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Wandering Between Two Worlds: The Humanist in the Digital Divide

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Abstract

Everything informational and important to the lives of individuals will be found for sale, or for the taking, in cyberspace. -Michael Benedikt “Cityspace, Cyberspace, and The Spatiology of Information” (1993)

“If the humanities are to thrive and not just exist in niches of privilege, they will have to visibly demonstrate the contributions to knowledge and society they are making in the digital era.” (Digital Humanities). Really--shouldn't “technology” have to prove its value to us? Today the humanist instructor finds herself anxiously “wandering between two worlds”(as poet Matthew Arnold in 1855 described his limbo between the pastoral and industrial ages): the undead print and the thriving newborn digital. I explore the special situation of the humanist in the digital age via assumptions that underpin education's technology-ecstasy, and I overview ways “technology” is rewiring our theory and practice for better and worse. Neil Postman has warned that our tendency to ignore both technology's meta-force as cultural change and pop culture's pervasive toxicity can lead to “*culture-death*.” The humanist, especially as educator, has the special charge to meet, with not only healthy skepticism but also constructive practice, this dire but not unreasonable threat. Today as more technology is pushed as remedy for pressing education problems, its intersections with economics, creativity, critical thinking and above all, its force for change in the way we live, individually and culturally, must be defined and interrogated.

Key Words: digital, digital divide, technology, humanism,

Introduction

The title here, half-borrowed from Matthew Arnold confronting the cultural paradigm shift of industrialism almost two centuries ago, reflects my experience and feeling as both a “print native” and an English instructor today—with one big difference: Arnold called his worlds “one dead and the other powerless to be born,” whereas the humanist instructor’s print world is far from dead—in fact, the bulk of our district syllabus for all courses still heavily calls for print literacy—and the “digital” world is a thriving (and demanding) adolescent already.

Not only wandering between but also compromising these two worlds is daunting and wearying along with challenging and exciting; any humanist should agree that if it’s a human enterprise, it falls within our scope and duty. As a humanist, I accept the charge and even the claim digital rhetoricians (2006) assert that “...all writing [today] is computer mediated; all writing is digital,” or at least potentially and perhaps even ideally so in our current *zeitgeist*. “Writing today means weaving text, images, sound and video—working within and across multiple media, often for delivery within and across digital spaces.” This reads like the frequent professional-development sessions I must attend in which I am urged to “address all the learning styles,” “go where my students already are,” and “keep them engaged.” What better way than taking them to the digital arcade? “And, perhaps now more so than ever before, writing requires a deep attention to context, audience, and meaning-making across the multiple tools and media available to us as writers” (DigiRhet.org). These are all familiar terms to English instructors, and the implied hermeneutical-cybercircling is well within our powers.

English instructors tend to believe that most problems are essentially semantic. We must figure out just how far “humanism” can stretch before it no longer has much to do with being “human”; one of the early techno-apocalyptic, Mark Slouka (1995), issues dire warnings about the cyber-dehumanization of mankind: “Like shined deer, we seem to wandering en masse onto the digital highway, and the only concern heard in the land, by and large, is that some of us may be left behind” (Slouka, 9), pointing to our wholesale buying-in to what he eventually calls “the hive”: one single cyber-mind with no tolerance for individuality, creativity or critical thinking—the classic humanist *desiderata*. Slouka echoes his obvious master, Neil Postman (1986), who threatens, “To be unaware that a technology comes equipped with a program for social change, to maintain that technology is neutral, to make the assumption that technology is always a friend to culture is, at this late hour, stupidity plain and simple” and apocalyptically prophesies that in a nation addicted to a continuous and undistinguished mainline of online trivia, disguised as “information,” “culture-death is a real possibility” (Postman, 68).

Social change, friend to culture, and the unveiled call to preserve whatever the “social” and “culture” are (presumably print-literate-logic, judging by the rest of Postman’s argument) are surely the humanist’s vocabulary and arena. In fact, a host of techno-apocalyptic humanists (either out or on the down-low) from Postman to Nicholas Carr seem to draw energy if not purpose from a traditional dualist us-them mentality, with the humanist responsible for saving mankind from the cyber-borg even though, as we all know here, resistance is futile. However, books are sold and careers sustained as a humanist resistance fighter, at least so far, and this very critical battle front can reinforce a techno-besieged humanities platform with sufficient *raison d’être* to guarantee survival for a while, one imagines if not hopes.

But a more compelling definition challenge is that of “technology” itself: what can the humanist make of such as “technology,” “digital natives,” the “digital divide”? After overviewing some of the main arguments against it, we shall, in good academic fashion, finally

define “technology” a bit later. First I want to look at the phrase “digital native.” I myself am not supposed to be one, having only ramped onto the I-way in the last two decades of my six-decade existence whereas my students, for the most part, had a device of some sort stuck in their hands as soon as they could consciously make a fist. And this putative distinction creates the new definition of “digital divide,” which usually means **access** to computer technology whereas I want to define it now as conscious buy-in to the digital world. My students are supposed to be consciously, purposively digital-age disciples, and thus desiring and expecting all their learning to be offered on it; their instructor, on the other hand, is a dinosaur whose “sage-on-the-stage” teaching method bespeaks her obvious mental desiccation and need to go, to paraphrase Joyce’s Molly Bloom, “out on the paper-and-podium ash-heap.”

Neither model works in the everyday reality of the classroom. Neil Postman sees little, if any difference between television and the internet: aside from speed and saturation, the same phenomenon of video simulacrum of reality, in that its images are reproducible and dependent on perceiver manipulation/interpretation, but just more continuously available and stimulating. Having grown up with television and thus addiction to the video simulacrum, I am a lot more at-home in cyberspace than the dividers might want to admit. And my students pretty much refuse to do their assignments any more readily on their smartphones than they would on paper; however unknowingly, they agree with Postman’s belief that the video simulacrum is healthiest when it is pure entertainment, so that is what they use the internet for: “following” each other’s antics endlessly on social media. To conclude this nod to humanist educator antiquity, this semester I gave my students the choice of whether to use their smartphones in class or keep them put away during our predominantly lecture-discussion classes. And guess what—a good majority voted for reality straight-up, the rest benignly conceded, and all now report a better class experience overall resting from their cyber-marathon for at least that hour. (For an in-depth discussion of the smartphone classroom, see <http://blog.cengage.com/smartphones-in-class-learning-tool-distraction/> and also technology educator-guru Clay Shirky’s arguments for a smartphone-free classroom (Strauss). See also “Confronting the Myth of the Digital Native,” in which Megan O’Neil (2013) describes “a picture not of an army of app-building, HTML-typing twenty-somethings, but of a stratified landscape in which some, mostly privileged, young people use their skills constructively, while others lack even basic Internet knowledge” (Chronicle). Ms. O’Neil illuminates here a class dimension of the technology push, in my experience and observation one overlooked by administrations doing the pushing. Kentaro Toyama (2015) sensitively develops this class challenge in the techno-boom’s wake, in his to-the-point “Why Technology Will Never Fix Education” (Chronicle).

I am not here to answer whether smartphones are good for learning although I believe that this is a valid concern for humanists, at least inasmuch as we like all questions of epistemology, and tools used for learning must be subservient to the phenomenon of the learning itself. I am here, I think, to overview some serious concerns that humanists have, or should have, about the so-called Digital Age, and especially about what we as educators are being asked to swallow, not to mention do, about “technology” in our practice.

Discussion

Under ever-increasing pressure to introduce more and more technology into our teaching, are we really being driven by the exigencies of better learning? This must certainly be a question for humanist interrogation, given some related concerns. I propose three fronts for today’s

interrogation: politics, practice and promise—that promise we humanists want to keep to our students, that is. I agree with Neil Postman, who as early as 1969 argues that it is the educator’s task to guard our students’ right to learning, not just “information” and job skills but also how best to adapt, live and thrive in their still-human world with all of its unquantifiable complexities and random challenges. And he especially recommends that educators attend to “the media” as primary and meta-cognitive curriculum: “...we suggest that media study become an integral part of all your classes. No matter what ‘subject’ you are teaching, media are relevant” (*Teaching*, 204; see also especially the chapter 13, “Strategies for Survival”). If permitted to understand “media” not only as the mass ones but also the technologies that are taking over our classrooms, not to mention departments, then I will proceed with warnings but conclude with some constructive recommendations.

Technology and Capitalism

Warning #1 will be no surprise to today’s educators: the collusion between technology and late capitalism. Borrowing from Fredric Jameson’s theory (1991) I use “late capitalism” to describe a system in which all global systems are organized if not unified under the profit motive, profit becomes the only valid consideration and “progress” a function of maximizing it above all other, shall we say more humanistic considerations. We could veer off now into a day-long coverage of capitalism’s assault on higher education, transacted on various fronts: STEM lionization; Kevin Carey’s (2015) currently popular economics-based assault on the traditional universities (he calls them, scornfully metaphorizing their putative archaism, “cathedrals of knowledge”); the push for converting universities into vocational schools; “the fall of the faculty” as Benjamin Ginsburg describes the replacement of education with profit-motivated administration (who suck up a great deal of these profits at the expense of providing their students with fulltime, well-compensated faculty); the student-loan bubble and consequent purging of every academic aspiration outside of job training--and much more.

Institutions and educators feel continuous pressure to innovate, update and expand technology-based learning; think of hybrid and “flipped” classrooms, MOOCs, online proliferation in general, and the threat to faculty jobs and salaries brought by mass-education forums not reliant on physical presence, classrooms, utilities, experienced and knowledgeable instructors and other expensive collaterals of face-to-face instruction (see Kevin Carey for a hypertrophied explanation of this threat). “At its most pragmatic, digital humanities has less to do with ways of thinking than with problems of university administration,” Adam Kirsch goes so far as to assert. Ever-prodded by the profiteering technology industry and fiscally-prudent administrations, educators can lose sight of the critical question: is all this technology really helping us teach better? Information technology gives us for sure three things: faster speed, greater access, and improved data aggregation. How do these facilitate the kinds of learning that humanists in particular rely on and encourage? Does the digital revolution give us new ways to think, and create--or only new ways to collect and catalogue what we “know”? Neil Postman addressed the problems of conflating scientific and humanistic methodologies; both are valid inquiry, but dollars come with data, not philosophizing. As Kirsch (2014) insists, “The humanities cannot take place in seconds” any more than they can thrive in the ecstasy of aggregated data gleaned from “everywhere,” unchanneled by the critical processes so often unfriendly to Big Data.

Humanists might also attend to more dystopic speculations about our technopoly. As “data-driving” drives most education nowadays, so does the demand for “efficiency,” as non-educator legislators and administrators must make policy profitable. As Aldous Huxley put it in his Preface to *Brave New World* so well seventy years ago, “in an age of advanced technology, inefficiency is the sin against the Holy Ghost.” For the sake of efficiency, he argues, and thus more committed and faster data-driving, technopoly slaves must love their enslavement, and “to make them love it is the task assigned . . . to ministries of propaganda, newspaper editors and schoolteachers.” The mass access, saturation and speed available through technology can reach, engage and inform more students than ever previously imagined--but at the potential cost of not only sacrificing intellectual rigor but also redefining education as instrument of capitalist indoctrination, antithetical to the humanist devotion to skepticism and critical analysis. Henri Giroux (2014) has pointed to a “full-fledged effort through the use of the pedagogical practices of various cultural apparatuses . . . the new media and digital modes of communication . . . to produce elements of the authoritarian personality while crushing as much as possible any form of collective dissent and struggle.” Along with perpetual access to mindless and even toxic popular culture, Giroux argues, information technology functions as a “distraction and disimagination machine in which mass emotions are channeled towards an attraction for spectacles while suffocating all vestiges of the imagination, promoting the idea that any act of critical thinking is an act of stupidity and offering up the illusion of agency through gimmick like voting on American Idol” (Interview)--or, say, the classroom clicker.

Technology and the Learner

Lewis Lapham, in his introduction to Marshall McLuhan’s biblical *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), points to the basic kinship of writing itself and the technologies that convey it. Comparing print and electronic writing, McLuhan half-condemns, half-embraces the “sovereignty of the moment” promised by the electric media that, as a significant corollary, finally “ends subjects in the world of learning” (346).

In a higher education economy increasingly hostile to the individual, either as “sage-on-the stage” instructor or lone, non-“engaged” learner--we might closely consider the end of the learning *subject*. With the panopticon potential and lightning speed of the internet, are our learners to be blended into the ecstasy of everywhere, at the expense of their individual autonomy? Kevin Carey certainly thinks so within his utopian vision of a world of uniformly (in spite of his “learning-style” hype) prepared, able and avid cyber-learners out there, ready to acquire MIT-level knowledge with just their laptops and WiFi. Sherry Turkle (2011) points to psychological hurdles online, observing that “we fill out days with ongoing connection, denying ourselves time to think and dream,” and warns of the hollow payoff of “simulation: the exhilaration of creativity without its pressures, the excitement of exploration without its risks” (224). In simulation, the gamer or surfer actually occupies a new identity, presumably one superior to the awkward biological mind and body so prone to error and underachievement in Real Life (see Mark Slouka for a thorough history and analysis of cyber life vs. “RL”). Aimed at digital heaven, a man’s reach exceeds his grasp, indeed, but at the expense of his hand.

A strange irony emerges in digital-literate culture: the “have-it-your-way” mentality of everything today from MickeyD’s to the classroom. Dan Tapscott, author of “The Eight Net Gen Norms” (2008), observes that “Young people insist on freedom of choice. It’s a basic feature of their media diet...The search for freedom is transforming education as well. Learning for them

should take place where and when they want it” (73-6). They will no longer accept the role of passive recipient to a sage-on-the-stage dictator. In fact, the very idea that such a “sage” could have anything valuable to say has been fairly nuked, in spite of the fact that the geniuses that debunk this role were largely informed and trained, via print literacy, by such sages. But little longhair Logan, the “hackschool” superstar with his Pez dispenser of 14-year-old experience and obvious ethnic and socioeconomic status indicators, rules the world of TED-talk pedagogy “lite” devoured today by higher ed. However unknowingly channeling Wordsworth and Whitman (whom he might not ever stumble across in his online freestyling), he tells his young audience to throw away their textbooks and creatively explore the vast Everywhere with their pricey technology and Starbucks internet hookup.

What will this confident young autodidact eventually give the world? We hope, a better Picasso, a more complex Joyce, an instant cure for Ebola, a better mousetrap. Free of the onerous constraints of informed direction, without tedious elder-sage guidance, under his own creative auspices and with his trusty devices, he is the great hope of the digitized future. He might even succeed in quickly making himself obsolete, obviously a goal of the digitechnicons.

So why isn't everyone, “everywhere,” ecstatic? McLuhan prophesied the future, perhaps temporarily (as an evolutionary stage) but nonetheless ensnared in the intersection of *somewhere* and *everywhere*. Nicholas Carr (2010) writes of the neuroscience of “multitasking,” and the news isn't good for our students' ability to reason clearly and argue effectively. Already we see our right to individual privacy and autonomy--the hallmark of print culture with its solitary and self-engaged act of reading--eroded or even obliterated, as collateral damage to our self-expansion into collective consciousness. And McLuhan had early on predicted the anxieties that plague our classrooms as well as our society at large. Could these anxieties be inevitable to the “electric circus”? Our students, raised on TV as we were but also the Internet, cannot “take refuge in the zombie trance” of print linearity and detachment; and thus they and their instructors panic as “we all become Chicken Littles, scurrying around frantically in search of our former identities, and in the process unleash tremendous violence. As the preliterate confronts the literate in the postliterate arena, as new information patterns inundate and uproot the old, mental breakdowns of varying degrees--including the collective nervous breakdowns of whole societies unable to resolve their crises of identity--will become very common” (McLuhan, *Playboy* interview,126). Any honest instructor today will admit to moments, if not semesters of such panic if not breakdown.

What Is the Thing Called Technology?

Warning #3 comes with hope because educators are very good at this kind of hope. We must attend to our students' “terrible anxieties” while optimizing their learning experience in the Divide. Turkle argues what we already know so well, “We have to find a way to live with seductive technology and make it work for our purposes. This is hard and will take work.” She is cautiously optimistic, believing that “When we are at our best, thinking about technology brings us back to questions about what really matters” (294-95). Note how she echoes Martin Heidegger (1953) in his famous take on technology: “In this way we are already sojourning within the open space of destining, a destining that in no way confines us to a stultified compulsion to push on blindly with technology or, what comes to the same thing, to rebel helplessly against it and curse it as the work of the devil” (The Question, 25).

As I have belonged to the latter camp, I am especially attracted to Heidegger's most careful definition of what "technology" actually is, fundamentally. Not the latest invention by Apple or the latest online Cengage lab--nor TED talk, YouTube nor Twitter nor Google nor whatever latest commodity fad. "Technology is a means to an end...[and] a human activity. These two definitions of technology belong together. For to posit ends and procure and utilize them is a human activity." For him "technology" is a means for humans to draw from what he calls the "standing-reserve" of "world" and to shape, "unlock, transform, store and distribute" the standing-reserve of phenomena. These are some of the "ways of revealing"--and it can be no surprise that "this revealing never comes to an end" (The Question, 4).

Heidegger delivers a strong message about our relationship to technology as educational practice. We must adopt what I am calling a "metapedagogy of technology" in our classrooms. That is, we must always perform the metacognitive act of calling our students' attention to both the definitions and the non-instrumental entailments of the technologies they use. To avoid or evade doing so is not only to shut off one of the rich pathways of revealing their being-in-the-world, but also to create great individual and cultural danger for them: Heidegger explains that "we shall never experience our relationship to the essence of technology so long as we merely conceive and push forward the technological, put up with it, or evade it. Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral" (4). It is my claim that "the worst possible way" appears in the classroom in which technology is imposed by cultural and administrative fiat and without the (at least current) exigency of critical inquiry and metacognitive practice.

Conclusion

"What is clear is that, to date, computer technology has served to strengthen Technopoly's hold, to make people believe that technological innovation is synonymous with human progress" (Postman, Technopoly, 1992). Nowhere is this more evident than in education. A collusion of seductive market forces, state funding requirements, cultural lapses, eroded literacy and the demands of globalism has frightened educators into grasping at short-term solutions including a hasty and uncritical embrace of technology. We have tended to fall short of, even to fear asking critical questions about not only what technology does, but even what it is. Yes, it is a "tool" that we bring in to "supplement" our human instruction, say the hopeful. However, as I have indicated here, there is a menacing *telos* within the technology-push, one that bodes ill for the physical classroom and human instructor who, after all, tend to be expensive. (At this time we will not look into how the techno-utopists plan to wean humankind from its species-long profiteering addiction, to the point where the the University of Everywhere is as freely provided, both in access and cost, to the world as promised . . .)

Within the deluge-push of technology, we want to avoid "selling our birthright for a mess of apps" (Kirsch, 2014). It is likely the true humanists among us who will fight this fight, which is most basically to keep the human element strong in education. In spite of what profiteering education technology, state legislators, budget-conscious administrators and starry-eyed instructors want to believe--our students are still human and overwhelmingly prefer, not to mention succeed in, face classes with their human contact, support and personal mentoring. They do love their devices for social media, which is a great use for these. These can even be brought productively into play in metacognitive assignments in which students study not only the subject at hand but also how technology supports both learning the field and practicing it nowadays. But

everyone needs to keep a close eye on how these media and devices constitute a radical reshaping of our world, a paradigm shift unparalleled since the printing press, and also on the fact that the advantages these technologies bring are calculable in terms of efficiency-- the totalitarian state's first mover, according to Orwell--and even more ominously, cost-cutting and bottom-line profit.

Almost two decades ago, Ira Shor (1999) defined “critical literacy . . . as ‘learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations’ (Anderson and Irvine, 82). I am arguing today that it is the humanist educator's destiny, challenge and responsibility to interrogate these power relations, remedy an unhealthy neutrality about technology's promise, and bring our students as critical thinkers into the argument.

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