Social Networking Services and Ihde's Technological Mediation: An Alterity or Hermeneutic Relation?

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Don Ihde's framework of the ways humans relate to technology is rooted in perception; specifically, how certain technologies *transform* perception. The smartphone is a vessel which allows men to use

social networking services (SNS) and subsequently transforms worldly perceptions by presenting carefully curated representations of reality. Peter- Paul Verbeek's explanation of Ihde's 'Technological Lifeworld' provides the contextual and core knowledge essential to understanding Ihde's interpretation of the role technological artifacts play in human experience. SNS, as accessed via the smartphone, conforms to two types of relations identified by Ihde: hermeneutic and alterity. Characteristics of both relations are crucial to understanding the role of SNS in experience, and its transformation of perception. This can be systematised as:

- (world)-I-Smartphone-SNS-curated world.

'World' is bracketed to acknowledge the intertwinement of man and world, and to call attention to the fact that the real world is often ignored in favour of the curated world presented on SNS. The 'I' uses the smartphone to access SNS and perceive this curated world, which involves interacting with curated users and curated representations of the world.

Through application of Ihde's hermeneutic and alterity technological relations it will be argued that SNS combines characteristics of hermeneutic and alterity elations uniquely, with a goal of presenting users with a curated version of the world and other men (users). I will also consider Ihde's embodiment relation and argue SNS cannot be deemed an embodiment technology.

SNS is a mediator *and* an 'other.' It is humanised *and* connects humans. It is a complex technology which requires a combination of Ihde's two relations.

i. WHY SNS IS NOT AN EMBODIED TECHNOLOGY.

SNS is not an example of embodiment relations because the smartphone, which is used to access SNS, is not transparent. One does not forget the smartphone is there, it requires constant interaction (tapping, scrolling etc.) It is certainly habitual, one often uses it without thinking, but it is not transparent. Transparency requires perception *through* the artifact (see glasses example) and embodied

technologies withdraw from attention to function like an extension of the body [1]. As Verbeek notes, these technologies 'call attention not to themselves but to (aspects of) the world given through them.'[2] The smartphone explicitly calls attention to itself and SNS with its constant buzzing and notifications, luring users into the virtual sphere.

SNS can often feel like an extension of the body, due to the amount of personal information contained on these platforms, its anthropomorphic characterisations, and its now unimaginable role in day-to-day lives. SNS are spaces where users share information and connect with others, not an extension of the body itself. Even though SNS now feel like part of our identities, to live without them wouldn't impair man to the extent that losing one's glasses or prosthetic leg would. I do not view it as an extension of the mind/body despite intense debate, due to the simple fact that humans can, and have, survived without smartphones and SNS.[3]

ii. HERMENEUTIC RELATIONS

Hermeneutic relations, Ihde's second type of mediator, contrasts with embodiment relations in that the artifact must be non-transparent and 'does not withdraw from our relation to the world but provides a representation of the world.'[4] Hermeneutic relations is a popular candidate to apply solely to SNS usage on the smartphone, due to its tangibility and its revealing of representations, however to do so would be to disregard the humanisation of the smartphone and SNS inherent to alterity relations.

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[1] Peter- Paul Verbeek, 'Don Ihde: The Technological Lifeworld', p.127 <https://www.utwente.nl/en/psts/documents/ihde.pdf>, [Accessed: 10 February 2026].

[2] Verbeek, p.127.

[3] Karina Vold, 'Is Your Smartphone an Extension of Your Mind?,' *Vice*, 2017 <https://www.vice.com/en/article/is-your-smartphone-an-extension-of-your-mind/> [accessed11 February 2026]

Chang Sup Park and Barbara K. Kaye, 'Smartphone and Self-Extension: Functionally, Anthropomorphically, and Ontologically Extending Self via the Smartphone,' *Mobile Media & Communication*, 7.2 (2019), 215–32 <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157918808327>

[4] Verbeek, p.127

Heidegger, who is discussed extensively in Verbeek's examination of Ihde, considers technology too as a 'way of revealing,' as opposed to a mere collection of tools and machines.[5] Heidegger believes that modern technology is revealed through 'enframing' (a term which denotes technology as an ordering, treating nature as a resource to be exploited). This mode of revealing (enframing/ Gestell) shapes human perception and experience through its control, whereas for Ihde technology can reveal different ways to access the world, critiquing Heidegger as restrictive. Ihde refutes Heidegger, with Verbeek noting that for Ihde '(technological artifacts) offers us different ways to access the world, even ones that would be impossible without technology.' [6] Heidegger's concept of Gestell suggests a lack of agency, which doesn't match reality. Ihde rejects this, acknowledges our agency *and* the opportunity for new, unprecedented experience. This potential for new experience in hermeneutic technologies, as explained by Verbeek, 'requires interpretation of the world in order to impart something to us about it;' posing a challenge when considering SNS in this framework.[7]

Men can *and must* interpret representations given by tech to understand it. Content consumed on SNS is often done so thoughtlessly, with little contemplation or interpretation, as seen in the likes of 'brain-rot' content. Content on SNS is designed for *escapism* not contemplation. However, despite the lack of contemplation, this content still requires *interpretation.* Content (videos, photos, text) consumed on SNS are representations of the world, not the world itself.

For example, a video of the local park seen on Instagram isn't actually the park, but a representation of it; to understand this is a representation of the park one must interpret it through the senses. Users must read and make sense of content, even if they rarely *reflect.*

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[5] Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology,' in *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition: An Anthology*, 2nd edn, ed. by Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek (Chichester: Wiley, 2014), pp. 305–317.

[6] Verbeek, p.130

[7] Verbeek, p.127

Another integral characteristic of hermeneutic technologies is the fact that the world 'is not perceived *through* the artifact but by *means* of it.'[8] For example, the smartphone is not a lens like that of the glasses, we do not see the world directly through the phone and SNS, but representations of the world 'by means of it'. To perceive 'by means' of a technology, in this case SNS, means that the artifact does not withdraw, one must interpret what it shows, like reading a map. It involves perceiving a representation, not the world directly. Using the smartphone to access SNS is a type of mediator/vehicle into the virtual sphere, which offers users curated content in alignment with their personal algorithms, transforming traditional perception.

To return to the systematisation I proposed:

- (world)-I-Smartphone-SNS-curated world.

The 'representation' here refers to the curated world as accessed through the smartphones ability to open SNS. To this extent, Ihde's hermeneutic relation is deeply resonant with SNS, however the rise of AI deepfakes complicates the concept of 'world representations.' The park example was simple because one knows what their local park looks like and can gauge that someone has simply taken a video of it and posted it online, however, with advancements in AI technology and its accessibility, users can create artificially generated images which closely resemble that of reality but are mere fabricated representations.

For example, the current New York City Mayor recently fell victim to deceptive deepfakes. Melissa Goldin reports, '(the images) show Mamdani as a child and his mother…with disgraced financier Jeffery Epstein and confidant Ghislaine Maxwell.'[9] Mamdani, a well-known figure was perceived by means of X (formerly Twitter) and users' senses were tricked since the image looked legitimate, leading users to interpret this as a representation of the real world, when in fact it was not. Fake

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[8] Verbeek, p.127

[9] Melissa Goldin, 'Fact Check: No, New York State Assemblymember Zohran Mamdani's Mother Does Not Appear in Jeffrey Epstein Files', *AP News*, 7 February 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-mamdani-mother-epstein-files-ai-photos-4d2adffd9790a83b34abf1eaf6cee349>.

content found on SNS complicates a full-proof application of hermeneutic relations to these platforms, and the smartphone and SNS begins to resemble an ‘other.’

iii. ALTERITY RELATIONS.

Ihde’s concern lies with the role *material* artifacts play in the lives of men. However, whilst the smartphone is a material object, the SNS accessed via the smartphone are not; they exceed the boundary of traditional materiality. When using SNS one enters the virtual sphere which in itself is an ‘other’ in terms of how it tries to replicate public spheres/spaces of appearance. However, these virtual spheres lack the tangibility necessary to engage with content meaningfully, like one would with another human.

By ‘other’ however, Ihde is referring to an ‘other’ thing which is given human qualities, but which can ‘never be present as a true person.’ [10] In this type of relation, humans are not related (as in mediating relations) via a technology but related *to* or *with* the artifact; just as humans are related *with* their smartphone due to its constant attention and availability on a person, resembling that of a companion.

This companionship one has with their smartphone, and subsequent access to SNS, *is not human,* despite the intense connection. Alterity relations involve personifying the artifact, referring to it as though it has individual autonomy and human qualities, which is seen widely with the smartphone and SNS. The introduction of Siri on the iPhone manifested this; now users can *speak* to their smartphone as though they were speaking to another human. More so, similar features began to appear on SNS, especially with the rise of AI being integrated into these platforms. Snapchat has a feature which appears at the top of a user’s feed called ‘My AI chatbot’ which is designed to, as stated by Snapchat themselves, ‘answer a burning trivia question, offer advice on the perfect present for your BFF's

[10] Verbeek, p.131

birthday, help plan a hiking trip for a long weekend or suggest what to make for dinner'; companionship and advice essentially. [11]

Alterity technologies are entities which interact with humans and appear as human-like. The smartphone and subsequent SNS usage resemble interactions between men since SNS is a (non-tangible) space where users can communicate and connect. These platforms facilitate connection (appearing as human-like) by recreating human interactions in a non-tangible virtual sphere, merely *representing* interaction. Platforms also 'interact' with humans directly through the introduction of chatbots on some services and Siri (or Siri-types) available on most smartphones. These features seek to provide *representations* of human companionship and connection.

iv. A HYBRID RELATION?

SNS uniquely characterises both hermeneutic and alterity relations. Aspects of SNS provide companionship and representations of human connection through various chatbot/interactive features. Yet these advancements are relatively new. 'Traditional' social media platforms, prior to the integration of AI technologies resemble closer to a hermeneutic technology, but recent AI innovations cannot be ignored as these features continue to grow and invade platforms.

Crucial to my systematisation, is the 'end product' of the curated world; the concept which bridges hermeneutic and alterity relations when considering SNS in Ihde's framework. This curated world refers to the illusion of companionship presented by chatbots, and crucially, the personally crafted content users see on SNS, thanks to algorithmic governance.

Feeds are curated to provide users with content they like and agree with, thus the user engages, which subsequently generates profit for the platform. Users will continue to see content they enjoy, which

[11] 'What is My AI on Snapchat, and how do I use it?'. *Snapchat Support*. <https://help.snapchat.com/hc/en-gb/articles/13266788358932-What-is-My-AI-on-Snapchat-and-how-do-I-use-it> [Accessed 11 February 2026].

does not present an accurate depiction of the real world due to echo chambers, filter bubbles, mis/dis-information, and AI generated content.

Both relations prioritise macro-perception since both require interpretation. Experience is transformed into a data point for platforms on SNS. Perception of the ‘real world’ is transformed on SNS to perception of the ‘curated world.’

Man and world (subject-object) remain intertwined, however if men begin (or continue) to prioritise consumption of the curated world instead of engaging with the real world, the boundaries between the real world and the curated one, reality and content, and true and false begin to blur.

By prioritising the real world, SNS should enhance our experience, not diminish it.

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