

The Background, the Body and the Internet

Locating Practical Understanding in Digital Culture

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In recent years, Hubert Dreyfus has put forward a critique of the social and cultural effects of the internet on modern societies based on the value of face-to-face, embodied interaction. His concern is motivated by the importance of what he calls “the background” of largely tacit and unarticulated norms which he believes drive social action. Dreyfus’ arguments coalesce around the claim that the internet frees human beings from living in local, embodied and practical situations, but that in doing so it undermines our connection to the background and thus to the sources of meaning in social practice. Citing Søren Kierkegaard, Dreyfus believes that the internet creates a deracinated public sphere in which people become increasingly unable to find their lives on meaningful choices, practices and commitments.

Dreyfus is surely right that the internet has profound social and cultural ramifications and he is also right that these ramifications can be productively analyzed using the concept of the background as it arises in the phenomenological tradition. However, I argue that Dreyfus’ unequivocally negative conclusions about the internet are unwarranted. In this paper, I argue that a modified account of the background can offer conclusions about the social, cultural and political effects of the internet which line up more convincingly with both empirical research and the current shape of online social practices. I mobilize Pierre Bourdieu’s depiction of the interaction between embodied “know-how” – what he calls *habitus* – and local areas of social practice – what he calls “fields” – to show how a study of the internet might proceed more successfully on the basis of the concept of the background.