

WOULD THE "DIGITAL CAVE" BE A POSSIBLE VECTOR OF CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT?

A philosophical analysis of cultural development is one of the increasingly important problems of our time; this involves averting possible negative scenarios of the future, including the future of digital technologies. At present, culture is undergoing a phase of "technological singularity", which implies an explosive acceleration of the scientific and technical progress – and may result in a complete transformation of both culture and the human way of thinking. Digital technologies, which used to be an accessory providing added comfort, are currently emerging as an independent dominant factor, forcing their human users into following rigidly prescribed algorithms, which would not always suit their needs.

A long time ago, I suggested that the first practical use of digitization was in German concentration camps where human identities were replaced by numbers. This was meant as a metaphor – but proved to be closer to reality than I expected: in 1937, Thomas J. Watson Sr., the then senior executive of IBM company, was awarded the Order of the German Eagle to honor the activities of the company's German subsidiary which provided the tabulating machines used during a population census to keep tab on Jews and Gypsies¹. One can surely say he never expected this to happen – but that's often the way with science. "We did the devil's work", Robert Oppenheimer's famous phrase uttered after a nuclear bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, comes to mind. Soon after Nazi Germany capitulated, the "Interim Committee" set up to consult President Harry S. Truman, with Robert Oppenheimer, Enrico Fermi, Arthur H. Compton and Ernest O. Lawrence among its members, met on May 31, 1945. The four leading nuclear scientists were tasked with defining the best way to use the nuclear bomb against Japan – that it should be used at all was never questioned. The Committee decided that the bomb should be used against Japan as soon as possible, and that it should be used on a war plant surrounded by residential houses and other buildings that would be easy to destroy. After the bombs were dropped,

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_J._Watson

Oppenheimer told President Truman that he and his colleagues felt “blood on their hands”; to this, Truman replied: "It could be easily removed with water".

The consequences of this kind are numerous, and we should consider them, forestall them, and in certain cases ask ourselves whether this should be done at all.

Modern technologies result in culture being divided into strata by age, consumption and other criteria; eventually, separate cultural clusters are formed for a person to navigate at will. An individual actually localizes the sphere of one's personal communication: thanks to modern technologies, its user may tailor it to his or her own liking, admitting other people to it or denying them admittance. Eventually, whatever a person's presence on social networks or other systems might be, the actual level of individual socialization is currently very low: the world shrinks to the size of a smartphone screen.

Some of the ideas about the world and human existence are currently under revision. A short while ago, we were sure Nature had a predetermined existence, and tried to comprehend it by filtering the facts we perceived with our minds or our senses through the medium of our intelligence. At present, it may well happen that a "secondary" nature, a product of human intelligence, could be technologically transformed into a semblance of reality (known as "virtual reality") we could interact with as though it were real. This situation gives a complete new reading to ontological problems, and demands that we define a way of relating to this altered world. The very definition of the thinking process as a function of an individual intelligence, or possibly a group of individual intelligences, and thus inherently human, could be reframed by the fact of an artificial intelligence and possible symbiosis between a human and a computer.

The emerging digital culture also alters the role of an expert and expertise. Traditionally, expertise implied a search for corroborative evidence. Now that a human is defined as a "user" of all knowledge accumulated by mankind, the traditional epistemological concepts of knowledge, its nature and source undergo a change. Expertise basically turns into scanning through the decision invariants, which may influence the human intuitive abilities. An intuitive decision, on the other hand, implied a possible

choice of an open-ended model with insufficient data to support it, often leading to a breakthrough in science.

Digitization processes result in drastic changes in education. This is a broad problem; to narrow it down, let us look into the modified relationship between teachers and pupils. Traditionally, a teacher was a person of an older generation who was presumed to possess information unavailable to the pupils. To-day, any young person has no need for go-betweens to access the information he or she needs; this means the teacher's role can no longer be limited to transmitting information.

Members of the older generation at times fail to understand how advanced the younger generation is in their ability to use modern gadgetry to retrieve information. The younger generation, on the other hand, is sure that knowledge boils down to information that can be easily found on the Web. A new understanding of the process of bringing children up has the same origin: it is no longer seen as forcing a system of views upon passive recipients but rather as cultivating the ability to select the values and priorities for oneself and to provide a rationale to the advantages of the selected system.

The very process of thinking is greatly influenced by the digital culture. Certain functions of human memory are currently becoming obsolete. The world transitions to a consumer lifestyle where pressing a button can solve any problem. The danger it brings is that people generally think in algorithms trying to simplify the actions without giving a moment's thought to the reason behind them. Eventually, the complexities and contradictions of the surrounding world are no longer perceived.

We seem to be returning to the preliterate period of culture. As Marshall McLuhan said, "We now live in the early part of an age for which the meaning of print culture is becoming as alien as the meaning of manuscript culture was to the eighteenth century... We are the primitives of a new culture."² But here comes into play the next stage in technology, which brings in new possibilities for visualization; with these, the conceptual meaning which dominated in the text is now superseded by an artificially created image. The visual image affects the brain directly, as if switching off rational comprehension.

² Marshall McLuhan "The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man". – The University of Toronto press, 1962, p. 201-202.

Audiovisual media are capable of rendering literally hypnotic influence on human mind, creating prerequisites for manipulation. For instance, an event in the modern world could well be not a fact but media–hyped fiction, a constructed event with no real fact behind it.

The same applies to the use of the newest communication gadgetry, e.g. the smartphone. Its users are laboring under a delusion that the mere possession of the device is making them smarter – whereas in fact, they are transformed into peripheral devices of their own gadgets. Among other things, this habit results in a decreased ability to concentrate, as the user is constantly on alert for incoming messages and often replies to them unthinkingly; but the worst part of the problem is that this device, presumably a means of communication, actually serves to sharply decrease the level of human socialization, as the users' interaction with reality is limited to the virtual world.

A research conducted in the USA in 2016 showed that:

An average American checks his or her smartphone every 6.5 minutes, which is about 150 times a day (300 times a day according to other sources)

53% respondents aged 15 to 30 would rather give up their taste sense than the use of their smartphone

An average American university student spends about 8 hours 48 minutes a day using his or her smartphone

79% respondents first use their smartphone within 15 minutes of waking up

68% respondents take their smartphone to bed with them

67% respondents check their smartphone even if it doesn't ping

46% claim they wouldn't be able to live without a smartphone³

This is how we lose our free time, which may be our most precious resource and is now cluttered up by an endless flow of information initiated by something external to us, including search engines and GPS systems. The online data we receive, filtered to reflect

³<https://style.nv.ua/blogs/skolko-raz-v-den-vy-proverjaete-telefon-amerikanskij-uchenyj-o-pervyh-priznakah-zavisimosti-ot-gadzheta-192903.html>

our digital trail and Web use history, puts us into the so-called "reality tunnel" – the narrow spectrum of events and opinions shown to us as long as we stay within the simulated reality produced by the algorithms. We no longer perceive the world as complex and interconnected, as we only see whatever the digital system is putting on the screen for us to see⁴.

Elon Musk and other optimists refer to the smartphone as the new "brain expander" which makes one smarter; however, Socrates would object that the knowledge we thus obtain is not interior to us and is therefore easy to reject or modify. It is not by chance that "digital hygiene", defined as deliberately training people to avoid wasting time on social networks, and engage in actual communication instead, is currently under discussion.

It surely adds to one's comfort to be able to sign petitions, send greetings to people you know, enjoy yourself or heap abuse on others tagging messages with "likes" and "dislikes" without having to leave your bathroom; for some, this is what they think real life is, while basically, they are already living inside a cave. The very cave Plato wrote about, although he didn't have the slightest idea that modern technologies would turn the metaphor he used into hard fact. Once again, people are immersed in the world of shadows; there is even no need for real chains as modern technologies restrain them just as firmly in place.

Five years ago, the Germans came up with a phrase that is the most precise description of the present-day generation: "*Generation Kopf unten*", which literally translates as "the generation with their heads down"⁵.

A much-needed philosophical analysis of these processes could unveil the distant prospects (there are many examples of this capability in the history of philosophy). My illustration is borrowed from Plato who would hardly be able to imagine the modern technologies capable of turning his metaphorical cave into a peculiar form of reality.

⁴ <https://knife.media/dark-social/>

⁵ https://www.welt.de/newsticker/dpa_nt/infoline_nt/boulevard_nt/article127898591/Generation-Kopf-unten-Wie-einsam-macht-das-Smartphone.html

In his well-known parable (Republic, VII, 514a 2 – 517a 7) Plato describes people chained by their necks and feet, ever since childhood, to a wall in a dark cave, unable to move or even turn their heads to see the other parts of the cave. The only things they can see are the shadows cast by the fire, which represents the Sun. The cave serves to symbolize the whole of human existence on Earth.

From the point of view of an observer able to analyze the mental model he created, Plato arrives at a conclusion of there being four states of the human soul through which we can perceive the truth: "we are satisfied... to call the first division science, the second understanding, the third belief, and the fourth perception"⁶, with an internal hierarchy based on their degree of proximity to the truth, i.e. reliability.

Belief and perception as the states of the soul, according to Plato, form the lower part of the said hierarchy, as they do not result from reasoning (mental understanding), and therefore can only produce opinions, thus being the remotest from the possibility of learning the truth⁷. For instance, says Plato, we can equal the essence of an object to a number, which helps "commensurate" things – but one should remember that this mental operation is relative; a very up-to-date thought in the setting of all the hype around digitization.

Digitization can build commensurability chains providing a more convenient interpretation of the world or certain phenomena within it; however, one has to keep firmly in mind that this is a purely imaginary structure that could be very far removed from the true nature of things.

According to Plato, in a number of cases perception of reality can turn into an imitation which stands apart from both truth and essence of things, in much the same way as it was in Plato's Cave (and possibly in the present-day "digital cave"). In both cases, what people see is not reality but a mere perception of it. To them, the shadow they see is indistinguishable from the reality.

Modern people are also chained, albeit not with the chains made of iron, to news feed on the Web, to constructed images. They are unable, and possibly unwilling, to understand

⁶ Plato. Republic. Book VII. p. 238

⁷ Plato. Republic. Book VII. p. 260

that these are very different from reality. They have been captured in a high-tech Plato's Cave where people are submerged into shadows; the iron chains are not even necessary to hold them down, being replaced by modern digital technologies. Once inside this cave, the person perceives it as the only reality there could be, convinced that there exist no other Truth and Beauty but those one can find inside the cave. However, as Plato said, this perception of reality is no more than an imitation – of activity, of feelings, of the reality as a whole. Here shadow is indistinguishable from reality.

"How could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?"⁸

The Cave of today is the global communication space. The chains that hold their prisoners in place restricting their inner freedom are big data providing the necessary condition for present-day human existence; albeit virtual, they are nonetheless real for that. Basically, human consciousness is now a subject of the computer simulation. It is no longer a mere optical distortion (as in Plato's parable), but rather an embodiment of the modern world of shadows which for many people has already replaced the real world – and the shadows become progressively more convincing as technology marches on.

The world is starting to take on a semblance to a computer game. Slinking away from reality and following game algorithms teaches us that thinking before starting to act is secondary and could easily be postponed. Digitization is capable of building commensurability chains providing a more convenient way of interpreting the world or certain phenomena – yet one should always keep in mind it is a mere mental construct which could be rather far removed from the true nature of things.

The above phenomenon exerts a tremendous influence upon communication causing the transformation of culture and distortion in its meaning-making components, including language. As Yu.M. Lotman very concisely put it, "Language is its code plus its history". In semiotic interpretation, culture is a semiotic system coded in language. Culture is never generic: it is a complex system of interacting local cultures. In fact, it was language that for a long time defined the shape of interaction between cultures, that of a dialogue which

⁸ Plato. Republic. Book VII. p. 239

could be seen, metaphorically, as language sets intersecting in different variations. Moreover, the dialogue would have the greatest value in the non-intersecting parts.

Technological development had always exerted an influence on communication, but until recently, it was a gradual process of a technology being integrated into a culture – which is in stark contrast to the current situation.

In the present day, the emergence of the global communication space is accompanied by disintegration of culture as a system of interacting local cultures. Digitization plays a tremendous role in this process, as it facilitates the present-day transformation of culture. By transformation, I mean a channeled process of internal changes to the system, which are achieved by integrating alien elements into it: although the system seemingly remains intact, its functionality is gradually modified. Today's mass media transforms communication from a background process serving to register the current events into a pivotal mechanism of modern culture, which is beginning to dominate and shape the entire process of information perception. Thereby, communication obviously influences the meaning-making mechanisms, first and foremost through inflating the pseudo-cultural space of communication. The above processes result in domination of common opinions, common features of expected behavior, and the culture's most available, i.e. the most primitive elements. Another manifestation of this process is trying to work out global criteria, e.g. for scientific practice, in form of a requirement to use English in citing; on the long term, this trend may undermine national culture.

Global digitization may provide a foothold for a new type of totalitarianism, a Global Empire of sorts, with technologies used to manipulate the population. While granted with seeming freedom to push buttons and communicate through social networks, an individual would increasingly surrender control to the SYSTEM, which relegates him to the role of an insignificant cog, or a piece of digital code.

One should also be cautious about the development of an artificial intelligence, which is arguably deemed a cure-all and a universal problem solver. However, would artificial intelligence regard the human intelligence as equal, or force it out to the background as not exactly essential?

"Why would an algorithmic mind, given an ability to modify itself and create, to feel joy and sorrow like humans (the basis of motivation as we know it), given a conscious ability to choose, opt for existence? ... An artificial intelligence would know everything there is to know about itself from the very start. Would a free and intelligent cog choose to be?

Once again, it all boils down to Hamlet's "to be or not to be" ..."⁹

⁹ Victor Pelevin. IPhuck 10. M.: E'S Publishing House, p.407-408