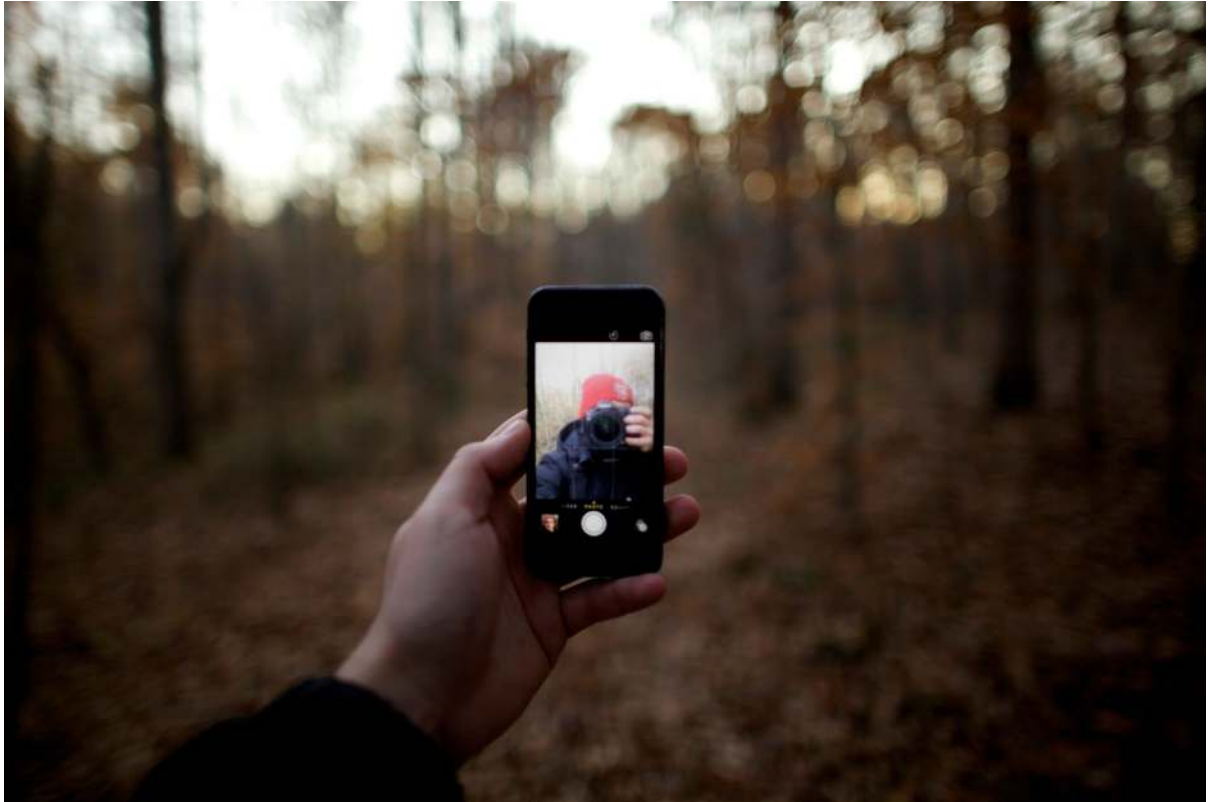# Technology and Freedom

It's time to analyse how our interaction with technology is affecting our being.

By: Ben Thornhill

Over half a century ago, philosopher Martin Heidegger, was teaching that technology should not be thought of as just an accumulation of useful devices that would continue to make things better and better. He believed that our inventions revealed something fundamental about our existence and therefore needed to be thought through not just in a technical way, but in a philosophical way as well. It should not simply be a question of what technology can do for us, but how we work in relation to it and how that affects our being. This is the first article in a two part series assessing the impact of technology on our psychological world. Part 1 will discuss its impact on our freedom and part 2 will focus on creativity.

How technology is going to affect humanity is a question that has no doubt been debated since the stone age, but few would have imagined the extent to which it now plays a part in our daily existence with the advent computer technology and the digital age. Some of the things it enables us to do are incredible and the science involved in producing such wonders is beyond most of our capacities of understanding. However, there is another side to it that perhaps runs deeper than many of us are aware.

In his 1954 publication, Existentialism and the Modern Predicament, German author Friedrich Heinemann warned that the coming of the 'ultra-rapid computing machine' would raise a 'truly existential question' of how human beings could remain free. In many ways, Heinemann was right. One aspect of modern technology that I would imagine that most of us are aware of, but are powerless to address, is the fact that technology has eroded personal privacy. Online, our lives are laid bare to anyone and everyone. Everything from our political views, shopping preferences, banking information, even our current location is logged and readily accessible and traceable. In effect, our lives are handed over, not just to other individuals like ourselves, but to an impersonal 'they' whom we never meet and cannot locate. No longer free to be private individuals, we wittingly or unwittingly broadcast a version of ourselves out into the digital world without really knowing why, or who the real audience is.

Having the ability to instantly communicate and broadcast ourselves across a variety of platforms is bound to change how our brains work and has given rise to an increasingly narcissistic culture. Constant access to these platforms is trapping people into habits that may lead to behaviours that have a negative impact on their way of being. In fact, a University of West Illinois study into narcissism showed that Facebook greatly facilitates narcissism´s two main aspects: gross self-publication and exploitative behaviour. It found that people with narcissistic tendencies were more likely to display antisocial Facebook behaviours like reacting angrily to negative comments and posting things that sought attention from others without offering it in return.

Technology has also redefined our expectations, not only of what is possible, but what is reasonable, leading to an increase in impatience. The goal of technology, to make things quicker and more efficient so that, as a species, we can ¨do more¨ with our time has led people to become accustomed to instant gratification. In my experience, the more techonologically-developed a country is, the more impatient the people become. Less than 20 years ago it was hardly possible to download a video online, now samples show that most viewers abandon videos if they take longer than 2 seconds to load. How angry people become when something technological goes wrong! A short delay to a flight can give rise to a full-blown temper tantrum so accustomed we are to being able to sit in a large metal bullet with wings in a seat floating in the sky and arrive at our destination on the other side of the world almost at the exact minute that we had been informed of this by our computers when we booked the seat 6 months prior to the gravity-defying vehicle taking off by typing in our names and a few numbers into a tiny electronic device hooked up to a vast, virtual network that seems to be everywhere and yet nowhere at the same time. By making things quicker and easier, in raising our expectations to a level never before

reached in human history, by making us less patient and more narcissistic, is technology therefore also contributing to an erosion in emotional resilience?

There are studies that suggest that young adults at University are becoming less resilient and able to deal with the rigours of further study and independent life. Now, this may not be directly linked to the influence of technology, there are other social factors at work here, for example, health and safety culture and parents and school not allowing their children the freedom to fail. But the overriding goal of all of this, seems to be to make things safer and easier. If our technology contributes towards making things safer and easier, is it contributing to raising a generation of young people who are risk averse and unable to do things for themselves? How does that impact upon their freedom to take risks, learn their own limits and develop resilience towards achieving their goals?

In addition to this, the way our technology is designed, to be available at all times, is also contributing to an inability to focus for sustained periods of time. Research on High School students in California shows an average concentration span of around 3 minutes at a time. The constant access to more instantly gratifying media, regular interruptions each with their own little noticifaction alarm come through from the ether to bring the focus of the mind away from the task at hand. The obvious solution is to turn everything off which is something I do when I need to concentrate for extended periods; however, with 75% of young people saying that they couldn´t live without social media; in a culture where FOMO (fear of missing out) is all pervasive, how many people take the necessary measure and isolate themselves for long enough not to get distracted from the task at hand?At what cost does being online and available at all times have in terms of our own productivity and abiltiy to reach our goals? How does it make us feel when it seems like we have been working for hours and yet achieved so litte? What impact does this have on our freedom to use the time given to us to do what we really want to do? How does this impact, in the long-term, on our mental health?

It may even go deeper than all the things I have outlined so far. In his fantastic short book, The Courage to Create, American Psychologist, Rollo May, analyses the issue from an even broader perspective:

"The danger always exists that our technology will serve as buffer between us and nature, a block between us and the deeper dimensions of our own experience."

The barrier between us and nature is increasingly apparent on a planetary level. But even on a individual, subjective level, so often, even when outside in a beautiful natural setting, we see peoples´ cameras or phones in their hands maintaining that barrier between subject and object. Instead of living the moment wondering at the

natural world, it has to be captured, stored, shared and commented upon, approval sought.

It is not only putting up barriers between us and nature in the natural geographic sense, but also face-to-face interaction with other members of our species. For we too are a part of nature, although at times it seems like we have forgotten the fact. In another study by the University of Berkeley, girls aged 8-12 who spend more time than their peers using digital technology as opposed to interacting with their surrounding environment, report greater difficulty socialising and therefore lower-self esteem as a result. What limits to their freedom to achieve their potential does, that impose they are already experiencing social anxiety and low confidence at such an age? How can they expect to fully access the deeper dimensions of human experience if superficial social interactions are already a challenge?

Do not get me wrong, technology is a fascinating advertisement for human achievement and the potential of the human mind. It is not a bad thing in itself. However, it is essential that we find ways of using technology that help to accentuate our life experience and our freedom and not to act as a barrier to a healthy, fulfilled existence. Such is the rise of conditions such as ADHD amongst children living sterile lives in front of screens a group of concerned parents in the U.K have even formed a project, The Wild Thing Project, that uses technology in a constructive way to help children and families get back outside for the benefit of their wellbeing. Parents can download an app where they can log time spent outdoors in natural settings; they can also access lots of fun games for children to play that don't involve screens; it even encourages them to climb trees!

This is just one example of the myriad of possibilities that we have when technology is used for good and it is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that we take responsibility and control over our use of technology in order to examine the impact that it is having on us and our families. The technology that we use ought to be an extension of our consciousness and be used in order to maximise our possibilities, not to diminish them. The ready availability of certain technologies does make this difficult, but we do have the freedom to take a step back, assess and reevaluate the role it is going to play in our lives and we should make sure that it is a constructive one.

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