



## Editorial

# Democratization of philosophy of technologies

Arun Kumar Tripathi<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 15 December 2015

**Abstract:** Technology is a form of culture. Technology is shaping the theoretical framework of our social existence. The technological form of life is part and parcel of culture, just as culture in the human sense inescapably implies technologies. There are unfathomable effects of technology on human culture and society. This paper presents the background and the editorial introduction to the special issue: symposium on Education, Technology, & Democracy: Democratization of Technologies.

**Keywords:** Feenberg, technology, democracy, critical theory

**Acknowledgement:** This is an original paper that presents personal views of the author(s).

### Contextual Background

**Technology** is a social and political force. The technological devices and instruments such as telephone and specs, we make and use transforms our experience in ways that are philosophically relevant. Technologies such as automobiles, telephones and specs enlarge and extend our capacities and effects of changes in the natural and social worlds. Verbeek (2001, p. 133) argues "Technology cannot be grasped in isolation; neither can culture." Technology always exists in its cultural contexts.

We people rely on what we make in order to survive and live together in societies. Technological devices shape our rural societies, urban culture and the environment. They modify patterns of human activity. They influence who we are and how we live. Sometimes technological gadgets add to the quality of our life style. And, sometimes, they made our lives miserable. They overwhelm us, and we seem to be at a loss as to how control them (Kaplan, 2006; Kaplan, 2011).

Mapping the Philosophy of technology for education, Peters (2006, p. 96) argues "Philosophy of technology promises the possibility of an understanding of

---

<sup>1</sup> Independent Scholar, Central University of Tibetan Studies, Sarnath, Varanasi - 221007, Uttar Pradesh, India E-mail: tirelessarun@gmail.com

technology that may be important not only to public policy but also in helping to conceptualise intellectual approaches to the study of technology and, indeed, to shaping new fields of knowledge and research. Philosophy of technology may also have a role to play in relation not only to structuring a largely disparate and inchoate field but also more directly in teaching and learning about technology" (See also Dusek, 2006).

Olsen and Selinger in their Preface of the book *Philosophy of Technology: 5 Questions* (2007) argue that the philosophy of technology is a special region of inquiry; Practitioners of the philosophy of technology defend their research by appealing to both instrumental and intrinsic justifications—that is, they emphasize how their analyses clarify what it means to be human, and portray alternative visions of how humans and non-humans can relate to each other. Some philosophers of technology are exploring the activist component: visions of the good life are articulated, marginalized voices are represented, and issues of participation and shared governance are explored (Olsen & Selinger, 2007).

Whereas Robert Scharff in his *Philosophy of Technology* (Scharff, 2005) argues that until the late twentieth century, technology was not a widely attractive philosophical topic. Even today, certainly in North America and to a somewhat lesser extent in the UK, Scandinavia, and the rest of Continental Europe, the philosophy of technology is still typically regarded as either a small and not especially prestigious area of specialization or an interest most appropriately handled in an institute or program outside of philosophy, "the reasons for this situations are partly historical."

It is no doubt that recently philosophy of technology is gaining recognition as an important field of philosophical scrutiny (Dusek, 2006; Irrgang, 2008; Kaplan, 2006). Scott Ruse essay<sup>2</sup> addresses the import of philosophy of technology in two ways, first as a place of technology within ontology, epistemology, and social/political philosophy, where Ruse argues technology inhabits an essential place in these fields. Second, Ruse discusses how modern technology, its further development, and its inter-cultural transfer constitute a drive toward a global "hegemony of technology". The crux of the Ruse argument is that the technological impulse within humanity insinuates itself into nearly every aspect of human existence (Ruse, 2005).

Ruse in his important essay discusses the two topical thinkers, Don Ihde and Andrew Feenberg to explore the import of philosophy of technology by elucidating a number of levels of approach that must be explored and integrated if we are to understand the ramifications of technology. Ultimately, Ruse (2005) says, the justification for philosophy of technology is beyond both pragmatic and utilitarian reasoning. Instead, Ruse argues that any philosophy of technology that *simply ignores* this essential element of the human condition is fundamentally flawed and intrinsically incomplete (Ruse, 2005).

---

<sup>2</sup> Ruse, M. Scott. Technology and the Evolution of the Human: From Bergson to the Philosophy of Technology, Essays in Philosophy A Biannual Journal Vol. 6, No. 1, January 2005. <http://commons.pacificu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1197&context=eip>

## General Introduction to theme

Technology not only enlarges and extends our capacities but also changes our perception towards natural, social and cultural worlds. The task for a philosophy of technology is to analyze the phenomenon of technology, its implication, and the ways that it mediates and transforms our experience and perception in the lifeworld (Irrgang, 2008; Kaplan 2006).

Coming from the school of critical theory in Frankfurt (where Jürgen Habermas, Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Horkheimer have studied), Andrew Feenberg proposes the solution to the problems of philosophy of technology from the political perspectives. Currently Feenberg is the prolific philosopher in the area of technology and politics. Over the course of more than two decades, Andrew Feenberg has established himself as an important representative of a new generation of critical theorists (Hickman, 2007, p. 79). In his book *Questioning Technology* (Routledge, 1999); Feenberg presents what is arguably his most successful attempt to date to construct a major revision of the critique of technology advanced by Marcuse and other “first generation” critical theorists, as well as by their “second generation” heirs, such as Habermas (See Feenberg, 2005 and for a critical discussion of Feenberg’s *Critical Theory of Technology* see Robert Scharff (2006) ‘Redeeming’ Technological Culture).

Feenberg argues against both essentialism and determinism - to put forward a political theory of technology which embraces the social dimensions of technological systems (Hanks, 2009, p. 176). Feenberg wants to encompass the technical dimension of our lives and to provide a social account of the essence of technology which enlarges our democratic concerns<sup>3</sup>. On technical democracy, Feenberg reminds us - that a technological society requires a democratic public sphere sensitive to technical affairs. But it is difficult to conceive the enlargement of democracy to technology through procedures such as voting. Andrew Feenberg has also established “democratic rationalization” where actors intervene in the technological design process to shape it toward their own ends.

## Introduction to this special issue: Symposium: Education, Technology, & Democracy: Democratization of Technologies

Technology is a highly contentious concept, of course, theorizing technology and it’s a complex relationship with democratic politics is not easily an easy riddle, as Tsekeris argues recently in *Ubiquity* (cf. Tsekeris<sup>4</sup>. *Technology as Politics*, *Ubiquity* Vol.8, Issue 37 (September, 2007- September 24, 2007). Further Tsekeris (2007) argues that for instance, as Andrew Feenberg (1999: 11-12) critically

---

<sup>3</sup> See Feenberg. Summary Remarks on the Approach to the Philosophical Study of Technology <http://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/Method1.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Tsekeris C. (2007). “Technology as Politics”, *ACM Ubiquity* 8(37) <http://ubiquity.acm.org/article.cfm?id=1315435>

observes, although constructivist sociology has interpreted particular technologies in new ways, the central modern questions are hardly addressed today in terms of the general problematic of technology. Nevertheless, the various intellectual efforts of theoretically representing the technological project could be approximately categorized into three main perspectives: technology as an evaluating subject, technology as an evaluated object, technology as a text. I agree with the hypothesis of (Tsekeris, 2007) on Feenberg's critical theory of technology. I would like argue that Feenberg's initiatives towards democratizing technology vs. technology as politics opens a new dimension in the democratization of philosophy of technologies (Feenberg, 2007).

Citizenship implies agency, but what is agency and how is agency possible in a technologically advanced society where so much of life is organized around technical systems commanded by experts? Feenberg (2011) addresses these questions from the standpoint of philosophy of technology and constructivist technology studies. Feenberg lecture<sup>5</sup> first establishes the conditions of agency, which are knowledge, power, and an appropriate occasion. It then considers the role of bias in the construction of technological systems and the importance of participant interests in modifying that bias. Finally, the lecture addresses the wider issue of the prospects for civilizational change required by the environmental crisis in a globalizing technological regime (Feenberg, 2011).

In their papers, the contributors have specially focussed on the intersection of Education, Technology, & Democracy." On the one hand, in a technological culture, it is important to explore issue of democracy which should be extended to technically mediated domains of social life. However on the other hand, I can also argue that technology might be incompatible with democracy to which Feenberg has given a pragamtic answer (Feenberg, 2007). If we are going to adapt democracy to new information technologies in our culture, can it enhance the political decision making in education?

In his paper "Politics and the Pursuit of Excellence" Borgmann argues that everyone applauds the pursuit of excellence in a democracy. However, the major kinds of political ethics agree that it cannot be an affair of the state because that would be an infringement of autonomy. Borgmann pleads that we have to take responsibility for this state of affairs where it encourages the pursuit of excellence whose standards are not really controversial. The political virtues should be the pursuit of excellence in a democratic culture. Borgmann approach is compelling us to bring reform in social system and higher education in particular (See Borgmann in this volume).

Whereas in his paper "CRISIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION?" Durbin has a skeptic tone. Durbin asks "if there is a crisis in higher education today, how should we respond to it?" (See Durbin in this volume). Durbin tries to show here how both extremes,

---

<sup>5</sup> Agency and Citizenship in a Technological Society, Lecture by Andrew Feenberg presented to the Course on Digital Citizenship, IT University of Copenhagen in 2011 <https://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/copen5-1.pdf>

rightly understood, can contribute to the improvement of democratic societies today.

For my special issue Glass et al paper on "Technology and the Experience of Education" is enlightening the meaning of technology in education. Glass et al claim, Educational technology is often treated as a tool that can be separated from the content of education. Technology shapes the experience of education, the identities of teachers and learners, the structures of our institutions and the relationships between people. Glass et al prudently argue "Awareness of the complexity of technology as an integral part of a complex system makes it possible to consciously shape the technology to enhance human interaction" (see Glass et al in the volume).

### Conclusion

Feenberg situates the best way on how the phenomenon of democratizing technology "would be" possible and if we assume, it happens then what will be its consequences, as we know technology has the Janus-Face. In the book "Five Questions in Philosophy of Technology" edited by Olsen and Selinger (2007), Feenberg has answered the issues on "practical socio-political obligations follow from studying technology from a philosophical perspective": [Andrew Feenberg writes] the main obligation philosophy of technology teaches are responsibility for our own creations and for the consequences of our own actions. We know we should take such responsibility in personal affairs, but what about our relation to nature and to society? Most of our institutions and received ideas tell us the natural world is a vast grab bag and garbage dump for which we have no responsibility at all. As for society, we are told that our responsibilities begin and end with paying taxes and voting. These are catastrophic errors. Technology is a collective project of society as a whole and can only be brought within the scope of our ethical obligations through a wide variety of political interventions, including protests, boycotts, and active collaboration with experts around new visions of the technical future (Feenberg, pp. 55 - 62). This is the reason why Feenberg (2007) is most concerned with the implications of technology for democracy, a subject that is still largely overlooked. Technologies form the framework of our lives but they are designed with little or no democratic input. This is a serious failure of our institutions, Feenberg says, it must be addressed by reforms in education, the media, the corporations, law, and the technical professions (Feenberg, 2007).

### References

- Dusek, V. (2006). *Philosophy of Technology: An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing.
- Feenberg, A. (1999). *Questioning Technology*, Routledge.
- Feenberg, A. (2005). *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History*, Routledge.
- Feenberg, A. (2007). "Toward a Democratic Philosophy of Technology," in *5 Questions: Philosophy of Technology*, J.-K. B. Olsen and E. Selinger, eds., Automatic Press, pp. 55-62.

- Feenberg, A. (2011) Agency and Citizenship in a Technological Society (Lecture presented to the Course on Digital Citizenship, IT University of Copenhagen) <https://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/copen5-1.pdf>
- Hanks, C. (Ed.) (2009). Technology and Human Values: Essential Readings, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hickman, L. (2007). Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism: Lessons from John Dewey, New York: Fordham University Press.
- Irrgang, B. (2008). Philosophie der Technik [Philosophy of Technology], Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt.
- Olsen, J.K.B. and Selinger, E. (Eds). (2007). *Philosophy of Technology: 5 Questions, Automatic Press/VIP*.
- Kaplan, D. (2006). Paul Ricoeur and the Philosophy of Technology (pp. 42 - 56), Journal of French Philosophy, Volume 16, Numbers 1 and 2, University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, USA.
- Kaplan, D. (2011). "Paul Ricoeur and the Philosophy of Technology" in Farhang Erfani (Ed.) *Paul Ricoeur: Honoring and Continuing the Work*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Peters, M.A. (2006). Towards a Philosophy of Technology in Education: Mapping the Field (pp. 95-116) in (Eds.) Weiss, J., Noland, J., Hunsinger, J., and Trifonas, P. *The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments*, Springer.
- Ruse, M. S. (2005). Technology and the Evolution of the Human: From Bergson to the Philosophy of Technology, *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 6: Issue. 1, Article 27. <http://commons.pacificu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1197&context=eip>
- Scharff, R.C. (2005). "Philosophy of Technology," *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia of Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Protevi. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 570-74.
- Scharff, R.C. (2006). "Feenberg on Marcuse: 'Redeeming' Technological Culture," *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology* 9/3, pp. 62-80. <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/SPT/v9n3/scharff.html>
- Tsekeris C. (2007). "Technology as Politics", *ACM Ubiquity* 8(37)
- Verbeek, P.P. (2001). Don Ihde: The Technological Lifeworld (pp. 119 - 146) in (Ed.) Achterhuis, H. *American Philosophy of Technology: The Empirical Turn*, Bloomington: Indian University Press.

## Notes on Contributors



Arun Kumar Tripathi is an Independent Scholar and teaching courses on “western philosophy” and “research methodology” at the Central University of Tibetan Studies in Sarnath, Varanasi. In the past, Arun has worked as a Research Assistant (2002 - 2009) at the Department of Philosophy of Technology, Institute for Philosophy, Dresden University of Technology, Germany. For the past 14 years Arun has been pursuing research on technoscience and the influence of technologies on Western culture and historical consciousness. Arun current research interests include the philosophy of technology; intercultural perception; postphenomenology of technological mediation; Science Technology and Society (STS) Studies; pragmatism and its amalgamation to the phenomenology and hermeneutics traditions; interface of human cognition and technology; ethics expertise, critical theory of technology, technology & policy studies. Contact E-mail Address is [tirelessarun@gmail.com](mailto:tirelessarun@gmail.com)

**EUROPEAN JOURNAL** of **SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR**

[www.socialbehaviour.org](http://www.socialbehaviour.org)

Journal License: 

ISSN 2408-0292