ENG

The old techno-utopia trick

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

Arthur C. Clarke

The relationships between technology, economic structure and the socio-cultural system have never been peaceful. The supposed neutrality of science and the hope for linear, universal and unequivocal progress from technical innovations have been questioned from many perspectives. However, in the face of all the historical evidence, a kind of mythology still persists according to which technological expansion, in constant development and without any political mediation, can solve all manner of problems as if by magic. This sort of techno-utopia encourages conservative discourses and actions that eschew any analysis of the real uses and social impacts of technologies, and see no need to act in consequence. Why organise, struggle or manage the future, if artificial intelligence promises ever more efficient responses? And especially, why question the fallacy of this promise, if the whole fabric of the current economic system is based on the myth of digital progress?

The influence of technologies and the commercial system of cultural production based on technical mediation have modified the traditional concept of space and time. In contrast to the direct communicative interaction in which individuals share these coordinates, technology has emerged as the scaffolding supporting a new idea of the person uncoupled from the physical reality of their environment. The most optimistic positions hold that the development of social media helps to create a world in which the fields of interaction are diversified and can rapidly reach global levels. However, if we heed the data, the only thing that is certain about this statement is the speed with which internet use has spread over the last twenty years, at least among part of the population. The new communication networks have a high degree of flexibility, horizontality, interconnection capacity and proximity between their members, but let us not forget that according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations telecommunications agency, around a third of the world's population is unconnected and has no internet access. Eighty per cent of internet users are among the richest 20 per cent of the world's population, which puts us a long way from the goal of 'universal and meaningful' connectivity by 2030 that this international body is aiming for.

The transformation of conditions for communication and the consolidation of remote forms of action have not guaranteed equality of choice in any sphere. The hope that technology will contribute to a true democratisation of knowledge and greater participation is constantly being challenged by the threats of technocracy, exclusionary specialisation and discriminatory access to new technological tools. All this, together with the rules governing the commercialisation of communication, calls into question the effectiveness and possibility of a democracy-based cultural revolution grounded exclusively in technological development and access to new forms of social interaction.

Alongside these economic differences, the unequal distribution of knowledge acts as a substratum of technological inequality that serves the defenders of an elitist technostructure. Transforming these asymmetrical conditions in the creation and use of new technologies must presuppose, among other aspects, educating people for the legitimate and widespread democratisation of culture, which will be impossible unless citizens are involved in this critical and transformative endeavour.

This issue of *kult-ur* uncovers some of the tricks the technocentric discourse uses to masquerade as neutral and unquestionable, and suggests ways of reflecting and acting to confront these simplifications. Because technology is not simply a tool, but also a way of understanding reality that responds to a certain relationship between social systems and life worlds. In response to platform capitalism and the dictatorship of digitalisation, we propose rethinking forms of collective action. Probably the most urgent task in the current technological circumstances is to move from communication *through the network* to *networked* communication, without losing sight of the fact that the new modes of participation imply redefining the traditional political spaces once occupied by the social contract.

All free, conscious citizens must be able to face the challenges posed by technology, whether at the individual level or in terms of social dynamics and the relationship with the territory. This implies going much further than mere technological literacy. It means acquiring a threefold capacity: for human communication, for

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self-understanding as a species and for political participation. The possibilities for civic action are immense, not only in terms of creating the intellectual tools to understand the structures that enable our network of inter-actions, but also to identify the oppressive mechanisms that are blocking any real process of democratisation. Technology itself can be an ally in this task, but only if it is approached consciously and critically, without false illusions or magic tricks.