

What Technology Reveals: Efficiency Mindsets and Dromocratic Culture

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INTRODUCTION

At a university somewhere near you in North America, a new course is being created. This course will be taught by John Smith, a competent instructor who will deliver his lectures online. The number of participants in the course will be enormous — there will be no enrollment caps, and the university will be aiming to collect as many tuition dollars from it as it possibly can. All of the considerable profits of the course will accrue to the university's for-profit eUniversity arm, and all rights to the course will reside exclusively with eUniversity. Thus, in the event that Professor Smith leaves the university some day, his recordings will go on instructing in his absence, the zombified version of his now-absent body presiding over the masses of disembodied and largely disinterested selves who will have signed up for one more credential in our increasingly credentialized society.

In her essay, Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer does a creditable job of focusing on some of the more positive possibilities that certain hybridized technologies reveal. Yet from my standpoint as an instructor at a large comprehensive university, the more pressing (and depressing) question is not what new technology makes possible, but what it makes probable, and it is this latter question that also preoccupied some of the thinkers Greenhalgh-Spencer invokes in her essay. In what follows, I will briefly outline what two philosophers of technology — Martin Heidegger and Paul Virilio — forecast that modern technology has in store for us, and I will explain how these forecasts align with some current trends in higher education. I will also focus on two aspects of Greenhalgh-Spencer's account that I find problematic: her apparent endorsement of hybridity and her analysis of Strava's approach to running.

CHALLENGING-FORTH AND DROMOCRATIC CULTURE

In "The Question Concerning Technology," Martin Heidegger suggests that there is a particular mode of revealing (or, more prosaically, a way of thinking) that corresponds to modern technology, which he calls "challenging-forth."¹ When someone sees the world in this particular way, they see it as a set of resources to be utilized in a maximally efficient way. Looking at a forest through the lens of challenging-forth, one would see not trees, streams, and pathways, but rather so many board feet of lumber, so many gallons of water, and a potential tourist attraction waiting to be developed.

Naturally, it is possible to look at the university this way as well. Under the mindset of challenging-forth, the main preoccupations become enrollment levels and teaching costs. The online for-profit institutions are arguably the best at applying this framework — they have adopted a ruthless strategy of recruiting marginal students and persuading them to finance the exorbitant costs of their low

quality education through government-sponsored student loans. Yet many public institutions are imitating their for-profit counterparts, converting lecture courses into “e-learning experiences” run largely by graduate students. These courses may sometimes be taught by talented professors, but the university’s goal is generally the same as that of the for-profit institutions: getting the most tuition dollars for the least cash outlay. For their part, the students are generally accepting of the changes which the university is making: while some students in humanities departments may cling to romantic notions of the university, the more modern ones (in the Heideggerian sense) understand that education is a credentialing game and that the primary objective is to get the degree as quickly as possible.

The ideas of Paul Virilio are also instructive in understanding some of the changes that the university is undergoing. Virilio is a French urbanist who has advanced the thesis that two of the leitmotifs of modern technology are an overwhelming concern with logistics and speed. Concerning logistics, Virilio takes his cue from the following remark by Dwight Eisenhower: “Logistics is the procedure following which a nation’s potential is transferred to its armed forces, in times of peace as in times of war.”² While the concept of logistics is usually applied to moving men and war materiel from place to place, Virilio wants to interpret the definition of “armed forces” and “transfer of potential” more broadly. He contends that in order to compete internationally for wealth and resources, the nation’s technocrat/bourgeois/military class has developed enormous logistical needs, and it slowly appropriates those resources from the rest of the nation through a process that Virilio dubs “endo-colonization.”³ The drive to make universities engines of international competitiveness can be seen as part of this endo-colonization effort; if a course or a new faculty hire does not contribute to the nation’s logistical effort, it is given a low priority. Slowly but steadily, inefficient practices like in-person humanities seminars and faculty who are unlikely to generate grant money will be eliminated from the institution. In the Virilian conception of the twenty-first century university, divisions that are unable to contribute strategically to the nation’s peace effort are going to be endo-colonized by those that will.

For Virilio, the military/technocratic preoccupation with logistics also necessarily entails an interest in speed. Virilio thus coins the word “dromocratic” to describe our speed-obsessed society.⁴ In war as in peace, Virilio claims, our society is obsessed with moving faster. Whereas in the Cold War the great anxiety was that fast nuclear technology would explode our space, Virilio contends that the speed of technologies like air travel and information technology has caused space to implode. Through the power of information technology, every space becomes more knowable and more easily and speedily accessible. The separate seminars of the university implode into the sameness of cross-institutional MOOCs that deliver the hottest course content the fastest to the most. It does not matter if you are from Portland or Portugal, MOOCs will let everyone play in the same space, and if you are fast and efficient, you win. Thomas Friedman comments:

Increasingly the world does not care what you know. Everything is on Google. The world only cares, and will only pay for, what you can do with what you know. We’re moving to a

more competency-based world where there will be less interest in how you acquired the competency and more demand to prove that you mastered the competency.⁵

In other words, we'd better rev up our engines for life in the new dromocracy.

HYBRIDITY AND POSSIBILITY

Before closing the essay, I would like to tackle two other more minor concerns — Greenhalgh-Spencer's apparent endorsement of hybridity and her Strava example. Throughout the essay, Greenhalgh-Spencer seems to view hybridity as though it were manifestly positive. She speaks of "the hybridizing potential in educational technology" and "cultivat[ing] hybridized knowledges and spaces." While I agree with Greenhalgh-Spencer that both knowledges and spaces are becoming increasingly hybridized and that we should move beyond the crude online/brick-and-mortar binary, I fail to see why one should regard hybridization as positive. Some of the hybrids that are currently being propagated in the classroom, it seems to me, are invasive species. Take, for example, clickers, which are supposed to transform the classroom experience by giving me the power to pose questions to my students and let them chime in. Although it may indeed augment a dull physics lecture to be able to have the bodily satisfaction of pressing buttons on a clicker, I doubt that it would do anything good for a philosophy seminar. We need to think carefully about exactly which augmentations, which flows, and which links we wish to make in the increasingly hybridized educational space, and a significant amount of wariness with regard to these decisions is appropriate.

This talk of wariness brings me to Greenhalgh-Spencer's Strava example, which is a prime example of a problematic hybrid. As neo-Heideggerian Albert Borgmann notes, activities like running and biking are potentially powerful "focal experiences," in which one can connect powerfully to one's body, one's own fragility, and to the world.⁶ Running and biking, however, can also be leveled down into competitive, impoverished, and quantified experiences, which is exactly what Strava seems to do. As Greenhalgh-Spencer notes, users can "see how fast or slow they were, compare their stats to previous stats, and even compare their own stats with other registered Strava users." In this hybridity, the hypermodernity of challenging-forth comes to the bicycle. One starts to compete against others and against oneself, to ask how one can "get the most out of" one's body. Strava is excellent training for life in a dromocratic society, but I worry that it does not bode well for the intrinsic pleasures of biking.

A CONCILIATORY NOTE

Despite all of the carping that I have offered above, Greenhalgh-Spencer deserves a lot of credit for taking the initiative to try to move beyond the totalizing discourses of the philosophy of technology and investigate some of the possibilities that are arising from hybrid technologies and in in-between spaces. In much of my own work, I have tried to do much the same thing. The persistent difficulty, it seems to me, is to combat the sense of pessimism and despair that arises from some of the larger trends that I have spoken of above. For all of our sakes, I hope that it is Greenhalgh-Spencer's brand of technological optimism and not that of Thomas Friedman that wins the day.

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1. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 14.
 2. Paul Virilio and Sylvain Lotringer, *Pure War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 32.
 3. *Ibid.*, 103ff.
 4. *Ibid.*, 55.
 5. Thomas Friedman, "The Professors' Big Stage," *New York Times*, March 5, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/06/opinion/friedman-the-professors-big-stage.html>.
 6. Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 196ff.