Technology, wellbeing, and freedom: The legacy of utopian design

Steven Dorrestijn, Peter-Paul Verbeek

Abstract

This paper is about the application of user-influencing design for improving wellbeing, focusing on the ethical issue of finding the right balance between determination and freedom. Two contemporary approaches for user-influencing design, “Persuasive Technology” and “Nudge,” are discussed against the background of social engagement in the history of design. What can be learned from the past? The most explicit but also contested examples of improving people’s lives by means of design can be found in movements of ”utopian design.” We discuss the utopian aspirations in Arts and Crafts, New Objectivity, Gute Form, and Postmodernism. The major lesson to be learned is that it is necessary to find a way out of the repeated ethical dilemma between coercing human behavior on the one hand and fostering human freedom on the other. Following Michel Foucault, we will conceptualize freedom not as the absence of influences on people, but as a practice of shaping one’s life in interaction with these influences. User-influencing design methods can help to prolong the tradition of socially engaged design, with tempered, non-utopian goals, but at the same time with improved understanding and more effective tools concerning how technology mediates our existence.

Full Text: PDF, HTML