Title: “The Question of Technology and Media in the Current Pandemic”

Abstract. The current ongoing epidemic brought to the forefront of our mundane experiences the use of technology and the influence of media. Due to the isolation most of us face, technology is the only means through which we can safely connect with the people around us. Through technology, media is the way in which we can stay updated to the world around us. Due to this, technology came to facilitate the access to two main spheres of our lives: that of the people we know and that of the world we live in. The current essay sets to revisit Heidegger’s *Question Concerning Technology* from our current predicament, reflecting on our relationship with technology, how this is relevant for the crisis we face, and the way in which media can change our way of perceiving the said crisis through its narrative.

Keywords: technology; pandemic; Heidegger; crisis; media freedom; Hobbe; Together but Apart

The current pandemic and the global crisis it generated are regarded as one of the most disruptive events of the recent years that affect the entire globe to various degrees. It is known that this situation which poses multiple difficulties on different levels created disruptions in both public and personal life. The most common disruption of the ones generated was the one that required all of us to change our ways of living and to adjust our private and public life to the guidelines imposed or advised by the governments. The year of 2020 can be thus described so far as one of isolation because it limited the direct contact between humans and reduced our direct participation to societal life. However, in order to maintain a somewhat normal existence, technology started to play a more important role than before. Why is it so? Because it facilitates the remote communication between us, helping thus the maintaining of physical distance while keeping us somehow connected. While this might sound ideal, the reality is more complex. While the more frequent use of technology has indeed many advantages, there are certain disadvantages that arise in both types of interactions: with other individuals and with the world.

Technology needs to be addressed because it can become a coping mechanism during harsh times or even a factor of stress caused by the endless scrolling.¹ For doing so, a possible approach would be the one of going back to a classical

text, such as Heidegger’s *Question Concerning Technology*, and see in which way it may pose interest and usefulness for this situation. A fresh reading may help us meditate on where we stand towards technology and what course of action we should take in the future. While the aim of this essay is not that of providing definitive answers, it merely wishes to revisit *The Question Concerning Technology*, the late importance that technology started playing in our lives, and how these all can connect within a crisis.

**Thinking Technology**

*The Question Concerning Technology* meditates on what technology is, isn’t, what it might be and what it ought not to become. The main thesis of Heidegger’s essay is the following: when addressing the question of technology, one has to look at the essence of technology. While it may appear an easy thing, it is not. The difficulty surfaces from the difference between technology and its essence. The essence of technology does not equal technology and its many products, and this is where the confusion usually occurs. After all, we are used to confusing an object and its products with its essence. However, as disappointing as it may be, Heidegger does not offer an answer for what the essence of technology is.

I want to highlight two key elements in Heidegger’s argument: the bringing-forth into appearance and poiesis. The connection between the two is clarified through the several ways of bringing something forth (through manufacture, artistry, poetry, but also physis) and how they are all poiesis. The bringing forth is defined as the movement from hidden to unhidden and it is connected to the Greek term *aletheia*. Heidegger links the instrumentality of technology with revealing and *aletheia* (truth), saying that “technology is a way of revealing”. Techne is an important aspect of his theory because it’s a form of knowledge and one of the ways of *aletheia* (the other being *episteme*), being responsible for forcefully revealing what will not normally reveal to us.

Technology brings-forth, reveals in a forcefully, almost artificial (not natural), manner things that do not show themselves if let alone. Another aspect of technology, especially the modern one, is its power to order things around it, in the sense that they enter in a stand-by mode where they become available as materials for whenever technology will order them to be used. Humans are the ones that drive technology towards new peaks but, Heidegger notes, they cannot control or influence the main capacity of technology: the revealing.

The concept of *Gestell* is introduced with the meaning of enframing something. This is the name used for the essence of technology and it means the “gathering together of the setting-upon that sets upon man, to reveal the actual, in the mode of ordering as standing-reserve”. However, even if it’s the name of technology, it’s not technologic itself. To quote Heidegger a bit more: “in enframing, the unconcealment appropriates rates in conformity with which the work of modern technology reveals the actual as standing-reserve”. Enframing brings about the revealing, the ordering of

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3 Ibidem, Pg. 320.
4 Ibidem, Pg. 325.
5 Ibidem, Pg. 326.
technology, but also through its bringing about of revealing places itself in destining (understood here as a sense of direction, rather than the traditional random force).

“Heidegger suggests that the danger lies in the possibility of misinterpretation. In other words, it stems out of possible meanings that do not conform to aletheia (that would be the true interpretation). This danger is seen as a supreme danger because when enframing operates the revealing it makes objects available, it transforms everything that is uncovered into a possible resource. The availability of everything has the possibility of throwing humans into an illusion: that of ruling the earth. If the objects around us become accessible, then they appear as if they are dominated, ruled. The second illusion that would arise, according to the author, would be that of finding humanity in everything around us, seeing our essence. “The essence of technology, as destining of revealing, is the danger.” The danger manifests itself in the changes technology might inflict on the essence of humans and in the impossibility of properly accessing truth, aletheia.

How can we escape the danger? By understanding the essence of technology and how it might prove essential to us. The key to salvation lies in enframing, in the danger itself. How can this work? According to Heidegger, granting is the saving power because it is connected to revealing and has the ability to send into a direction or the other. The saving can work if the humans are on the lookout for both the concealment and unconcealment that can be found on earth. By having their guard up, humans have the chance of countering the danger. It is crucial to change our perception of technology as a mere instrument and to give up on our wish to master it, all in order to not lose sight of the essence of technology.

The strongest point of Heidegger’s essay is its intention of discussing not technology but our modes of thinking technology. Such modes can be exemplified through the bringing-forth where humans are a meaningful element among other such elements, all inside the productive process, while in the challenging-forth humans control this process. As David Waddington notes, because we are trapped in the Gestell we choose the mode of challenging-forth which reveals everything in its specific manner. Following Waddington and Rorty, it must be said that the idea of Gestell is very confusing, not clearly formulated and it leaves space for interpretation regarding its specific nature. Moreover, it makes it appear as if “the determinations of Being are somehow responsible for human actions”. While this responsibility and its dynamics are not clearly indicated, it raises some ethical issues as well. About the monstrous character of technology that Heidegger writes about, Rorty notices how he fails to see the variety of technology and the good it

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6 Ibidem, Pg. 331.
7 Ibidem, Pg. 333.
10 Ibidem, Pg. 578.
More critical comments can be made about Heidegger’s essay, but this doesn’t serve the current purpose. His view on technology has the merit of altering our simplistic perception of it, launching us into questioning where we stand towards technology and how we truly view it. We get to ask ourselves: are we still in the desire of mastering and using it?

The Question of a Crisis

As it was stated in the first lines of this essay, the pandemic made it so for us that we came to be depended on technology in order to maintain a somewhat normality with our fellow humans. Let us now take a look into what can be said about crises. When a general crisis occurs, we can speak of a collective trauma going on. Traumatic events and an environment that is dominated by difficulties and various forms of stress may result in large-scale negative impacts with direct and indirect psychological effects. For the present situation, Dana Rose Garfin identifies the direct effects as being caused by being exposed to the virus first-hand (through personal infection or family infection), and the indirect effects that arise through media coverage that leads to trauma or other unwanted effects. Intensive media coverage of crises is associated with a rise in psychological distress and other unpleasant effects that may happen over a longer period of time. What is the general image that the media, independent or not, created regarding the virus? There is an answer that can be viewed as almost universal.

As Nigel Warburton pointed out in his "(Hospital) trolley problems. Some philosophical responses to coronavirus”, the ongoing pandemic has been described as a metaphoric war by various leaders around the globe. The current situation with the coronavirus is described as an invisible war, in an attempt of making us stay alert and united against this common enemy. As the author emphasizes, it’s interesting to think about the fact that we chose to depict an almost-invisible virus as an enemy, humanizing it in a sense, putting it in a war narrative. When viewing the situation from the lenses of the mentioned metaphors, the current situation sounds more similar to the climate of the Thirty Years War and what the philosopher Thomas Hobbes and author of the Leviathan witnessed during his times. After all, the Leviathan gives us an occasion to reflect, as individuals, on the various ways to guard our mind against the chaos of the world. Had we not lived through this pandemic so far, it would have been difficult to imagine the world entering a

rather chaotic state where fear is more present than it used to be.

Let us bring Hobbes into this discussion a bit more. Daniel McCarthy suggests that a broader reading of Hobbes’ work highlights the role that fear played in his views on history and society. Fear is seen by the philosopher as the main catalyst of any war. The prosperity of one state brings about the fear of the other and so on and forth in a never-ending cycle. He brings up the position of Hobbes on the topic of continual welfare that is rather not an eternal war, but rather the fear of one breaking out. Following the philosopher, McCarthy notes how a sovereign or a government that cannot protect the subject throws it back in a natural state. And this is precisely what many citizens around the world felt. They felt that the government wasn’t doing enough, wasn’t fighting enough, wasn’t protecting enough in order to win this war. It is here what I wished to prove in the most general sense: that media has had the power to shape the way in which we perceived the past months and this general struggle.

However, media is not to blame for it faced its own problems and difficulties in the previous months. Media freedom is one of the core values of the European Union and it plays an important part in democracy. The freedom of media was in a dire state before the pandemic, and it only worsened now. Globally, there have been a number of cases where the government infringed the media freedom in order to cover its own lacking in response to the pandemic and to lead a positive narrative for a nationalist and authoritarian approach. The International Press Institute recorded a number of roughly 130 cases where the media freedom was violated across the world. To combat such cases, there has been a constant effort to counter misinformation and false campaigns that aim to incite fear and distrust. Because of the nature of this situation and because technology is the means through which we can access whatever media has to report in these times of isolation we can take two stances. Namely, we can tend to blame technology for the damage that it’s making, like Heidegger, or we can look to the bright side and the good it has done, like Rorty. Either way, the aim here is not to choose any of these two narratives, but rather to question our present state.

Going to what Eileen Hunt Botting is pointing in “A novel (coronavirus) reading of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*” we find an interesting observation. When Hobbes wrote about how people, when they are isolated from society, lose the account of time, but also the meaning and purpose of industry and other activities, he must have indicated living in a form of quarantine, in the sense of isolation. Undoubtedly, the isolation from the time of Hobbes is different from our current isolation

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during the pandemic, and yet they seem to both somehow be able to suspend to a degree our lives. Just as David Runciman argues, Hobbes indicates how this suspension, in this case of politics, is a mean to highlight and uncover the “nature of power”. It’s almost as if this isolation and this loss of normality make us aware of things we did not realize up until now. On this, I support the idea that this moment is the proper moment for stopping and meditating on our relationship to technology and how it is changing our lives in these grim times. We can gain a new perspective through the lenses of crisis.

**Enframed Existence**

Revisiting Heidegger’s *Question Concerning Technology* may appear in a new light in our current situation when isolated from our normal interactions, we use technological means to connect with each other. We use video calls and social platforms that are substitutes for our usual activity. As Kent de Spain notes, our three-dimensionality is inevitably altered when it is contained and processed through technological means. It is more or less evident for anyone that a video call cannot equal our previous, live, experiences. This alteration is reminiscent of Heidegger’s enframing (*Gestell*) because, after all, our movements and actions are now enframed on a screen and this enframing inevitably excludes certain elements, revealing and concealing at the same time. While this should not be interpreted as a kind of total-loss situation, we should be aware of the fact that, inevitably, something is lost in these two-dimensional and virtual interactions. However, something is also gained, revealed, in the sense that we get to see the people we know through the technological lens and something may appear as different or new. This completes our general experience and enriches it, even if at the moment it may appear as unpleasant or difficult as it requires us to adapt to a new way of acting.

When applied in this context, Heidegger’s essay makes us question the following: is our humanity altered by this capturing and enframing, all the way to its most intimate spot, or is the alteration present only on the surface? While this question is difficult if not impossible to answer, it makes us reflect further on our views on technology’s relationship with us and vice-versa. If we are to consider technology as a mere instrument which we can master, making the mistake Heidegger warns us about, then we lose in our quest of comprehending the nature of technology. If we start to reflect on technology as not a mere instrument but something that has the potential of inherently changing our world, inner and outer, then we may stand a chance in avoiding the danger Heidegger mentions.

How can we avoid this danger? Through art, described as a “manifold re-

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20 Ibidem, pg. 28.
which has two main functions: that of keeping the truth and also that of exerting power over it. Even if art can be the solution to this extreme danger, Heidegger admits that whether it will manifest itself so and be indeed the salvation is uncertain. Art is the becoming and happening of truth and a good way of letting technology happen would be that which has an artistic dimension to it, embracing its *techne* character. Through reflecting on art we are able to remain open towards the truth and see our current situation with technology in earnest. By comparing the way in which technology and art changed us over the centuries, we should come to the conclusion that leaning towards the benefits of art should be desirable as it had a generally positive effect over humanity. Heidegger’s point is not to transform technology in art, but to analyze the way in which we think technology and get past its conception of instrumentality.

What is the final advice that Heidegger has to offer about this predicament? He advises us to remain open, to keep our mind alert and to question in earnest, to question our relationship with technology, the world, and all the events that happen around us. Through questioning and a general and natural awareness, we inherently possess we will be able to notice the direction we are heading to, as a whole, and make the necessary adjustments.

**Conclusion**

A fresh reading of Heidegger’s *Question Concerning Technology* can always prove useful for, in a sense, it tends to fit well in a crisis situation. Technology is a way of revealing, of getting the hidden into unhidden. While Heidegger’s text may appear as alembicated, its message is clear. It is an invitation for us to question in order to discover and understand where we stand. This questioning is relevant as we became more dependent on technology in order to communicate with others and the world. Because of this dependency, we are in a stage where technology has the potential of changing our lives, for better or worse. While it may sound cliché, information is power and technology helps to spread it. The wrong use of technology and reporting or the wrong limitation on media freedom, can both result in the danger Heidegger talks about, tossing us in a wrong relationship with technology, a relationship where even humans become standing-in-reserves, usable resources. Questioning helps us reflect and eventually make a choice, changing the course of action, adjusting our relationships. “For questioning is the piety of thought”.

**Bibliography:**


23 Martin Heidegger, David Farrell Krell, *Basic Writings*, pg. 341.


