



Mètode Science Studies Journal

ISSN: 2174-3487

ISSN: 2174-9221

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Universitat de València

España

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Digital intimacy
Mètode Science Studies Journal, núm. 14, 2024, Enero-Diciembre, p. 5
Universitat de València
Valencia, España

Disponible en: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=511778116002>

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DIGITAL INTIMACY

Massimiano Bucchi

Our gaze on technology is often short-sighted, even cross-eyed. It focuses only on technological novelty and forgets the other half of the issue: human beings and their ways of using technology.

My new book *Confidenze Digitali: Vizi e virtù dell'innovazione* ('Digital intimacy: Vices and virtues of innovation') starts from everyday life situations that we all know well and from habits that are as widespread as they are unconscious, analyzing key features that characterize our relationship with technology and more in general contemporary society.

For example, why do big tech companies, chatbot and virtual assistants address us confidentially as friends, rather than customers? Why do we often receive kisses and hugs in messages, even from people we do not really know that well? If the person sitting next to us looks at their telephone, why are we likely to do the same within thirty seconds? Why do we not want to pay to read daily news anymore, but we are ready to donate money to Wikipedia? Where does the extraordinary spread of video tutorials on «how to do...» anything – from fresh bread to barbecues, from dying hair to repairing a roller shutter – come from? And what does it say about us?

The confidential and familiar approach that big tech companies encourage goes hand in hand with the perception of having everything at reach. The quickness and (at least apparent) simplicity in finding instructions and responses to any question and in every moment reinforces the perception that any activity or experience, however complex, is at our fingertips, and indeed just a few clicks or taps away, irrespective of competences and personal abilities. Similar tendencies also characterize tourist experiences. In the past, even for those who had the necessary budget, travelling to exotic or remote locations required long term planning and effort, imposing a mental as well as physical distance. Today the

possibility of instantaneously booking from a smartphone, together with the restless visualization of holiday images posted by our contacts (there is not a shared holiday time anymore, but a continuous flux of work and leisure time), feed the expectation that any destination and any travel is easily and quickly accessible.

An innovation does not only need a technology that works, but also an infrastructure that includes political decisions and regulations, consideration of possible social uses and long-term effects: more generally, it needs a context that allows metabolizing innovation and exploiting its benefits while minimizing its negative implications. Electric scooter apps or platforms for short-term room or apartment rentals are clear example of the dangers of neglecting such context or infrastructure and consequent negative impacts on communities (road safety, expulsion of families and students from entire neighborhoods and so on).

Too often we tend to focus just on technology as such, placing almost thaumaturgic expectations on it, without considering that the impact of a technology unfolds only in its practical and specific contexts of use.

From this perspective, long-term reflections with a long and rich tradition, such as those on the vices and virtues, can also allow us to see the different angles and implications of innovation in contemporary society in more depth.

Uses, attitudes, and expectations towards innovation foster and amplify vices like *envy*, *avarice*, and *hubris*. Classical virtues like *prudence*, *temperance*, *justice* and *fortitude* can help evaluate and manage the benefits and negative implications of innovation with greater wisdom. ☺

MASSIMIANO BUCCHI. Professor of Science and Technology in Society and Director of Master SCICOMM at the University of Trento (Italy). His latest book is *Confidenze digitali: Vizi e virtù dell'innovazione tecnologica* (Il Mulino, 2023).



Jesus Ciscar

«An innovation does not only need a technology that works, but also an infrastructure that includes political decisions and regulations»