Does technology have an essence?

The last few decades have witnessed a vast deal of technologic developments. It has become the era for technologic advancement and new/contemporary media environment. Old media technologies such as vinyl, cassettes, newspapers, radio, and television have been superseded and started to leave their place into discursive practices, info tech, digital networks, and mobile, wireless, digital.

Our life practices have been transformed by advances in information and communications. Accordingly, the nature of our knowledge practices and institutions has changed. New information and communication technologies raise complex ontological, epistemological, ethical, and identity issues (Peters, 2003). We have been affected by the environments in which we live in and the media factors that surround us: i. e. newspapers, the film and TV industry and by new media technologies (digital, WAP).

Although most of us we use it daily, many of us never think about technology outside of its current usefulness. It may be because of this that society is becoming increasingly more dependent on the use of technology in everyday activities. However, many theories and ideologies have been put forward about technology. Some has seen it as a good or positive value and some has interpreted more broadly in relation to culture and history. Where some tend towards a kind of ethnicity and materiality, the others view technology as something more than material, embodying cultural practices and symbolic forms (Peters, 2003).

In this essay, in order to understand the way technology may be changing our views of ourselves and the world around us, we examine it thoroughly

through exploring the ideas of Martin Heidegger, Rutsky and others, and few examples of new/contemporary media environment.

Heidegger and the “ essence” theory

Martin Heidegger was widely regarded as one of the central figures of the existentialist movement and influential in the areas of phenomenology and ontology. He attempted to reorient Western philosophy away from metaphysical and epistemological and toward ontological questions. In other words, he worked on questions concerning the meaning of being, or what it means to be, during his long studies in a Catholic family atmosphere and his studies in theology. Although some critised Heidegger as a person who longed nostalgically for a fantasized feudalism through conceptual lenses derived from Catholic scholasticism and who never renounced Nazism, but chose instead to subsume it under a metaphysical reading of history (Bendle, 2001), he is arguably one of the first philosophers to explicitly discuss the implications of a philosophy of technology.

In a world “ everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm it or deny it” (Heidegger, 1977, p4), Heidegger formulates the goal we are concerned with here as that of gaining a free relation to technology.

Heidegger had never liked the modern cosmopolitan lifestyle with its consumerism, shallow values and disregard for nature. He saw mankind in the grip of an obsession with production of profit-maximum yield at minimum cost without even considering the current or future consequences, hence mercenary behaviour governed all decision. He believed for a long time that

the danger of technology was that man was dominating everything and exploiting all beings for his own satisfaction, as if man were a subject in control and the objectification of everything were the problem (Watts, 2001). However, he later realised man also turns out to be the slave of technology and finding the only way of achieving freedom out of technology as to attain the essence of technology.

“ According to ancient doctrine, the essence of a thing is considered to be what the thing is. We ask the question concerning technology when we ask what it is. Everyone knows the two statements that answer our question. One says: Technology is a means to an end. The other says: Technology is a human activity” (Heidegger, 1977, p. 4).

He distinguishes technology from its essence, “ technology’s essence is nothing technological” (1977, p. 4), rather sees it as a system. He describes this essence with the Greek concept of techne, the term not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also to the arts of the mind and fine arts. Techne could also encompass the meaning of “ a form of meaning in the widest sense”, episteme. The essence of technology, technï¿½, is a matter of bringing-forth, poiesis; it is something poietic.” “ Thus what is decisive in technï¿½ does not lie at all in making and manipulating, nor in using of means, but rather in the aforementioned revealing”(Heidegger , 1977, p13). As revealing, not as manufacturing, technï¿½ is a bringing-forth which is grounded in revealing (aletheia). “ Technology is a mode of revealing- a mode of fundamental truth, comes to presence in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where aletheia, truth, happens” (Heidegger, 1977, p. 13).

Heidegger claims that revealing is what “ truth” really means. The Greek for revealing, aletheia, is translated into veritas, truth, by the Romans. The equating of revealing with truth is relevant to understanding the danger of technology.

The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging, to come forth by challenge or demand”; this is a matter of putting to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored”(Heidegger, 1977, p. 14). He gives the example of flower which blossoms and fades according to the season as the natural and unchallenged. But in contrast, if a flower is cultivated and preserved in a greenhouse articifially, this is an excessive demand upon nature, hence, is revealing by challenge. Heidegger describes this challenging as a demand and a setting upon. As he indicates: “ modern technology sets upon nature challenging forth the energies of nature, unlocking and exposing them but always directed toward furthering something else (maximum yield at the minimum expense)” (Heidegger, 1977, p. 15) Even agriculture today is a mechanized food industry; the field has come under another kind of ordering.

Heidegger distinguishes modern technology from its ancient form. He observes: “ Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing, namely standing in reserve (Bestand).”(sayfa no)

Revealing does not occur beyond humans, but also not decisively or exclusively in us. Thus we respond to “ that challenging claim which gathers man thither to order the self-revealing as standing-reserve.” (p. 19) In this way, we ourselves are standing reserve, being challenged to set upon all things, including ourselves, that they may be ready to be ordered about. This form of revealing is the essence of modern technology and in Heidegger’s terms “ enframing”.

Heidegger uses the term enframing as a challenging claim on man. Once things have been revealed to us we place them inside of a “ frame” of understanding. Enframing endangers ‘ man’ in his relationship to himself and to everything that exists. We appear to have such a decisive role in Enframing that we see ourselves as the masters of the world, the orderers of standing-reserve. In fact, we are but one standing-reserve ordering others because we are employed simply for the purpose of creating standing-reserve.

We therefore lose awareness of our capacity for revelation. All objects become forms of standing-reserve, and we feel that we encounter only ourselves, but in fact, we do not encounter our essence, because this essence is revelation.

Heidegger claims that technology is relentlessly overtaking us (Heidegger, 1977). We have become little more than objects of technique, incorporated into the very mechanism we have created. The essence of this technology is the methodical planning of the future.

Heidegger believes that modern technology, as enframing, is dangerous. If we enframe, we are losing sight of our revealing and our essence. Our essence is concealed from us because we become users of the world as standing-reserve. There is a tendency for us to reduce ourselves to ‘ standing-reserve’ or a source of energy for human use. This ‘ use’ of the world is not exclusive to materials, it includes other humans as well. The essence of technology contains the extreme danger to humankind by threatening the loss of what is most essentially human, our capacity for new revealings.

The process of ‘ enframing’ seeks to make everything more accessible for utilization for our objectives, and it motivates us to create the artificial boundaries that divide land into different communities and societies. It causes us to define cultural and racial differences that allow us, when we are more powerful. Heidegger suggests that the ultimate purpose of all this manipulation of life is simply ‘ the will to will’ – self-assertion for the sake of more power. We are gripped by the compulsion to control things without realising that man is being controlled, at least in the way of thinking.

Technology, however, can be a means to improve the living standard; it strengthens the power to control nature; and it is taken even as a way to freedom. But as Heidegger indicates, as man behaves according to the way which modern technology reveals, he blocks other possible ways of existence. So we consume never-ending quantities of entertainment and information and interact with representations of reality rather than reality itself.

As for post-modern society, as the result of advance technology, Jameson (1990) claims that postmodern culture turns out to be high culture and mass culture, while exhibiting a “ new depthlessness” that resists interpretation; involves imitation and not parody; reduces history to historicity, to a stereotyped and cliched set of images. “ In the weaker productions of postmodernism the aesthetic embodiment of such processes often tends to slip back more comfortably into a mere thematic representation of content- into narratives which are about the processes of reproduction and include movie cameras, video, tape recorders, the whole technology of the production and reproduction of the simulacrum” (Jameson, 1990)

Like Jameson, In Baudrillard’s version of postmodernity, there is hardly any space for opposition or resistance because of the supreme hegemony of the controlling system: “ Everywhere, always, the system is too strong: hegemonic” (Baudrillard, 1988, 163) Baudrillard is merely pointing out the various ways that consumer society and the simulacrum have won in their colonization of all “ reality.”

Baudrillard points out that the loss of history, television, film, and the internet separate us from the real even as they seek to reproduce it more fully or faithfully. Therefore our culture has been covered by mass-market products, which contribute to our society of simulation and consumerism, consumer society, a culture of consumption has so much taken over our ways of thinking into, in Heidegger’s term “ enframed” thinking.

In Technologies of the Self (1988), throughout his work Foucault had been concerned with technologies of power and domination, and emphasizes the

relation between technique and subjectivity (or self-development) rather than investigating anything about the nature of technology.

He contends that technologies have always been part of culture and society and instrumental in questions of self-formation; technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject (p, 11).

On the other hand, Heidegger's account of technology has been criticised on a number of grounds (e. g., Feenberg, 1999) for being himself ascribing an essence to technology, but not differentiating among different types or levels of technology. It is also criticised for too abstract and too theological Greek aesthetic sensibility, in other words, for its inability to offer us a guideline for reform of technology in the present era. In addition to this, he is accused of leaving no room for a future-oriented practice of reform or human agency reforming the apparently autonomous cultural system of ordering that modern technology has become (Peters, 2003).

In further, and more evidently, Rutsky ( ) in his High technï¿½ looks back to the insights of early twentieth century to develop an approach to aesthetics in our contemporary techno-culture. Rutsky sees that in high tech, rather, technology becomes much more a matter of representation, of aestheics, of style.

Rutsky as opposed to Heidegger offers a revisionist view of " essence" as " a dynamic, ongoing process or movement" that " dismantles" or " unsecures" the world (p105). In high tech, the ability to technologically reproduce,

modify, and reassemble stylistic or cultural elements becomes not merely a means to an end, but an end itself.

Rutsky also discusses what he calls the “ avant-garde technï¿½” and its relationship to functionalism, drawing upon examples from architecture and film. He argues, for example, that the “ reification of technological form [implicit in functionalism] is the result of the extension of rationalization to the aesthetic sphere,” (83) and that this is followed by a further shift from a view of technology as instrumental to a view of it as form (p111).

Rutsky seems to appreciate this where he explores the “ techno-cultural unconsciousness”: “ technology is neither an external instrument nor simply a threatening, uncontrollable other, but a promising generative process that, however monstrous or alien it may seem, is already ongoing within us.” (153) This is an important insight as we develop an aesthetics of the high-tech world-to-come.

Drawing on the Greek root of technology, (techne, generally translated as “ art, skill, or craft”), R. L. Rutsky challenges both the modernist notion of technology as an instrument or tool and the conventional idea of a noninstrumental aesthetics. Today, technology and aesthetics have again begun to come together: even basketball shoes are said to exhibit a “ high-tech style” and the most advanced technology is called “ state of the art.”

He also clearly explains that the contemporary advancement, despite at the level of individual cases, screening a video, playing a computer game, finding information on the Web, or making money by providing these services may be quite instrumental, when the process is viewed on a larger

scale, when all the complex interactions between its elements come into play, it comes much more difficult to conceptualise as simply a matter of an instrumental rationality or enframing. It becomes much less a case of humans screening data for their own use than of techno-cultural screening itself (Rutsky, p7).

New media environment/Contemporary media environment

In the lights of the theories above, we can see the truth of Heidegger's words in the rapid evaluation of computer technology, the supervision of genetic engineering research and also in new advances in atomic research. Mankind has been drawn into serving technology, thus ' lending a hand' to the coming to presence of technological developments. In so doing human being are losing all contact with the deeper essence or meaning of their own Being.

In Heidegger's own words: ' The approaching tide of technological revolution in the atomic age could so captivate thinking may someday come to be accepted as the only way of thinking.'

Borgmann introduces the term " hyperintelligence" to refer to such developments as electronic mail and the Internet (Borgmann, 1992: 102ff). Hyperintelligent communication offers unprecedented opportunities for people to interact across space and time, but, paradoxically, it also distances those it links. The person as a focal thing has become a commodity delivered by a device. This new way of relating has weakened connection and involvement while extending its range. (Borgmann, 1992: 108).

He begins: “ The Internet is not just a new technological innovation; it is a new type of technological innovation; one that brings out the very essence of technology” (Dreyfus, 2001, p. 1).

In the essay “ Switchings”, Tony Fry wrote,

With his notion of the “ will to will” Heidegger prefigured much of the critical concern with cybernetics.

These ideas can be …In the first place, the computer was not destined by some inner techno-logic to serve as a communications medium. In fact, the major networks, such as the French Teletel or the Internet were originally conceived by technocrats and engineers as instruments for the distribution of data. So precious were the computing resources being put at the disposal of ordinary users that this seemed the appropriate use for them. The engineers imagined a virtual space of communication, paralleling the real world of everyday interaction, where only valuable information would circulate.

-the distribution of information-was perceived by another group of actors, its users, as the solution to quite another problem-human communication. The new interpretation of the technology was soon incorporated into its structure through design changes and, ultimately, through a change in the very definition of the technology.

In the second place, Borgmann’s critique ignores the variety of communicative interactions mediated by the networks. No doubt he is right to argue that human experience is not enriched by much of what goes on

there. But a full record of the face-to-face interactions occurring in the hallrooms of his university would likely be no more uplifting.

Borgmann ignores more interesting uses of computers, such as the original research applications of the Internet, and teaching applications, which show great promise (Harasim, et. al., 1995).

It is a thesis as powerful as it is frightening, as simple and elegant as it is prophetic. The Net as a kind of technological enframing of being stands at the door. It contains both the danger and the saving power. If we allow it to transcend the limits of the body, we will also allow it to remove, forget, or separate us from our moods, our cultural location and belongingness, our finitude and vulnerability, our animality that helps comprise our linguistic and cultural identities, and also the meaning we give our lives http://www. utpjournals. com/jour. ihtml? lp= simile/issue9/PetersX4. html

Conclusion

There is a sense in which, for Heidegger, technology is the supreme danger to man. The essence of technology, in the Heideggerian sense, is the supreme danger because it prevents us from having a proper understanding of our own being. The essence of technology, in the sense of the understanding of being which makes it possible, is such as to exclude other ways of understanding being, for instance, those involved in creating and engaging with works of art. It is not just understanding being, but understanding being in manifold ways which makes us human. As such, the real danger of technology for Heidegger was the process by which the machines begin to alter our existence.

since he rejects technical regression while leaving no room for a modern alternative, it is difficult to see in what that relation would consist beyond a mere change of attitude. Surely these ambiguities indicate problems in his approach

Technology is not neutral. The tools we use shape our way of life in modern societies where technique has become all pervasive. In this situation, means and ends cannot be separated. How we do things determines who and what we are. Technological development transforms what it is to be human.

No doubt Heidegger is right to claim that modern technology is immensely more destructive than any other. No one can deny that our society is immersed in technology, therefore we must try to understand technology and our relation to it or else we become ignorant captives of it, blind to the bondage that defines our daily activities. Technology is more than just our use of gadgets and tools to make common tasks easier, it is an understanding of the world as being apprehendable.