what the other chooses to show me—what she chooses to embody. Ideas and feelings can only be known to me if the other displays them for or discusses them with me—I must engage her in a dialogue. If the other is an object, there will be characteristics that I will not be able to see at the surface level—I must break it apart to see its internal compounds and characteristics. By playing up the difference between the self and the world and the mind and the body, it seems as if Bakhtin is creating a form of dualism.

Bakhtin’s interest, however, does not lie in opposition but interaction [2, 3], as seen in figure 1. Bakhtin attempts to move away from an idealist position and move towards a more materialistic position [1, 2, 3]. As such, he is interested only in phenomena that appear concretely. Only the physical manifestations of the I-for-self that are embodied in the I-for-other can enter into a dialogue with the other. Only the embodied other-for-me, likewise, can be part of interaction. This is not to say that the exchange does not have an effect on the I-for-self. Unless an idea can be demonstrated or expressed in language, it cannot become part of the world dialogue. This process, the creation of the I-for-other, is also fundamentally dialogic in that it is a relation between the I-for-self and the I-for-other [2, 3].

2.3 Bakhtin, Husserl and the other

Bakhtin expresses very clearly the debt we owe to the other for definition [2], but he focuses primarily on the “I” side of the interaction. In order to understand the other, we must turn to the writings of Husserl, particularly the Cartesian Meditations. Husserl, in the fifth meditation, wonders how it is that I can perceive of the other as another Ego. He states that it is my acknowledgement of “harmonious behaviour” that not only indicates that the other is an animating being but also that the other possesses a psychic (psychological) presence [8]. We understand the other is another Ego through the analogy of the other with our own behaviour [8]. I cannot bridge the gap between myself “here” and the other “there” by physically approaching the other—whenever I walk “there” it
becomes “here”—but through the exchange of ideas from my own unique position “here”.

Relative of this position, Bakhtin notes that I and the other both have a surplus of vision towards each other [2]. The other can see things that I cannot—what is behind me, my face—while I can see objects and relations that the other cannot. I need the other to help me create my sense of self by giving me information that I cannot see. Reciprocally, I have a responsibility to respond or answer the other in the same manner—this is our responsibility to each other.

3 Nicolai Hartmann and ontology

3.1 Concrete individuals

Nicolai Hartmann shares many of the ontological concerns of Bakhtin. Hartmann also focuses on the concrete individual subject. Hartmann’s ontology is a non-reductionist, “natural” ontology [7, 10]. He believes that we must understand being as we find it, not as we might theorise it. Like Bakhtin, Hartmann believes that only a concrete individual can enter into actual interactions. Hartmann writes, “The subject—not as a metaphysical subject in general but as empirical, actual, just how we know man—fulfils in every particular the specified conditions” [6]. Ontology, for Hartmann, is not simply a matter of developing a priori conditions. Instead, ontological categories are “gleaned step by step from an observation of existing realities” [7]. Any knowledge we are able to gain of ontological categories we gain “through an analysis of objects to the extent that they are intelligible to us” [7]. Hartmann believes that the categories and principles of ontology “must somehow be included in being and that,
consequently, it must be possible to discover them if only a sufficiently broad basis of ontic data is supplied” [7].

Hartmann, like Bakhtin, divides individuals into two portions—the body and the mind. While this too seems like a continuation of Descartean thought, Hartmann does not view the mind and body as independent entities: “Body and spirit, however, do not shade off into each other, and there is no continuum between them” [7]. Simply put, the psychic qualities of an individual must be embodied. The link between the bodily and the psychic can be seen in the relationship of how the body affects thought and the thought process: “In every individual, human nature starts its career with purely organic life, and only in this stratum is it directly connected with its ancestral line. Consciousness is not taken over from the consciousness of the parents, but it is formed anew. But it is formed in a very definite dependence upon the particular growing organism” [7]. Consciousness develops in the unique context of each individual’s life.

3.2 Rules for strata division

The levels for strata are organized and divided by four rules [7]:

1. Categorical dependence is dependence of only the higher categories upon the lower, not conversely.
2. Although the categories of the lower stratum afford the basis for being of the higher, they are indifferent in regard to them.
3. The lower categories determine the higher ontological strata as either matter or as a basis for its being.
4. The novelty of the higher stratum is completely free in relation to the lower stratum.

The lower strata are the stronger. They are the building blocks for everything above. The higher strata use materials from the lower, but are able to combine and change these materials to create new structures. The higher strata are dependent on the lower strata—if the lower strata are not present, the higher strata cannot develop. Certain characteristics may appear in several strata. How it appears in the lower strata, however, does not predict how it will appear in the higher strata. These strata are shared by the whole of the physical world, not just mankind. Not everything in nature, though, will have all of the higher strata.

The two primary divisions, as mentioned above are the body and the mind (sometimes the mind is called intellect or spirit—for purposes of simplicity I will refer to the higher strata as the mind and the intellect and the spiritual as strata of the mind). The mind is dependent on the body but the mind is not fully determined by the body. Categories that appear in the body may also appear in the mind, but the categories will not bleed from the body to the mind—the body/mind division is seen as a hard division. The body is divided up into two primary aspects—the inorganic (the lower and stronger) and the organic (the higher and freer). The mind, likewise, has two primary aspects—the intellectual (the lower) and the spiritual (the higher). It is unclear if Hartmann sees the self and other as categories within the strata themselves. I believe a more fruitful and
productive way to view individuals is as monads and not as a part of the strata of the being of the world.

4 Towards an integrated ontology

4.1 Dialogic stratification

Understanding intersubjective relationships is vital to understanding the process of human communication as all interactions, even with one’s self, are ultimately intersubjective. However, if ontology is stratified like Hartman suggests, how do I conceive a relationship between individuals? Does this type of ontological model show a stratification of the world with individuals as part of the natural world or does it see relationships between individuals in the world as relationships between monads?

I believe that each individual is uniquely stratified and that we share some categories or modalities based upon the context of the interaction. Individuals project a self into the world that is constructed from a dialogical relationship between the I-for-self, the other-for-me and the context. The external self, the I-for-other, is not just made up of bodily/external qualities that can be viewed, but also mind/internal qualities that are revealed through verbal or non-verbal communication. Through interaction, individuals share information about beliefs, ideas, and concepts along with psychical characteristics. Individuals do not necessarily “overlap” each other, but instead come into correlation with each other in an attempt to come to knowledge about the other (see figure 2).

4.2 Correlation

The Neo-Kantian philosopher/theologian Hermann Cohen discusses correlation in regard to both man’s relationship with God and man’s relationship to his fellowman [5]. We are able to “come alongside” God. We cannot merge with God, nor can we see things from His perspective. The same is true in relationships between individuals—we are contraposed to the other and can never occupy the space she occupies. We are never able to see from the position of the other. In his later writings, Bakhtin discusses the possible relations that exist in the world: relations between two objects, relations between subject and object and relations between two subjects [1]. These relations form a continuum that ranges between monologic at one pole dialogic at he other.

Relations between objects would be purely monologic. This relation is between two “things” that do not possess consciousness. Relations between two subjects would be purely dialogic. However, neither of these two poles is obtainable for the self. I neither can be an object—as mentioned above I am a subject of or for an other—nor am I able to treat the other fully as a subject—I must finalize or reify the other to some point in order to consider them an other. The positions I can take on this continuum range from treating the other as an object, treating the other as a subject with equal rights and treating the other as a Subject. These are all types of correlation and each one determines the type of
perception I have of the other (see figure 2). If I completely reify the other, the other becomes an object to me. I view the other as a means as opposed to an end in herself. The type of perception I receive from this type of correlation is explanation. If I partially finalize or reify the other, I am able to treat her as a subject. This can be best understood as a form of sympathy. In order to sympathise with the other I must have knowledge of her grief or pain. I do not need to understand it, only know of it. I treat her grieving as a static “thing”, I reify it into a moment of being and not a process. This type of correlation allows to perceive the other through a knowledge of her. If I only marginally finalize the other, I am able to treat her as a Subject. I am able to empathise with her grieving by treating it as an event and not an object. I see that she is in the process of becoming and changing and allow her the room to change. I am never able to completely empathise with the other since I am never able to stand in her place. I can only stand alongside her, correlate with her, and, as a result, understand her. This is the closest correlation I can achieve with the other.

![Figure 2: Correlation between self and other.](image)

5 Users and interactions

5.1 Users, computers and software

All three types of correlations may be seen in interactions between the user and the machines and programs that they use. The type of correlation depends on the use of reification and personification by the user and the experience level of the user. Ontologically, the user is going to approach the machine through her level of experience, the context of the interaction with the computer and the ability to
relate to the computer. Each interaction between the user and the computer is unique because of the experience gained by the computer. The computer is not changed by the interaction except in the most basic physical terms (wear, usage time).

I routinely teach a course in the use of technology and communication. I find that users who have little experience using computers tend to correlate to the computer through explanation. The user understands that the computer is an object but the user’s lack of experience leads them to explain the computer’s behaviour by relating it to human behaviour (“the computer hates me,” “the program is stupid”). While at first glance it may seem that the novice user is personifying the computer and trying to relate to it dialogically. What the user is actually doing is attempting to further reify computing. The user is assigning human behaviour to the computer instead of understanding the functioning of the computer. He remains at the level of explanation and does not try to engage the computer on any terms but his own.

As the user gains experience, his correlation with the computer shifts to one of knowledge. The user partially personifies and partially reifies the machine. Software packages that employ agents are aimed at these users. The software gives the illusion of personalization without actually personalizing the program towards the user. Operating systems label file folders with generic personal terms (“My Computer”, “My Documents”). This level of personification is very superficial. The user is still dealing with the machine using analogous experience, although this experience now includes working with the machine. There is not yet a true personification of the computer as an individual.

Those who have the most experience with computing enter into the most dialogical correlation. These users recognise that each machine, although similar, are individuals and that each one operates slightly different. The user understands the machine as the distinct machine. The individuation shows the highest degree of actual personification.

As users become more technically savvy the need for false personification decreases and the need for adaptability increases. Novice users need to see a “reified individual” in the machine. Agents play an important role and allow the users to project (perceived) human characteristics into the machine. Novice users need the familiarity that human cognates bring. These users need to be able to relate to the machine in a reified personalised manner. As users advance in experience, the agent’s role should diminish and be replaced with a transparency that allows the user to see the individuation of each machine.

5.2 Users and internet interaction

The relationship between internet users is perhaps the more pressing ontological question. How does the user view the other involved in surfing experience? There are two distinct issues that arise: the interaction between users in real time and the interaction between web site designers and those who view the sites. Each one of these has it own issues and implications.

One of the benefits of the internet is that it allows for instant communication over great distances. As speed increases, the communication becomes more
seamless. Conversations take place in real time. Non-verbal information can be conveyed through the use of emoticons or plug-ins that indicate the individual user’s mood and reaction. Problems can arise when there is a disconnect in the relationship between users or between a user’s I-for-self and I-for-other.

First, in an ideal world, individuals would treat each other dialogically. Everyone would strive for either knowledge or understanding of the other. In practice, however, this is not the case. People attempt to use others as a means to some end. The self misuses the other by taking advantage of his surplus of vision either in context of the interaction or in the experience advantage the self holds over the other. The same is true in online communication. The difference is that since the communication is mediated, you can never be sure of who the other is. There may be large gaps in experience between one user and the other which leads to one being able to take advantage.

Second, problems can arise due to the anonymity of the internet. One user may put on a mask when communicating with others. Genders can be switched and age can become fluid. The I-for-other that the user projects may be false. While the I-for-other develops in the interaction between the I-for-self and the context of the situation, knowledge and experience of the situation allows for the more proficient user to exploit the situation. Ultimately this leads to an ethical question—how ought I view the other? Any interaction depends on the context of the situation. One of the elements within this context is value. I am answerable to the other in a dialogue. If I wear a mask, I am no longer answerable to the other. I can always claim to be somewhere or someone else. I have, in Bakhtin’s words, “an alibi in being” [X].

Finally, the web site designer must keep the user in mind when she is creating an internet home. She must consider the context of the situation in which the user will be surfing—what is the user looking for, what level of user am I attempting to attract and how should I respond to the other? The designer must answer the user before he finds the web site. She must answer him by anticipating his needs and his context.

6 Conclusion

Ontology must be a consideration when dealing with technology and individuals. It is only through understanding the user, the context of the communicative situation and the relation or correlation that the I of the user can strike toward the other that we can see both the promise and pitfalls of technology. We must conceive of being as active and stratified which allows for the user to change and build off of experience. Further investigation needs to look at the three correlations and the actual experience of the user.

References


