

Getting Beyond Easy Dichotomies: *Thinking Otherwise* about ICT and ethics

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Gunkel, D.J. (2007). *Thinking otherwise: Philosophy, communication, technology.* West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press. 228pp. ISBN: 1557534365. \$34.95.

My first experience with David Gunkel's writing came when I took one of his courses as a first-year master's student at Northern Illinois University. Gunkel's *Hacking Cyberspace* (2001) posed many of the same challenges and rewards to me then as *Thinking Otherwise* does now. In *Thinking Otherwise*, Gunkel asks his readers to engage topics so ubiquitous to the literature of information and communication technology (ICT) that a cursory review of the table of contents might seem to have little to offer the engaged scholar. Nothing could be further from the true rewards of this text, as it fundamentally challenges not the topics of ICT discussion and debate, but rather the fundamental structure of the debate itself. Chapter by chapter Gunkel carefully reconstructs ancient to contemporary debates around the paradox of books (Chapter 2), the digital divide (Chapter 3), drugs and technology (Chapter 4), *The Matrix* (Chapter 5), and the question of machine ethics (Chapter 6) in order to show that each is based on an untenable false dichotomy. Gunkel does not collect data, re-hash old arguments, or perform some sort of techno-philosophical meta-analysis. This text is neither a treatise on method in the contemporary sense of the word, nor a handbook for performing analyses "otherwise." To Gunkel this is "a qualitatively different way of considering the philosophical dimensions of information and communication technology" (p. 4). The text would seem to have limited utility as a textbook. Instead, *Thinking Otherwise* poses a number of significant challenges for scholars of ICT and ethics, and for students and faculty whose interests lie in the intersections of culture, technology, social responsibility, and "the other."

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Gunkel's Introduction to *Thinking Otherwise* begins with a familiar debate about violent videogames. One side traditionally asserts that violent videogames cause players to become more violent and act out their game fantasies in the "real world." The other side counters that these games may actually play a cathartic role, affording individuals pre-disposed to violence a "safe place" in which to act out their violent tendencies. Both sides typically agree, however, that what matters is what happens in the "real world" to other humans. Here Gunkel sets the tone and focus of his book by critiquing neither camp in this debate, but rather the oppositional binary nature of the argument: "[W]hat is needed is not more research data to prove one side or the other but a qualitatively different way of considering the philosophical dimensions of information and communication technology (ICT)" (p. 4).

The first chapter of *Thinking Otherwise* continues Gunkel's identification and critique of binary, digital reasoning. In this chapter Gunkel describes the debate about the social importance of the computer, the Internet, and related communication technologies. He contrasts the unchecked enthusiasm of "network idealists" who view cyberspace as a "techno-utopia" with the dour sentiments of "naïve realists" who caution us to be prepared for increased surveillance, loss of reality, and eroded face-to-face communication (p. 11). Gunkel goes on to describe a variety of techniques by which dichotomies in ICT have been addressed. He calls them either/or, balance, dialectic, and poststructuralism. For a number of reasons, Gunkel rejects each one on epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical grounds.

In Chapter 2, Gunkel (notably, in print) considers the debate surrounding the late age of print and the impending death of the book as the standard for the organization and presentation of knowledge. Again, Gunkel does not play herald to the death of the book, yet he does note the irony of numerous print books that do just that. Instead, this chapter considers the subject matter of the argument and the manner in which the argument is presented. The debate's obvious paradox is not the focus of Gunkel's analysis, however, as he is more concerned with a semiotic examination of how that paradox has been explored and argued. The chapter attempts to examine clearly a debate that "is a kind of interminable, if not confusing, self-reflection, where the subject matter addressed in the investigation is mirrored in the material of the investigation and vice versa" (p. 62).

Chapter 3 focuses on the differences in access to and availability of ICT to peoples, countries, and cultures commonly referred to as the "digital divide." This topic, like many of the others Gunkel considers, comes framed dichotomously, posing the ICT haves against the ICT have-nots. Gunkel leads readers carefully through a consideration of the origin of the term itself and on to the unhelpful structure of the binary debate. He then confronts this overly simplistic assessment of technology access, and in doing so challenges the oppositional definition. This "notion of a binary divide between haves and have-nots is thus inaccurate and can even be patronizing because it fails to value the social resources that diverse groups bring to the table" (p. 71). Gunkel fundamentally shifts the debates surrounding the digital divide to a focus on the structure of the binary opposition itself. In doing so, he chastises the casual use of the term by government, the academy, and the media.

Gunkel's fourth chapter considers not so much a dichotomous debate as a dichotomous pairing. This chapter traces the connection of technology and drugs, reaching from Socrates' addiction to a book, discourse, and the new technology of writing, to Timothy Leary's *Chaos and Cyber Culture* (1994), to Neo's (played by the actor Keanu Reeves) red pill/blue pill decision in the first *Matrix* film, to the current online role-playing addiction. Gunkel concludes this chapter with a push toward challenging ICT scholarship to engage the codependence of drugs and technology. Finally, Gunkel considers Neo's decision to accept truth (in the real world) as opposed to falsity (of the Matrix), connecting the drug/technology pairing with the dichotomies he will explore in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 continues Gunkel's discussion of *The Matrix*, by examining not Neo's red pill/blue pill decision, but rather the binary structure of the decision's presentation. Through this analysis Gunkel attempts to show that Neo's decision is "not a matter of choosing one or the other but of questioning the structure, necessity, and stakes of this particular and limited set of alternatives" (p. 117). Gunkel connects Neo's predictable, unquestioned "correct" decision to leave the artificial world of the Matrix with current ICT scholarship. Like Neo, it's easy for scholars to choose from a convenient false dichotomy, and in doing so recreate and reinforce traditional boundaries and debates about what are the appropriate and inappropriate subject matters of ICT research. It is a much more difficult task to think otherwise about traditional binary oppositions.

The sixth chapter of *Thinking Otherwise* presents an approach to ethics that considers other forms of "the other". These "others" include the animal and the machine. While animals and the environment share some level of ethical inclusion, the machine remains excluded from moral consideration. Gunkel's analysis is primarily concerned with autonomous, self-regulating machines that could be legitimate subjects of and for moral consideration. He notes that communication ethics is often concerned with how we treat the other with whom we interact and exchange ideas and information. The problem Gunkel notes is that pieces and networks of technology no longer operate as mere conduits (media) of human information transmission and reception. If machines can act as both receiver and sender of messages, might they be considered as the other in communication ethics?

In summary, Gunkel's *Thinking Otherwise* asks readers to do just that. Engaged readers will confront topics and debates they thought they knew and arrive at the end of the chapter questioning the very nature of the debate itself. This is a text ideally suited to getting both students and faculty to challenge long-held assumptions and conventions, if they are willing to work at it. In the space of a few pages Gunkel can (and often does) draw examples from and connections to film analyses, diverse philosophical perspectives, cyber-punk novels, presidential campaigns, and ICT research. As I read *Thinking Otherwise* I was repeatedly struck by the breadth of research and knowledge Gunkel evokes in support of his arguments. This may unfortunately pose a challenge to readers whose interests and whose own literature reviews are more narrowly focused, or who are unwilling to engage a text that so

clearly demonstrates just how cutting-edge and radically positioned Gunkel's perspective is.

References

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