

Stay alert to the toolification of experience. The technocratic shift is here

1. The new normal

How do we retain critical thinking during a technocratic shift?

If this state of emergency turns out to be our (indefinitely stretched out) new normal – a quick Google search for ‘coronavirus the new normal’ already returns over 2 billion entries – maintaining a critical view of technology is more crucial than ever.

Why? Because, for many, the state of emergency simply trumps critique, of any kind.

We have been buckling down, learning new digital tools, adapting our working ways to commercial platforms – MS Teams, Collaborate Ultra, and in our off-time Zoom or Houseparty. Our resilience astonishes us and strengthens even more our individual and collective resolve to make it work. Our new platform-based interaction capacity feels almost second nature already, almost empowering, almost ‘just right’ and frankly so convenient. Travelling to a meeting seems an unproductive, even pointless, thing to do now or in the future.

What I am concerned with here is not simply that we are glued to our screens more than ever before. What I am concerned is the impact of the platforms we rely upon as ‘users’. What do they do to our ways of communicating, teaching, learning, thinking, feeling, being, existing?

The shift to online mode has happened very fast, as appropriate to an emergency response. We should however be mindful of how we frame this shift: not quite as online learning, better as emergency remote teaching - for lack of better words.¹ The point is that it would be a mistake to treat this shift as a mere technical problem to solve through technical means. No matter how sophisticated the platform, intuitive the interface or superb the usability, these are not just technical matters.

Technologies are never neutral. They are situated, generative, persuasive enactors of realities – including reality’s unequal power distribution, injustice and social conflicts reflected in their own unequal sovereignty layout. Far from being neutral enablers, or benign reflections of what we do, technologies mediate, orient and shape our behaviours and practices, as educators, citizens and humans. Technologies are not just tools. They build the social. They design it.

For any behaviour, any practice, any cognitive, sensorial and affective capacity that a platform-based environment affords (hello MS Teams), there is an equal number of behaviours, practices, cognitive, sensorial and affective capacities that are denied, side-

¹ <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>

lined or devalued because they do not fit the interface strategy, the 'choice architecture', the usability narrative.

As we found ourselves with no other choice but to become fundamentally users of – and used by – a complex of networked, interlocked and stacked digital infrastructures, we must stay alert to what this process is doing to us.

We must stay alert to the toolification of experience that is happening to us through the technocratic shift.

2. The technocratic shift

Technocratic logic is rooted in technical theories about efficiency, measurement of performance, calculability. The problem it answers is: How do we make the system more efficient?

Technocracy is a form of governmental rationality, a regime informed by the ostensibly neutral and objective knowledge provided by technical expertise. Technocracy claims no allegiance but to efficiency. It traverses nation states, governments, corporations, educational institutions, mindsets.

It is informed by a specific understanding of technology and how technology intersects governance, policy-making and the management of risk and performance.²

Above all, a technocratic logic is based on three ideas concerning technology:

- *Instrumentalism*: technology is a means to an end. If it works, it must be good.
- *Solutionism*: technology can, will and should deliver solutions to problems.
- *Techno-determinism*: the progress of technology is natural, rational, positive and inevitable.

The implication of this instrumentalist, solutionist and techno-determinist view (technocratic logic) shapes not only how we see (or fail to see) technologies, but also how we relate to the world of material entanglements we live in.

Technocratic logic reduces any discussion around technology to the disingenuous common sense of 'Guns don't kill people, people kill people' - the notorious argument that technologies are tools, it only depends how they are used.³ Moreover, it frames technology as the harbinger of future achievements, often equating it tout court with 'the' future (chosen by whom, for whom, to whose advantage or detriment always left unsaid). Finally, it deploys its promise of improved performance and measurable results in order to claim to be beyond the political.

A true technocrat will always say that politics must be kept out, if what is at stake is to solve a problem.

Technocratic logic is value-free.

² Anders Esmark (2020) *The New Technocracy*. Bristol University Press p. 3

³ Andrew Feenberg (2018) *Technology, Modernity, and Democracy*. London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, p. 59

3. Toolification

There is nothing wrong with having the right tools for the job. Tools are after all what makes us human and how we humans have learned to interact with the planet. The mistake would be to believe that we invented tools to master the world. The truth is that it is tools that invent the human. Actually, tools and humans co-produce each other.⁴ The idea that we invent, design and use tools that are tailored to our specific needs and requirements fails to take into account how everything we humans create goes on creating, producing, designing – all the while generating largely unexpected consequences. The tendency to see technology as nothing but pure instrumentality – the technical toolkit – is a fallacy.⁵

This is why is essential to stay alert and:

- Don't confuse between technologies with tools (nor with methods).⁶
- Don't normalize our reliance on tools and the standardization of behaviour and practices tools expect from us.⁷

Instead, we must stay alert and resist the toolification of experience.

Our direct experience – the experience we constantly have of the world we inhabit, which is constitutive of what and who we are – is a finely tuned blend of the cognitive, the sensorial, the affective, the embodied, the material-semiotic and the noncognitive. It is this complex, nonlinear, even messy, chaotic, ex-centric experiential apprehension of the world that is turned into workable tool by the technocratic logic of the platform. This logic is enacted through environments designed to be highly intuitive, with the ultimate goal to become invisible. This is not new, of course. It was spelled out 30 years ago by the pioneers of ubiquitous computing: the more technologies are woven seamlessly into the fabric of everyday life, the more they go unnoticed.⁸

And so we buckle down and we learn the platforms. We get to know them. We familiarize and continuously adapt to them, down to my body posture right now, the correct one that the assemblage human-screen demands. We adjust to the machine. Toolification shifts tremendous responsibility directly onto us, and our ability to retrain, to develop competence, to make it work.

Every time we login to a platform we are not only users, but products too.

Platform design (interface, interaction, UX) is a way of designing intentions, propensities and desire pathways at a precognitive level, in ways that remain not fully accessible to conscious cognition and perceptual awareness. This is where platform design

⁴ Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley (2016) *Are We Human? Notes on an Archaeology of Design*. Lars Muller Publishers p.51

⁵ Gilbert Simondon (2011) 'On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects.' *Deleuze Studies*, 5 (3) pp. 407 – 424

⁶ Dennis Tenen (2016) 'Blunt Instrumentalism: On Tools and Methods.' In *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, Lauren F. Klein and Matthew K. Gold eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/09605ba7-ca68-473d-b5a4-c58528f42619>

⁷ Philip Scranton (1995) 'Determinism and Indeterminacy in the History of Technology.' *Technology and Culture* 36 (2) S31-53 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3106689>

⁸ Mark Weiser (1991) 'The Computer for the 21st Century.' *Scientific American*, 265(3): 94–104.

encounters persuasion techniques and behaviorist units.⁹ And this is also where data harvesting, predictive analytics, pervasive surveillance and algorithmic control happen.¹⁰ The technocratic shift is here.

4. Scalability

The rhetoric of easy, quick and simple-to use (intuitive) tools has also another effect. It implies the expectation of scalability. Scalability is the capacity to expand without having to rethink or transform the underlying basic elements of a given system.¹¹ It prioritizes how well all the components fit, how snugly they can be nested together and expanded at will. It values precision above frayed edges. By definition scalability does not accommodate or value what cannot be precisely determined and what does not fit exactly within the established categories of the given architecture – especially when this is a digital platform and not an IRL event.¹²

What happens to the messing around that nourishes creativity, imagination and free-range experimentation is anyone's guess. Is there a space for a non-standard response to, and interaction with, technologies, platforms, infrastructures?

If scalability informs the way in which the triangulation of technologies, infrastructure and governance is effectively designed, we must zoom in on the opposite pole of the spectrum, where the non-standard, the non-scalar, and the non-scalable linger, and where studio mess thrives. Where we encounter the diversity of what does not fit with the blueprint of platform design and does not match the planned growth of infrastructures.

This diversity is not about paying lip-service to the entrenched ideology of identity politics. Rather it is the acknowledgement that diversity means not only difference, heterogeneity and divergence, but disharmony, tension, contradiction, and conflict too, and that is where the potential for creative transformation lies.

The focus on the toolification of experience should keep us alert to another thing: how to stay concerned with theory and criticality. Problems concerning tools (and methods) appear to be easier to discuss and to resolve than theoretical ones. To close a protracted argument about tools – especially if it raises uncomfortably competing intellectual and axiological standpoints - our technocrat could always invoke the

⁹ B.J. Fogg (2003) *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do*. Morgan Kaufmann

¹⁰ For a recent assessment of FANG (the high-performing tech stocks Facebook, Amazon, Netflix and Google) in pandemic times see Naomi Klein's Screen New Deal (8 May 2020) <https://theintercept.com/2020/05/08/andrew-cuomo-eric-schmidt-coronavirus-tech-shock-doctrine/>

¹¹ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2012) 'On Nonscalability: The Living World is not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales.' *Common Knowledge* 18 (3). pp. 505-524, Duke University Press <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/485828>

¹² Paige C. Morgan (2018) The consequences of framing digital humanities tools as easy to use, *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 25 (3), pp.211-231, Routledge <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:20283/>

necessity to be pragmatic, practical, efficient, and ask to refocus on the empirical evidence leading to the right solution.¹³

We do not have a lot of control over the technologies that we use. The platforms we use each day are those with institutional licence and more will come our way (hello Panopto – an article begs to be written about your name). We do not discuss the values these technologies bring with them.¹⁴

And yet we should. Because we have a lot of control over how we articulate our critical reflection, how we ignite a discussion about the values we stand for, and how we keep on observing and nourishing those frayed edges without which we would not even be here. Hello CSM.

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¹³ Tom Scheinfeldt (2012) 'Why Digital Humanities Is 'Nice.' In *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, edited by Matthew K. Gold, 59–60. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-88c11800-9446-469b-a3be-3fdb36bfd1e/section/ffbe0616-a8d6-44ac-8f8e-1e4d4359d4f8>

¹⁴ Curtis Fletcher (2019) Educational Technology and the Humanities: A History of Control. In *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, edited by Matthew K. Gold. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/4805e692-0823-4073-b431-5a684250a82d/section/ed3d53dd-d7aa-4369-a41f-1098a121e41b#ch30>