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DIGITAL FUTURES

A brief essay on sustainable life in the digital age

RAFAEL CAPURRO

The following reflections are based on the premise that individual and social life is open not only to a single goal, in a deterministic historical process, but rather, to a number of possibilities, among which we can find digitalisation. Society, understood as interaction among free citizens and between them and their government, must now promote everyone's participation in the creation of potential digital futures. These must be based on fair rules and also promote digital literacy both in the sense of educating citizens in the management of digital technologies and in giving them the tools to reflect critically upon them in relation to sustainable lifestyles.

Keywords: digital age, sustainable living, misinformation, surveillance, thinking.

■ INTRODUCTION

To what extent can we foresee a potential future where sustainable living is a reality for everyone? Who does that *everyone* include and what does *sustainable* mean? What digital utopias and dystopias, or structures of order and disorder, are we already facing and which ones do we want to avoid? Going even further, who does that *we* include?

«Thinking about digital futures means resisting the obsession of digital order planned with absolute ambitions»

Perhaps it involves a vision in which we would be better informed if we were «digitally formatted» or informed? Is this a goal that we must aspire to in order to act responsibly in a digital future? Does it involve imagining a digital future or designing a world in which all sorts of transactions are regulated by algorithms? But, is it not true that the future always presents itself as a range of possibilities that fan out the very moment that some of those possibilities become a reality? We often consider our plans good only if we can calculate every potential outcome in advance. In the digital age, this involves using algorithms and *big data* in the hope of escaping the range of human action, which is all subject to unpredictability (Capurro, 2014).

■ LIVING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

«Smart» life has already emerged as the conceptual hallmark of the digital future. Not only will we have smart homes, cities, and all sorts of smart objects, i.e., objects connected digitally; we ourselves will become *smart*, overcoming human intelligence, which is the product of biological and cultural evolution. In a nod to Hamlet, «to be digital or not to be» is the choice we need to make when we imagine a future in which the difference between what is real and what is digital, as a potential vision of life, is perceived as confusing or may have been invalidated.

But every future, with its potential successes and failures, can only be partially glimpsed from the present. We cannot seize it, we can only allow it to manifest itself, instead of projecting it from our subjectivity and our willpower. We need two things to open ourselves to potential futures that appear and disappear: consideration and time. Both are scarce. Only on the basis of free thinking, that is, reflection open to potential and upcoming futures, can we unmask some of the negative aspects of digital futures, especially the one that imagines the digital future as a monolithic, unambiguous, and ultimate entity (Morozov, 2013). Thinking about digital futures means resisting the obsession of digital order planned with absolute ambitions. This sort of «foresight» is a digital gnosis, i.e., a substitute for religious dogmatism.

■ RES PUBLICA DIGITALIS – RES PRIVATA DIGITALIS

Can we imagine a potential *res publica digitalis* and *res privata digitalis* that go beyond paternalistic digital wellbeing, both in relation to the government and to private companies that hide their true interests behind wholesome promises? The government must ensure equal opportunities while also protecting social life as a whole. The *res privata digitalis* cannot provide this, even if it claims to be able to do so. How can the tensions between one and the other be regulated? We are in constant danger of depriving citizens from their freedom and money via government paternalism. Such an attitude involves seeing civil society as incapable of taking care of its own issues or incapable of doing it without the existence of governments and laws. However, this cliché-based dualistic vision only generates controversy, not reflection.

When is it a good option – a useful option, or even a necessary one – for me or others to relinquish personal freedom to others temporarily or permanently (by handing it over to algorithms) and when is it not? We have been looking for individual and social solutions to this question since at least the time of the Industrial Revolution, albeit with recognised government abuses and a lucky few individuals who think they can solve it in a strictly philanthropic way. Marx critiqued the ways that ideas of order had decomposed in industrial-age capitalist societies, and his criticism also opens the doors to thinking about the digital age. If we want to imagine potential liveable digital futures and realize them both in the private and in the public sphere, we must let thinking emerge as a sort of forethought to action, together with different sustainable and unsustainable ways of social and ecological coexistence (Capurro, 2008). Marx's famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach reads: «Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.»¹ (Marx, 1969, p. 5). Although this thesis is commonly understood as a critique to «philosophers» and a defence of action, what it actually does is indicate that any possibility to change

the world is built on a new interpretation. Every action is based on a foresight, which emerges from opening our minds to what could potentially be.

■ ON EQUITY

Where, for whom, to what extent, and at what price does digital life make sense? What are the limits of digitalisation in private and political life? What is good as a possibility for the community as a whole and what is good for me or for us? What should we promote or forbid by law and what should we not? How can we initiate a lasting (academic and daily) critical reflection on good living in digital futures? What is the role of the media in promoting such reflection? For instance, in the Federal Republic of Germany, respecting basic agreed-upon rules constitutes the framework of society, and its legitimacy is based on cultural traditions and the painful experiences of the recent past. This also applies to other nations, not only those in Europe



«When is it a good option for me or others to relinquish personal freedom to others temporarily or permanently and when is it not?»

¹ Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert; es kommt aber darauf an, sie zu verändern. English translation by Cyril Smith 2002, based on work done jointly with Don Cuckson.



Luke Chesser / Unsplash

«Smart» life has already emerged as the conceptual hallmark of the digital future. Not only will we have smart homes, cities, and all sorts of smart objects; we ourselves will be connected digitally. Devices such as smartwatches (above) or car navigation systems (on the left) have already become everyday items.



In the face of the future, we must ask ourselves questions such as what the limits of digitalisation in private and political life are. The image shows one of the features of Apple's virtual assistant, Siri, which monitors some aspects of user health.



Apple

and the European Union (European Commission, 2018). Thus, all political and social groups, particularly including educational institutions, must guarantee that any potential digital future conforms to the rules that must ensure fair play by all social forces.

Today we use the word *fair* mainly in sports contexts. Its ancient use, however, informs us about other contexts related to the *feriae*, Latin holidays or festivals, and therefore, to a regulatory context of freedom, beauty, and peace. Sporting uses have only existed since the mid-nineteenth century. In terms of potential well-ordered digital futures, we can use the term *fairness* in the wider sense, in relation to the Latin term *integritas*. The latter, in turn, is of Greek origin, more precisely Aristotelian, and refers to the development and preservation of a whole – *holon* (Aristotle, 1924).

As we know from recent history, and taking car companies as an example, the integrity of these companies is quite fragile, despite them proclaiming otherwise. Protecting a whole from decline and disorder requires continued attention from all its elements, not only in relation to that specific entity, but to its relationships with other entities on a local or global scale. Thinking about the integrity of a whole also involves analysing the different ways to conceal or cover up what could be. Thus, one way of blocking liveable futures in a society could be to defend the motto *non plus ultra* (“not any more”) for a specific digital or non-digital order, as a supposedly unchangeable fact.

■ MISINFORMATION SOCIETY

The so-called «information society» is becoming, in an increasingly alarming way, a misinformation society: the spread of misinformation about public and private lives impacts both digital and non-digital life, at the local and global level (Castells & Himanen, 2014; Froehlich, 2017). Thus, the *res publica*, that is to say, the citizenry and government, should create digital public spaces similar to real public spaces, making sure that there are public alternatives where citizens do not pay with their data, but rather, with their taxes, and where they are not subject to the implicit or explicit interests of private digital giants.

Communication is the binder of a society. Therefore, it cannot be put unilaterally on the corner of the *res*

privata digitalis and yet, imposing legal limitations is insufficient. We need to learn and practice our freedom of thought and action, which involves observing and answering «yes» or «no» to digital and non-digital options, taking different types of risks and keeping other possibilities theoretically – and, as far as possible, also practically – open. We must question absolute imperatives dictated or proclaimed by public or private authorities and by surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019).

We must also imagine different forms of mobility that are not obsessively related to self-driving machinery, forms that consider different objectives and contexts, including the interests of the automotive industry (Capurro, 2017a). Why has this branch of industry not launched an interdisciplinary, intercultural, and free-thinking offensive through a variety of publications and symposia with the aim of promoting consideration of different possibilities for mobility in the future? Digital public libraries are a great way of communicating knowledge in the digital age. This does not diminish the importance of classical libraries as a place where access to digitalised knowledge is open to everyone. The same can be said about different forms of digital and face-to-face learning, or the ability to think about the advantages of these possibilities and what and who they are advantageous for or to. These references can be extended as desired to specific questions about digital futures. This is just the beginning. The opportunities open for digitalisation are impressive. Thus, it is essential not to make them absolute in any theoretical or practical way. However, we must reflect upon them, and thinking requires time.

■ ON DIGITAL ENLIGHTENMENT

Immanuel Kant wondered: «Do we live in an *enlightened* age?»² (Kant, 1975, p. 59). Even if the answer was no, he did think it was an age of *enlightenment*.

² *Leben wir jetzt in einem aufgeklärten Zeitalter?*

Translated by Mary C. Smith. Available at <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>

«The so-called “information society” is becoming, in an increasingly alarming way, a misinformation society»

Kant expected that when the «the urge for and the vocation of *free thought*»³ had developed, it would gradually impact not only the population, making citizens more capable of «acting in freedom»⁴, but

also on «the fundamentals of government»⁵, which would treat humans, «who is now more than a machine, in accord with his dignity»⁶ (Kant, 1975, p. 61). What better guidance for thinking and acting in digital futures than these words by Kant published in Königsberg on 30 September 1784?

The dignity of the human person that wonders «who

³ *Der Hang und Beruf zum freien Denken*. Translated by Mary C. Smith. Available at <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>

⁴ *Freiheit zu handeln*. Translated by Mary C. Smith. Available at <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>

⁵ *Die Grundsätze der Regierung*. Translated by Mary C. Smith. Available at <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>

⁶ *Der nur mehr als Maschine ist, seiner Würde gemäß zu behandeln*. Translated by Mary C. Smith. Available at <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>



Jens Johnson / Unsplash

Digital public spaces must be created in which citizens do not pay with their data but rather, with their taxes, and where they are not subject to the implicit or explicit interests of private digital giants.



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Digitalisation offers impressive opportunities, like the creation of digital libraries or better virtual or face-to-face learning options. However, we must also understand the concept of digital literacy as a broader issue which goes beyond educating citizens in the use of technologies.

am I?» is different to its digitalisation, which can change and answers the question «what am I?» (Capurro, 2017b; Capurro, Eldred, & Nagel, 2013). The difference between these two questions is the basis of ethical thinking. Do we live in an enlightened digital age? The answer is no; but we do live in the age of digital illustration. We must learn the vocation of free thinking outside the greenhorn field of algorithms (Seyfert & Roberge, 2016), and to this end we must expand the concept of digital enlightenment or digital literacy (Limberg, Sundin, & Talja, 2012). This is because this concept is generally understood as education in the use of digital technologies and not as the task of reflecting upon individual and collective life and considering sustainable digital futures. ☺

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