

Software against humanity? An Illichian perspective on the industrial era of software

Most programming languages, and the research programs that investigate new ones, embody an industrial attitude to software and humans. For example, software should be correct and efficient; languages should engender those qualities, and either encourage or require humans to write code accordingly. This reflects a belief that retained currency during the 1950s--70s, when those research programmes were formed, but is less current now: that growth in infrastructural complexity is the expected trajectory of development, and that the power of mechanisation will render that complexity tractable. In this talk I'll explore the possibility of alternative principles and alternative directions, drawing primarily on Ivan Illich's vision of post-industrial society. I'll outline the ways in which Illich's recurring themes, such as creeping counterproductivity and "radical monopoly", apply particularly strongly to the world of software and how it shapes people's lives.