

## I. INTRODUCTION

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A book about the philosophical grounds of new media is always a risky and delicate project. First of all, despite the relative youth of new media, the number of studies written about them is absolutely intimidating. To try and add something new seems to be an eccentric endeavour. We could already name some research traditions and numerous subfields developed in recent years, each with their own specific vocabularies and hypotheses. The subsequent debates in new media studies or dealing with around specific subjects have contributed to the development of the domain. Secondly, to keep up with the pace of changes in this area looks like competing with the 100 meters speed race world champion: you know very well that you cannot win, but you still love the running track. Thirdly, mixing philosophy with something else is also a sensitive matter. Generally, philosophers are sceptical about comparing different paradigms or about applying a certain theory to a new, different domain. Nevertheless, the context in which new media have developed has been intensively marked by philosophy, having being linked mainly with the postmodern condition.

This book lies under the sign of the nomadic discourse that changes every time it encounters a new concept. In this vein, metamorphosis represents a main keyword, and even if a cluster of repetitive themes may be easily detected, their inner transmutation is always at work. New media represent an umbrella term for a plethora of topics and debates that evolves with technological progress and also with the users' expectations. The familiarisation with different platforms and tools, along with their integration in everyday life, has lead to a kind of "normalization" in discourse and practice. Thus, the deterministic views about media are naturally balanced by the perspective of the social shaping of technology. The literature records these shifts in opinions and theories, as well as the constant call for philosophical, ethical or cultural arguments. Even if the '90s may be considered the most "philosophical" in terms of interpreting new media literature, the philosophical references and presuppositions have always been included.

The studies collected in this volume can be read independently or in a pure network-like spirit, every reader can find his or her path. The links among topics are somehow evident, but the intertextuality *per se* is not the key or the scope of this book. Neither philosophy, nor new media are designed to be the only protagonist of the text; on the contrary, it is their *liaison* (sometimes vague or distant) that represents a story line. Beside this connection, new media have also shaped literature and arts, and the last section of this volume will shed a light upon these relationships.

The papers that are included in this volume were written over a period of almost 10 years, covering the correspondent academic vibes. Nevertheless, some of them are not totally anchored in their time, dealing with the scientific curiosities of the author and not necessarily with scholarly headlines. They also speak about a personal story, because having a philosophical background complemented by a PhD in postmodern discourse, I conducted my postdoctoral research in communication sciences, within the program „Developing the Innovation Capacity and Improving the Impact of Research through Post-doctoral Programmes”, where my project was “Socio-technical Paradigm in New Media – between Social Shaping of Technology and Diffusion of Innovation” (2010-2013). Thus, for me, philosophy and digital media became confluent and the depiction of the latter in cultural studies as postmodern helped me find a reason for this attempt. This project, extending into research in the field of philosophy of communication at the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research of “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, as well as into the New Media course at Public Relation and Advertising MA level, converged into an enduring preoccupation for me.

Most of the studies included here have been published in several journals: *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication*, *Sign Systems Studies*, *Journal of Media Critiques*, *Academicus International Scientific Journal*, *Revista Educação e Cultura Contemporânea*, *Argumentum*, *Journal of the Seminar of Discursive Logic*, *Argumentation Theory and Rhetoric*, *META: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy*, *Hermeneia*, *Journal of Hermeneutics*, *Art Theory, and Criticism*, *International Journal of Communication Research*. I express my gratitude to the Chief Editors who allowed me to republish them. I am also grateful to the peer reviewers and editors that have contributed to a better form and understanding of my ideas. In the digital era, academic writing and publishing are mostly collaborative activities, even though sometimes only the name of the author remains on the cover. One way or another, the network of peers that work with you become an important part of your final paper. At the same time, the work with my students continues to be a challenge in order to better explain and interpret the new media phenomena. Conversations and debates remain at the heart of our classes.

## II. TECHNOLOGY, COMMUNICATION AND PHILOSOPHY

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Artefacts, objects and technologies shape our experiences and configure our lives in ways that are philosophically significant. We are surrounded at all times by things and we also create material entities that serve human purposes. Nevertheless, they are not just simple companions that construct the context or the background of our existence, but they lead to changes that could even transform us. The “technosphere” is hard to avoid, but what is its meaning for us? Oftentimes, technology is “silent” and we just take it for granted. Other times, it is “noisy”, modifying habits and raising concerns in society. Philosophers have found here a new area where criticism, methods and comprehensive thinking are heavily used.

Over time, we can notice that scholars wrote not only about the “philosophy of technology”, but also about “philosophy *and* technology”. Whereas the former deals with technology as philosophically fruitful, and with its “philosophical problems as *internal* to technology and its practices” (Kaplan 2009, XIV), the latter deals with technology as a philosophically deprived entity *per se* – philosophical issues occur only in an *external* mode, as reflections about its consequences on human beings and society. Technological expansion has not only provided a new range of topics for analysis, but has ultimately shaped the very nature of the philosophical investigation.

In the manner advertised by Hegel, who wrote about various kinds of philosophies (of religion, science or history), the philosophy of technology began in the nineteenth century and further developed in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Ernst Kapp was the first author who used this phrase in the title of his book (*Grundlinien einer Philosophie der Technik*, 1877) while in France, Alfred Espinas wrote *Les origines de la technologie* (1897). Karl Marx is another such pillar, due to his insistence on the material modes of production, and his bias towards technological determinism. Researchers have talked about several “waves” or generations of philosophers who wrote critically about technology. The first one used to reflect metaphysically on technological issues and with a certain dystopic emphasis. For Don Ihde (2009), John Dewey

represents the exception, being labelled as an optimistic thinker who saw in technology an optimal tool for the enhancement of education and technology. The second wave (mid – to late twentieth century) was more political and cultural, and the Frankfurt School of critical theory was representative of it. The third wave included contributions by Durbin, Mitcham, Ihde, Dreyfus, Haraway, Borgmann, and it was more pragmatic, with a special preference for the analyses of concrete technologies.

The “new wave” is formed by the current approach, which seems to be balanced and nuanced, overcoming some of the anxious perspectives of the past waves (Ihde 2009). For Brey (2010), the philosophy of technology is divided in two great periods: the classical philosophy of technology and the contemporary philosophy of technology. The classical stage (1920-1990) consists of contributions that scrutinized the effects of technology on the human condition (Heidegger, Mumford, Marcuse, and Ortega y Gasset being the best known); the image of modern technology was mostly pessimistic, deterministic or even general and abstract; political and historical context was a specific catalyst in portraying technology merely in a negative manner, as an autonomous force that threatens humanity. In the 1980s and 1990s, a set of approaches balanced this image with a more empirical orientation, as a response to the classical tradition. A “first empirical turn” collected a range of theories wrote by neo-Heideggerians, neo-Critical authors and post-phenomenologists that emphasize the concrete, descriptive part of technology. The “second empirical turn” is, in fact, an engineering-oriented approach focusing on the understanding of products and practices. This was a movement towards technology itself, instead of the social effects of technology. Together with these currents, the “applied ethical research” into problems surrounding technology has known a significant notoriety (cloning, privacy on the Internet, or Artificial Intelligence issues being now in fashion).

We have to notice the timelessness of Heidegger’s presence in all these waves – he is “the remaining spectre” (Ihde 2009, xii), the “giant mighty dead twentieth-century philosopher” (Ihde 2010, 117) that still configures how we think about technology, in spite of the criticism that surrounds his ideas. For instance, Romele prefers Ricoeur’s philosophy to Heidegger’s as better applicable to this field: “I am not arguing that one cannot extrapolate a philosophy of technology from Heidegger by isolating some passages of *Being and Time* and other works. I am instead arguing against the possibility of developing any kind of empirical philosophy of technology *within* a Heideggerian framework” (Romele 2020, 5).

Even if Heidegger showed his reluctance in relation to certain technological inventions (see, for instance, the typewriter), which caused his commentators to be “satirical” (see Ihde 2010, 121-122), he became an unavoidable reference. *Being and Time* and *The Question Concerning*

*Technology* represent major works that have transformed technology into a main preoccupation for philosophy. Although Heidegger's perspective on technology is "somber and filled with warnings, he was not simply 'anti-technological'" (Ferré 1995, 64). For him, technology is an ontological issue that has to be taken out from instrumentalist interpretations. Technology is also phenomenological because it displays its existential foundations, namely the technological understanding of being. The uncovering of the essence of technology will lead to "a free relationship to it" (Heidegger 1977, 3), because its essence is not equivalent to a tool, an instrument or a device, but rather to a way of comprehension: "Technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing." (Heidegger 1977, 12). The limits and mysteries of technology could help us conceive of it as just a modality of seeing things. In this vein, Dreyfus emphasizes that "this transformation in our sense of reality – this overcoming of calculative thinking – is precisely what Heideggerian thinking seeks to bring about. Heidegger seeks to show we can recognize and thereby overcome our restricted, wilful modern clearing precisely by recognizing our essential receptivity to it." (Dreyfus 2009, 29). Because "*The meaning pervading technology hides itself*" (Heidegger 1966, 55, author's italics) and technology became indispensable, our attitude towards it proves to be essential. For Heidegger, "releasement toward things" and "openness to mystery" constitute twin behaviours that offer the key for a free relationship with our technological environment. The use of devices and tools is unavoidable, but we could also keep ourselves free of them in a constant effort to avoid a state of dependency. This holds true especially if we want to preserve the very definition of our inner core. Thus, Heidegger's answer to technology is both "yes" and "no" (1966, 53-54), an answer that summarises the entire "battle" of understanding the existence of mankind in relation to technology.

The history of technology has recorded efforts to properly explain this relationship alongside the mechanisms of technological change or development. These explanations carry an insurmountable interpretive load, and this has been differently stressed in the "waves" described above. The general tone has been disputed between the optimistic/ utopian and the pessimistic/ dystopian views on technology and on its subsequent effects on human beings, communities and society. Polarization of opinions represents an ineluctable trait of this field. This fact reveals, simply put, that technology matters. To what degree it matters and what its functions are represent questions which are differently dealt with by every important current. For instance, technological determinism claims that technology is the most important factor that drives change in society, all events representing to a certain point an effect of technology. This perspective implies that technology is an autonomous force, impacting society from the outside. Changing technologies represent one factor among many others (political, cultural and economic). Thus, the social shaping technology theory asserts that

society also affects technological development, through its norms and values. Moreover, there is a mutual constitutive relationship between artefacts and social communities, as technology and society are entities that are interconnected rather than separate. The “actor-network” theory or the “diffusion of innovation” also tried to explain how human agents and non-human entities are linked and how technological innovations are spread and communicated. Instrumentalism emphasizes the possibility to use a certain technology our own way, refuting technological essentialism but assuming, on the contrary, that technology is rather neutral. Today, philosophers of technology examine the technology – society interdependence, and the ways in which technology became the environment and the context of our lives.

### **Media Philosophy**

Since the 1980s, the interaction of the philosophy of technology with several other fields has led to a Wittgenstein-like family approach to technology that is less pessimistic and more empirical and constructivist (Brey 2010, 40). Media and communication studies are listed among those fields that have contributed to a positive image of the philosophy of technology. In any case, the relationship between these two domains is particularly interesting. While scholars have always been focused on media content and effects, it is equally important to discuss the technological underpinnings as well, and not only because media necessarily imply devices and material tools. As Kapp asserted, technologies are extensions of the human body, material modifications of corporeal functions. Later, McLuhan rejected any difference between medium and technology, as they are both extensions of our senses. They constitute complex socio-material phenomena that at the same time mediate and create a new milieu or, in some cases, new prostheses for people. In McLuhan’s tradition, John Durham Peters has argued that media are much more than communication channels; they are instead environments for our lives, creators of experience and vehicles of symbolic burden. Thus, media are “vessels and environments, containers of possibility that anchor our existence and make what we are doing possible” (Durham Peters 2015, 2). They affect not only the society, but also the nature and the objects. They are ecosystems, and Google is the perfect instantiation of this idea. When media cease to be interpreted only as a way through which people send messages, they become existential “infrastructures” and veritable “forms of life”: “Media are not just pipes or channels. Media theory has something both ecological and existential to say. Media are more than the audiovisual and print institutions that strive to fill our empty seconds with programming and advertising stimulus; they are our condition, our fate, and our challenge” (Durham Peters 2015, 52).

As Neil Postman (1998) wrote, technological change is ecological and non-additive, its consequences being unpredictable and multifarious. New