Extended Abstract

A Critical Approach to Information and Communication Technologies †

Alfonso Ballesteros

Philosophy of Law (Private Law Department), Universidad de A Coruña, 15071 A Coruña, Spain;
alfonso.ballesteros@udc.es
† Presented at the XoveTIC Congress, A Coruña, Spain, 27–28 September 2018.

Abstract: Many times it has been taken for granted that information and communication technologies (ICT) are intrinsically good for human beings or at least neutral. The first position is assumed by "techno-enthusiasts", the second by those who have a well-meaning opinion of ICT. Here we briefly framed a third possibility leaded by South-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han, a position that allows us to think about how ICT is shaping society and human beings as we know it.

Keywords: information and communication technologies; positive society; Transparency Society

1. Introduction

Since their appearance it has been usually taken for granted that information and communication technologies (ICT) are good for human beings or at least neutral. The first position is assumed by "techno-enthusiasts", the second by those who have a well-meaning opinion of ICT. All in all those views are not the only ones and have been challenged recently. Some philosophers are reluctant to consider information and communication technologies positive or even neutral. Here we frame this position leaded by Byung-Chul Han.

2. Discussion

If information and communication technologies are neutral they are not good or bad themselves but the use of them could be considered good or bad. This position excludes any responsibility of those who produce these technologies and it makes the ICT user the responsible alone. This view forgets that human actions are mediated and partially determined by objects, tools and technologies (1). It also forgets that objects like a chair or a smart-phone are far from having the same influence in human beings (2). As objects and tools become more and more complex are designed not by craft makers but by prestigious and clever engineers. If we think twice, a chair made by a carpenter and a smart-phone made by a group of engineers force us to have a very different perspective and a different judgment on our relations with technology.

Leading South-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han has underlined the negative effects of digital technology in society. Han defines our society as a "positive society", but this is not positive in the sense of good. By positive he means that we live in an immature society unable to face reality and especially what is hard or painful: illnesses, death, ugliness or even disagreement [1] (pp. 11–23).

Han also states that Information and Communication Technologies lead not to more communication between people but, on the contrary, to incapacity to listen, narcissism, loneliness and depression. Those are some of the features of what he calls "homo digitalis". With respect of narcissism and the loss of the principle of reality Han's source is Sigmund Freud and his well-known distinction between the reality principle and that of pleasure. The digital realm keeps reality

distant and puts the individual and its pleasure in the center. Websites, apps, screens in general, are completely adapted to the tastes of each user. Tastes known by the clicks, likes or any information recorded about that person.

Han also analyses the digital realm as a manifestation of developed capitalism where everything is in plain-sight (as a shop window) and everything has a price. As a consequence transparency and homogeneity become the rule. In a market society money can buy everything and even people become products. People are obsessed of their image, fame and online social recognition. Thus every detail of their lives should be in plain-sight to be "consumed", with the obvious consequence of the loss of privacy and a not real interaction.

Against those negative effects of technology Han's proposal is the recovery of "distance", the recognition of the other as a different person out of our control [1] (p. 16). A person we cannot "delete" from reality although we can delete him or her in social media.

We do not need to accept completely Byung-Chul Han's philosophy to learn from it how to understand technology. In my opinion we do not need to get technology out of our lives, but put it in the real service of human beings. We need a "technology with a human face" as Schumacher, following Gandhi, expressed it [2] (p. 126). The recovery of a direct and real relationship with others in a low-tech environment seems critical and this point becomes stronger as we realized that Silicon Valley parents are raising their kids tech-free and are not precisely techno-enthusiasts [3].

Author Contributions: All work was done by Alfonso Ballesteros.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

1. Han, B.-C. *La Sociedad de la Transparencia*; Gabás, R., Ed.; Herder: Barcelona, Spain, 2013.
2. Schumacher, E.F. *Small is Beautiful: Economics as If People Mattered*; Blond & Briggs: London, UK, 1973.
3. Business Insider. Available online: https://www.businessinsider.com/silicon-valley-parents-raising-their-kids-tech-free-red-flag-2018-2 (accessed on 7 September 2018).