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AN EXPLORATION OF VARIOUS IMPACTS OF SOCIAL
MEDIA USAGE: THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND
SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES OF JACQUES ELLUL'S
'TECHNIQUE'

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ABSTRACT

AN EXPLORATION OF VARIOUS IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE:
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This thesis aims to unearth insights about the relevance and degree of applicability of the concept of “technique” as defined by the French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul in his seminal work, “La Technique” (translated as “The Technological Society”, published in 1964). Specifically my aim is to examine how Ellul’s dialectical methodology can be used to examine the degree in which “technique” interacts with the world of internet and social media usages to produce particular global-scale changes in the way people communicate and use language. To what extent have recent developments in social media and internet-based communication, confirmed or contradicted Ellul’s ideas and concepts of “technique”? Dialectics is central to Ellul’s works as a whole, and can clearly be seen in the dialectical tension between human choice of action and technique. When humans use techniques, to what extent do such established techniques in turn, use human beings? Do humans use social media as a tool in a freely chosen or “neutral” way? Or does technique rigidly control the possible ways in which people can interact with such technology on a meaningful sociological level? This thesis will be referring primarily (though not exclusively) to Ellul's 1981 book “The Humiliation Of The Word” which adopts both theological and sociological analyses as part of its argument that modern life prioritizes the visual and the image over language and “the word”. He argues that the word has been turned into an object and made subordinate to the image which represents the world of reality, action, technical application and objectivity as opposed to the world of

truth, the theoretical, the abstract, and of human subjectivity which language represents. In light of this, what has social media done to language generally? Has it made communication more efficient through rationally applied technical methods? What is the price of this efficiency? Perhaps this efficiency is only apparent and results in an inefficient form of communication? What about the role of 'freedom' and 'necessity' with respect to the human subject? Does language and the word become more free as a result of social media technology? I shall be exploring several case studies concerning communication on the Internet that might help provide answers to such questions or produce new questions and problems with respect to Ellul's dialectic of Technique and Freedom, as well as the sociological and philosophical understanding of language and images in general.

Keywords: Jacques Ellul, Technique, Dialectics, Social Media, Language, Images.



ÖZ

SOSYAL MEDYA KULLANIMININ ÇEŞİTLİ ETKİLERİNİN İNCELENMESİ: JACQUES ELLUL'UN "TEKNİK" KAVRAMININ FELSEFİ VE SOSYOLOJİK PERSPEKTİFLERİ

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Bu tez, Fransız filozof ve sosyolog Jacques Ellul'un "La Technique" adlı çalışmasında tanımladığı "teknik" kavramının geçerliliği ve uygulanabilirliği hakkında içgörüyü ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. (1964'te yayımlanan "Teknolojik Toplum" olarak tercüme edilmiştir). Özellikle benim amacım, Ellul'un diyalektik metodolojisinin, "teknik" internet dünyasıyla etkileşim derecesini incelemek için nasıl kullanılabileceğini incelemek ve insanların iletişim kurma ve dil kullanma biçiminde belirli küresel ölçekte değişiklikler üretmek için sosyal medyayı nasıl kullandığını incelemektir. Sosyal medyadaki ve internet tabanlı iletişimdeki son gelişmeler ne ölçüde Ellul'un "teknik" hakkındaki fikir ve kavramları ile doğrulandı mı, çelişkili mi? Diyalektik, Ellul'un eserleri için bir bütün olarak merkezdedir ve insanın eylem ve teknik seçimi arasındaki diyalektik gerginlikte açıkça görülebilir. İnsanlar teknikleri kullandığında, bu tür teknikler ne ölçüde sırayla insanı kullanır? İnsanlar sosyal medyayı özgürce seçilmiş veya "tarafsız" bir araç olarak kullanıyor mu? Ya da teknik, insanların böyle bir teknoloji ile anlamlı bir sosyolojik düzeyde etkileşime girme olasılığını katı bir şekilde kontrol ediyor mu? Bu tez, her ne kadar modern yaşamın görsel ve imgeyi dil ve "sözcük" üzerinden ön plana çıkardığına dair argümanının bir parçası olarak hem teolojik hem de sosyolojik analizleri benimseyen Ellul'un 1981 tarihli "The Word of Humbleation Of The Word" adlı kitabına öncelikli olarak (özellikle de değil) atıfta bulunacaktır. Bu kelimenin bir nesneye dönüştüğünü ve gerçeğin, kuramsal ve özün dünyasının aksine gerçekliğin,

eylem, teknik uygulamanın ve nesnelliğin dünyasını temsil eden imgeden daha ařađı bir Őey olduđunu savunur. Bunun sosyal medya dili ne yapıyor? Rasyonel olarak neler teknik amaçlı ile yapılacaktır daha fazla hale hale getirdi mi? Bu verimlilikliđin fiyatı nedir? Belki de bu etkinlik sadece belirgindir ve etkisiz bir iletiřim biçimi ile sonuçlanır? İnsan konusuna göre 'özgürlük' ve 'gereklilik' rolüne ne dersiniz? Sosyal medya teknolojisinin sonucu olarak dil ve kelime daha özgür mü? İnternette iletiřimin bu tür sorulara cevap vermesine yardımcı olabilecek ya da Ellul'un Teknik ve Özgürlük diyalektiđi ile genel olarak dil ve imgelerin sosyolojik ve felsefi kavrayıřı ile ilgili yeni sorular ve sorunlar üretmeye yardımcı olabilecek çeřitli vaka arařtırmalarını arařtıracadıđım.

Anahtar Kelimeler; Jacques Ellul, Teknik, Diyalektik, Sosyal Medya, Dil, Görüntüler.

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INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE

In this chapter I will give a brief outline of Jacques Ellul's intellectual life and methodological approaches that pertain to his formation of the concept of 'Technique' and his dialectical approach to human 'freedom'. The various people that helped to shape Ellul's theological and sociological conceptions are also briefly explored as will the contextual influences that shaped Ellul'. Then I will provide a comparison of Ellul's concept of 'technique' with the theories and ideas of other philosophers of technology and society, namely Max Weber, Herbert Marcuse and Lewis Mumford. The similarities and differences of 'technique' with concepts formulated by the respective thinkers will thus be highlighted.

Who is Jacques Ellul?

Ellul was a French philosopher, historian, sociologist as well as a scholar in Protestant theology - influenced in particular by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Though an academic professor of law in the late 1930s, his life experience often extended itself outside the world of academia. Examples of this were his roles in various libertarian anarchist movements, one of which was (for a time) close to the "personalist" ideological movement of Emmanuel Mounier. Such 1930's movements were based on local, small, independent (decentralised) groups spontaneously formed and seeking to demonstrate the bankrupt nature of modern social, economic, spiritual and political life and the need to save the God-given dignity of the human "subject" from the large-scale disruptive, impersonal, rationalist and materialist forces of the modern world.¹

¹ Patrick Chastenet, "A Biography of Jacques Ellul (1912-1994)", Trans. Lesley Graham. Retrieved from <<https://ellul.org/life/biography/>>, 7 Şubat 2018.

Ellul was in fact, a marginal figure in the intellectual life of France². Having been born in the provinces and of mixed heritage, he was a stranger to a life of material comfort. Though his area of academic specialization was law, the vast majority of his sociological and theological books and writings clearly fell outside the area of his paid profession. He was in many ways, an outsider. Stating about himself that “it is obvious that I have always found myself alone and out of place”. Given his most seminal writings were produced from outside the intellectual realm of his paid profession, much of it is resultantly written in a language that appears to address the nonspecialist. There is a great gulf between Ellul and the sort of jargon, technical terms and forms of expression used by intellectuals such as Foucault, for example.

During World War II, Ellul was involved in the French Resistance in central southern France and became acquainted with rural life, growing food to feed himself and his family. He was involved in ecological and environmental movements and also for several years was president of a club aimed at preventing juvenile delinquency. His work, *La Technique* was published in French in 1954. It is a seminal work which gained little attention or value in France, but eventually gained a strong following amongst intellectuals in the United States where it was later translated into English as “The Technological Society”. The use of the word “technological” instead of “technique” is problematic however, because it is not what Ellul is actually conveying. Ellul was not somebody who spent his life attacking technology (he wrote three books throughout his life on “technique”). Rather, he exposed and problematized “technique”, which had come to take over and dominate the vast majority of human life and affect how people related to technology or the “machine”. This was a reduction of life to a rational proceduralization where everything must be made as efficient as possible, above all else. I shall of course elaborate on the meanings and implications of “technique” later on in this study³.

² Greenman et al, **Understanding Jacques Ellul**, Cascade Books, 2012, p.12.

³ Patrick Chastenet, “A Biography of Jacques Ellul (1912-1994)”, Trans. Lesley Graham. Retrieved from <<https://ellul.org/life/biography/>>, 7 Şubat 2018.

Intellectual Methodology and Influences

Before attempting to define Ellul's intellectual methodology, I want to make it clear that despite the fact that the scope of this study relates to Ellul's sociological writings on "technique" it is not possible for me to solely confine my attention to them. Yet, in order to understand Ellul one must appreciate the fact that none of his books on "technique" stand as self-contained intellectual units⁴. Each of his books are, according to Ellul, mere chapters of a larger book that he wrote throughout his life. A larger book that covers not only sociological (or philosophical) themes, but also his theological reflections and insights⁵.

The main influences in Ellul's intellectual approach to the problem of technology and freedom were a combination of semi-Marxist and Protestant "reform theology". The Technological Society (and subsequent works on the same subject) largely owes its line of thought to the French thinker Bernard Charbonneau (1910-96) who was a close friend of Ellul's and who had written work on "techno-scientific development", totalitarianism and ecological disruption. An interesting aspect of Charbonneau's writing was his perspective of the influence of the First World War in creating a "totalising" effect on the social organisation and fabric of society. The nature of the war and the involvement of mechanized warfare reflected the industrial scale of mobilization of human beings and a scale of "massification" of mankind not yet seen before. This is a notion of "mass man" where individual cultural practices, habits, social and political norms are disrupted by the cold logic of the machine. Charbonneau also considered technological and technical development as a "quasi-autonomous" process that is seemingly independent of any central human direction. In fact, this suggests that the development of technology creates the conditions of complexity which later necessitate governments to try and manage it through centralization of power. Ellul builds on Charbonneau's idea of "quasi-autonomous" technology via his own term of "self-augmentation" where the technical complex

⁴ D Lovekin, **Technique, Discourse and Consciousness: Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul**, Lehigh University Press, April 1991, p. 105.

⁵ J.M.Shaw, **Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on Technology and the Human Condition**, Pickwick Publications, June 2014, p.41-42.

is seen as an inter-dependent ensemble seemingly with a life of its own, independent of individual human will.

Ellul and Charbonneau met in Bordeaux and their intellectual engagement (as well as their lifelong friendship) began during the late 1920's onward. During the 1930's in particular, they both perceived a sense of civilizational crisis that was impacting France, that the old traditions had been subject to great upheaval by the growing impact of modern and materialistic forces, that politics was ineffective regardless of whether it was the Left or Right in power, and that future confidence in society was bleak partly due to the Great War. Both Ellul and Charbonneau held the view that "top-down" solutions could not work and that it was more workable to act at a local level, not as a uniform mass, but as a collection of many small groups. These groups would meet in a variety of settings primarily to engage in free-form and open discussion on a variety of issues, and would also engage in social activities in natural settings⁶⁷. They were loosely part of the "Personalist" movement during this time, and Ellul and Charbonneau's *Outline For A Personalist Manifesto* published firstly in 1935 included the following interesting statements:-

"A world was organized without us. We entered it as it was beginning to lose its balance. It obeyed deep-seated laws we did not know, which were not like those of earlier Societies. No one took the trouble to ferret them out, because this world was characterized by anonymity: no one was responsible, and no one attempted to control it. Each person simply kept to the post he was assigned in this world, which came into being by itself, through the interplay of these deep-seated laws.

Thus we also found our place marked, and we were obligated to obey a kind of social determinism. All we could do was to play our role well, unconsciously assisting in the interplay of the new laws of Society. Faced with these laws, we were disarmed - not only by our ignorance, but also by the impossibility of changing this anonymous product. Humanity was completely impotent as over against Banks, the Stock Market, contracts,

⁶ Joyce Hanks, "Jacques Ellul and Bernard Charbonneau", **The Ellul Forum**, No. 26, January 2001, s. 3

⁷ Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, "Bernard Charbonneau and the Personalist Context in the 1930s and Beyond", **The Ellul Forum**, No. 26, January 2001, s. 6

insurance, Hygiene, the Radio, Production, etc. We could not struggle, one person against another, as in previous societies, nor could ideas challenge one another directly.

In spite of our impotence, however, we felt the need to proclaim certain values and to incarnate certain forces...⁸

Such a manifesto paints a picture of a modern world replete with forces so large, interwoven and systemic that it is no longer possible to point towards any person or institution that is responsible for any thing that happens. The words, “We could not struggle, one person against another” highlight the impersonality of the sort of modern industrial world that Ellul, Charbonneau and others were experiencing. It also shows how “Personalism”, for them, had the potential to act as a countervailing ideological force against the totalizing matrix of impersonality which technology was facilitating. The collective struggles, class conflicts and other ideological concepts propagated by the Left (communism in particular) were also seen as part of the forces working against the dignity of the human subject. Though both of them left the personalist movement in Paris as a result of various disagreements, the fundamental ideas expressed by Ellul and Charbonneau in the aforementioned “manifesto” remained important throughout their lives. They both agreed that the forces of “progress”, rampant technological developments and the destruction of the environment were the most pressing problems of the age. Charbonneau also influenced Ellul’s views with respect to how science and technology tended to have negative impacts on their shared notion of “freedom”, and Ellul in turn influenced his friends’ views on religion - eventually turning Charbonneau away from the path of atheism. In summary, his friendship with Charbonneau enabled Ellul to formulate and develop his concept and theory of “technique” which he would expound and illustrate not only in his sociological works, but in several of his theological works too⁹.

⁸ Jacques Ellul & Bernard Charbonneau, “Directives pour un manifeste personaliste, Bordeaux, 1935”. Retrieved from <<https://lesamisdebartleby.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/version-imprimable-de-origine-de-notre-rc3a9volte1.pdf>>, 7 Şubat 2018.

⁹ Jacques Ellul, **Jacques Ellul on Politics, Technology and Christianity: Conversations with Patrick Toude Chastenet**, University of South Florida, 1999, p.3.

Ellul's Dialectical Approach and Its Influences

It can be argued that the dialectical character of Ellul's work derives itself from the writings of Karl Marx, Soren Kierkegaard, and Karl Barth. However, while Ellul was strongly influenced by Marx's critique of capitalism and his theory of alienation and ideology - he did not agree with the deterministic and materialistic approach that comprised Marx's totalizing view of human history and society. Rather than placing Ellul within the category of a Marxian historical thinker, it would perhaps better to place him as roughly within the tendency of the 20th century existentialist thinkers such as Karl Jaspers, Lewis Mumford, and Martin Heidegger.¹⁰ Ellul, however, did not write abstract philosophy that was as overly theoretical as Heidegger's views on technology, for example. He was a trained historian first and foremost and his approach was more empirical and phenomenological.

Ellul took seriously the Marxian idea of 'alienation' with respect to the effect of capitalism on the worker, his exclusion from the fruits of his labour, from being a valued part of the whole means of production, from the natural world and from meaningful community. The wage slave is compelled to work for a master, or he simply cannot survive. He must participate in the edifice of capital, money and property that surrounds him and thus he ultimately becomes an object of the profit incentive and less of a human being. Thus the alienation from humanity that the problem of capitalism (for Marx) presents. For Ellul, the alienated state of the labourer resembles somebody who is bound to the force of 'Necessity' as opposed to that of 'Freedom'. As will be discussed later, Ellul's philosophical ideas with respect to these two concepts derive from the thought of Kierkegaard though he utilises them in different ways, with influence also from Karl Barth. It can be said here, before going into detail, that Ellul's dialectic is opposed to the seemingly mechanistic and deterministic historical materialism and dialectic of Marx - who sees history as a series of periods of merely human power relations, social flux, and internal contradictions that somehow produce a sense of progress and evolution. Dialectical materialism thus sees history as an antagonistic battle between differing forces rooted in the material world. There is no room for a spiritual or metaphysical dimension in Marxian thought. Thus Marx's

¹⁰ D.M. Kaplan, **Readings in the Philosophy of Technology**, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003, p.1.

dialectic boils down to human power within the material world and its temporal fluctuations and dynamics.

Ellul on the other hand, does not root his dialectic pole of ‘freedom’ within the Marxian idea of material power falling into the hands of the formerly oppressed. The solution to alienation, for Ellul, cannot come from some material human-centred ideal or class-victory, but rather it arises from the Spirit, from the Word, from Freedom in Christ. Though Ellul takes the Marxian understanding of material history being composed of a series of movements, changes, developments and conflicts of opposing forces - he does not ground this merely within a materialistic context, and he does not share the view that through such dialectical interaction there can be any sense of ‘progress’ or ‘evolution’. For Ellul, there is no way that such material dialectic forces can result in any meaningful change and thus for him the only way out of the continual dialectical tension is the Spirit (i.e. the realm of Freedom)¹¹.

For Ellul, history is not just a story of man and his material context but rather a story, a dialectical story, composed of man’s decisions and that of God’s. Ultimately the decisions of man will become subsumed into the Greater Plan of God, or redeemed via the fulfillment of the Kingdom¹². It is a dialectic of spirit and body, and transcends the mere power plays of the world of Necessity. It is at this juncture that I wish to introduce the influence of Immanuel Kant on Ellul’s conception of ‘Freedom’. Ellul’s notion of this concept, though by no means simplistic, does take some of its influence from Kantian ethics of individual freedom. The notion of the Golden Rule derives itself from this Kantian respect for individual autonomy and the right for such autonomy to be legally protected. Another of Kant’s principles is that of treating the human subject as an end in itself and never as a means. Thus human beings cannot become, according to Kant, mere cogs in the machine of society, valued only for their use-value, their material productivity or position in the status hierarchy¹³. Rather, one must “Work toward a Kingdom of ends” and thus the human person and subject becomes the centre of consideration at all times, as does his dignity, his honour and the full spectrum of his sensitivities and faculties. Yet, as we

¹¹ J.E. Van Vleet **Dialectical Theology and Jacques Ellul: An Introductory Exposition**, Augsburg Fortress Publishing 2014, p.11-16.

¹² Ibid p.41-42.

¹³ Ibid p.113.

have briefly seen earlier - the Marxian perspective and theory of alienation shows that capitalism treats people as mere means, as mere tools and cogs towards an end that is harmful to human dignity. Ellul, on the other hand, does not blame capitalism as the mere force that is violating Kant's principle of individual freedom and dignity. Rather, it is 'technique' (a concept which I will explore in much more detail later) and its rendering efficient, mechanistic, total, and rationally systematic all of human life - that violates these Kantian principles, that causes alienation, and thus ties people into the realm of 'Necessity' and away from 'Freedom'. Yet, while individual freedom is a component of Ellul's concept of 'Freedom', it is important to understand that the human is not the mere end. Rather the human being finds his true Freedom through communion with the Spirit and that which is Wholly Other. But how is a human being able to do this? In order to try and address this question, I would like to briefly turn to perhaps the most important of Ellul's influences with respect to dialectical thinking - namely that of Soren Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard's concept of human existence is heavily dialectic in nature and in particular it involves a constant tension between the realm of the 'spirit' and 'flesh and blood'. For him they are opposite in nature with one representing the realm of 'freedom' and the other the realm of 'necessity'¹⁴. Yet what prevents the human individual from being merely a determined automaton is his ability to choose the degree of freedom or necessity that he subjects himself to. But in this seemingly contradictory realm of spirit and flesh, there can be no absolute choice between freedom and necessity but only a tendency in the direction of one or the other at varying times. The dialectical tension of the spirit and body for Kierkegaard also are referred to by him as 'transcendence' and 'immanence' as well as 'possibility' and 'actuality'. Human nature, for Kierkegaard, can also be examined through the framework of 'qualitative logic' as opposed to merely that of the 'quantitative'. The former being one that fully accepts all the subjective, mysterious, paradoxical and often contradictory aspects of human nature and existence. Choice allows the human being to attempt to resolve these contradictions though for Kierkegaard they are only fully resolved in the person of Jesus Christ. For Ellul, it is not simply the ability of choice but the living act of 'hope' that allows the individual to distinguish himself from the deterministic realm of necessity. This idea is expressed most lucidly in his 1973 theological work

¹⁴ Ibid p.16-20

‘Hope in Time of Abandonment’. From this one can garner that Ellul saw our reality as being constituted of a ‘closed’ world dominated by ‘technique’, the logic of efficiency, power, systematization of life and of control. In such a ‘closed’ world there can be no true human freedom primarily because our actions are constrained within specific ideological and organizational structures. For Ellul, the realm of ‘hope’ is one that should be lived as an act and not simply as an impotent emotion. Trusting in the promise of a coming Kingdom should inform the character and behaviour of Christians who are living in the world of ‘necessity’ and will allow them a degree of freedom and access to a world that is ‘open’. It is the relative freedom of being in the world, but not of it.¹⁵

¹⁵ L.J Terlizese., **Hope in the Thought of Jacques Ellul**, Cascade Books, 2005, Introduction.

Ellul's Concept Of 'Technique' In Light Of Other Works

In his 1954 work 'The Technological Society', Ellul defines the concept of 'technique' right at the start in the following terms:

“In our technological society, technique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity. Its characteristics are new; the technique of the present has no common measure with that of the past.”¹⁶

This definition appears rather vague and simplistic despite the depth of discussion that Ellul engages in with respect to the dynamics and broad implications of this phenomenon. A more detailed definition is however mentioned in Ellul's 1963 essay titled “The Technological Order”. This latter definition describes “Technique” as possessing six notable characteristics:

- a. It is artificial;
- b. It is autonomous with respect to values, ideas, and the state;
- c. It is self-determining in a closed circle. Like nature, it is a closed organization which permits it to be self-determinative independently of all human intervention;
- d. It grows according to a process which is causal but not directed to ends;
- e. It is formed by an accumulation of means which have established primacy over ends;
- f. All its parts are mutually implicated to such a degree that it is impossible to separate them or to settle any technical problem in isolation.”¹⁷

From these characteristics it is possible to infer that “technique” is a deterministic phenomena that is independent and exempt from the influence, intervention and guidance of humans in general. The aspects of autonomy, artificiality, and self-determination portray a phenomena that

¹⁶ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Society**, Vintage, 1964, XXV.

¹⁷ Jacques Ellul, "The Technological Order", **Technology and Culture**, No.4, Vol.3, Autumn 1962, pp.394-421

dictates the limits of human freedom and agency and even encases human beings within its mechanistic dictates.

Yet it also may be argued that this sort of sociological definition is nothing new, and that it is at least partially derived from late 19th century thinkers such as Max Weber who articulated a phenomenon known as the 'Iron Cage'. Ellul mentions methods, rational approaches and efficiency and this tallies with the Weberian observation of the rise of the bureaucratic organization in tandem with the rise of capitalism. This bureaucratic force would be technically efficient above all those institutions prior to it and would impose itself on individuals and the masses in its own calculating fashion:

“The bureaucratic organization, with its specialization of trained skills, its delineation of competencies, its rules and hierarchical relations of obedience...is...in the process of erecting a cage of bondage which persons – lacking all powers of resistance – will perhaps one day be forced to inhabit, as the fellahs of ancient Egypt. This might happen if a purely technical value – a rational civil service administration and distribution of welfare benefits – becomes viewed as the ultimate and single value in reference to which the organization of all affairs ought to be decided.”¹⁸

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to further examine Weber's concept here, but rather what I shall do is briefly highlight similarities and differences with that of Ellul's 'technique'. For Weber, it was a particular type of Protestant ethic which gave rise to a capitalism in Europe that, in its very nature - birthed a subsequent form of capitalism dominated by an industrial logic, of calculation, rationalization, and standardization. This helped develop new institutions and organizations that stifled human freedom and behaviour in a manner not seen before¹⁹. In this sense Weber's 'Iron Cage' seems very much another definition of Ellul's 'technique'. However, a reading of Ellul's work beyond the aforementioned definition given by him (as well as perhaps a closer examination of his short definition) yields important differences as well as developments.

¹⁸ (Weber 1968b: 1402; trans. altered).

¹⁹ Kim, Sung Ho, "Max Weber", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/weber/>>.

Firstly, as we will discover later, Ellul's society of 'technique' is by no means rational in nature, despite consisting of a universe of means and methods "rationally *arrived at*". I have emphasised those last two words, for as we will see later from an examination of his ideas - the domination of such technical means often yields irrational behaviour and irrational outcomes. Though devised with efficiency in mind, efficiency of outcome is not exactly acquired. In addition, for Ellul, 'technique' cannot now be linked with capitalism and in fact it tends to work against it and subsume it within its matrix of influence. Technique has not only dominated the capitalist nations of the world but also that of the various communist states. As we will see later, it is the very nature of 'technique' to seek further efficiency, means of quantification, of systematization and centralization regardless of the underlying economic system or political ideology. In this sense, it is a logic that has penetrated almost every aspect of life and not merely that of the bureaucratic institutions of the capitalist state.

Unlike Weber, Ellul did not believe that industrialised mass societies could ever nurture significant democracy, freedom for the individual or moral principles. Despite his concerns about the 'Iron Cage', Weber was still optimistic and found hope in the development of institutions - both civic and governmental - that were developing and safeguarding the rights of the poor and the rights of workers from the older abuses of the rich and elite classes. Weber was not a romanticist and believed in a progressive future within the general sociological context of his time²⁰. Ellul, though oft accused of being a negativist, pessimist and a neo-primitivist does not take a romanticist stance nor does he idealize the past. Rather, he makes it clear that 'progress' and 'democracy' remained as myths and never became realised, thanks to the new deterministic cage of 'technique':

"I do not maintain that the individual is more determined today than he has been in the past; rather, that he is differently determined. Primitive man, hemmed in by prohibitions, taboos, and rites, was, of course, socially determined. But it is an illusion-unfortunately very widespread-to think that because we have broken through the prohibitions, taboos, and rites that bound primitive man, we have become free. We are conditioned by

²⁰ S.E Kalberg., **The Social Thought of Max Weber (Social Thinkers Series)**, SAGE Publications, 2016, p. 77-79.

something new: technological civilization. I make no reference to a past period of history in which men were allegedly free, happy, and independent. The determinisms of the past no longer concern us; they are finished and done with. If I do refer to the past, it is only to emphasize that present determinants did not exist in the past, and men did not have to grapple with them then. The men of classical antiquity could not have found a solution to our present determinisms, and it is useless to look into the works of Plato or Aristotle for an answer to the problem of freedom”²¹

Writing in his 1941 article “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology”, Herbert Marcuse uses similar language to Ellul with respect to the influence of technique (though to be strict, Marcuse uses the term “technics” and “technology” which is not the same as Ellul’s concept). Still, when he talks about technological efficiency and its comprehensive impact it does have parallels with Ellul’s. However, unlike Ellul, Marcuse seems to avoid making a dialectic separation or tension between man and the machine/machine-based thinking. For Marcuse, technique and the individual cannot be separated:-

“We do not ask for the influence or effect of technology on the human individuals. For they are themselves an integral part and factor of technology, not only as the men who invent or attend to machinery but also as the social groups which direct its application and utilization.”²²

Here he is also differing from the viewpoint of Ellul when he states that men “direct” the application and utilization of technology and its techniques. For Ellul, this is only partly true because for him technique and its related technology also has its own agenda and power in terms of its dialectical relationship to man. Marcuse talks about the rise of “technological rationality” which started to override the former idea of individualistic, humanistic rationality based on a persons’ rational self-interest. The rise of the machine and forces of “rationalization” resulted in the downfall of the former “free economic subject”. Marcuse seems to argue that the very logic

²¹ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Society**, Vintage, 1964, XXIX.

²² Herbert Marcuse, "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology," **The Essential Frankfurt School Reader**, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, 1982, p.138.

of competition at the heart of capitalism ultimately results in the rise of technology and its dominion of rational systematization of all things²³. This is not what Ellul argues in his thesis, however, and he instead states that it is not fully clear how “technique” became a dominant sociological phenomenon. He does, as we shall see later, posit several suggestions for its emergence and capitalistic competition is not considered by him as the most influential. Indeed, Ellul states that technique subjects capitalistic free enterprise to its own aims and thus limits its power and significance in shaping the world²⁴.

Marcuse, on the other hand, states that industrial capitalism had implications even for the way people organised in order to oppose it and challenge it. This is because of the way that such a system impacted people psychologically:

“Its tendency to assimilate itself to the organizational and psychological pattern of the apparatus caused a change in the very structure of the social opposition in Europe. The critical rationality of its aims was subordinated to the technological rationality of its organization and thereby "purged" of the elements which transcended the established pattern of thought and action. This process was the apparently inevitable result of the growth of large-scale industry and of its army of dependents. The latter could hope effectively to assert their interests only if these were effectively coordinated in large-scale organizations. The oppositional groups were being transformed into mass parties, and their leadership into mass bureaucracies. This transformation, however, far from dissolving the structure of individualistic society into a new system, sustained and strengthened its basic tendencies.”²⁵

Interestingly Marcuse claims that though these industrial technological forces end up creating what some would term “mass man” and large systematically organised parties – they were not social or mass forces but instead reflected individualism. Ellul however, would find such

²³ J.V. Oca, “Technology, Technological Domination, and the Great Refusal: Marcuse’s Critique of the Advanced Industrial Society”, *Kritike*, Vol. 4, Iss. 1, 2010, p.54-57.

²⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, Vintage, 1964, p.153-58.

²⁵ Herbert Marcuse, "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, 1982, p.145.

definitions of individualism and 'community' to be incoherent and problematic. Marcuse claims that it is 'society' that places 'restraint' upon the individuals' selfish desires for competitive gain whereas Ellul's notion of the individual is more based on theological definitions. The society can, if not guided by Biblical principles, end up promoting immoral individual and collective behaviour. Society also tends to constrain or 'determine' peoples' choices and thoughts and actions and thus can pose a challenge to individual 'freedom', which Ellul always sees as dialectically in a relationship with Necessity. Technology or a society governed by technological rationality thus restricts an individual persons' freedom to live a truly authentic life as God intended. On the other hand, Marcuse thinks that "technics" is not a force unto itself and in fact has the potential of liberating man and increasing democracy and freedom. He claims that the social apparatus dictates its implementation and thus implies that technical methods and technology are in fact neutral:

"Technics hampers individual development only insofar as they are tied to a social apparatus which perpetuates scarcity, and this same apparatus has released forces which may shatter the special historical form in which technics is utilized. For this reason, all programs of an anti-technological character, all propaganda for an anti-industrial revolution" serve only those who regard human needs as a by-product of the utilization of technics. The enemies of technics readily join forces with a terroristic technocracy: The philosophy of the simple life, the struggle against big cities and their culture frequently serves to teach men distrust of the potential instruments that could liberate them. We have pointed to the possible democratization of functions which technics may promote and which may facilitate complete human development in all branches of work and administration. Moreover, mechanization and standardization may one day help to shift the center of gravity from the necessities of material production to the arena of free human realization. The less individuality is required to assert itself in standardized social performances, the more it could retreat to a free "natural" ground. These tendencies, far from engendering collectivism, may lead to new forms of individualization."²⁶

²⁶ Ibid p.152.

This is in contrast to Ellul who deems that technique has grown so pervasive that it has become a civilization in itself and that it constrains, limits and determines the behaviour and actions of man in all modern societies, whether capitalist or communist. For Ellul, man can never escape the dialectical tension between freedom and various deterministic forces of necessity and any act of freedom is something that has to continually be fought for and is never a finality:

“As a matter of fact, reality is itself a combination of determinisms, and freedom consists in overcoming and transcending these determinisms. Freedom is completely without meaning unless it is related to necessity, unless it represents victory over necessity.... We must not think of the problem in terms of a choice between being determined, but that it is open to him to overcome necessity, and that this act is freedom. Freedom is not static but dynamic; not a vested interest, but a prize continually to be won. The moment man stops and resigns himself, he becomes subject to determinism. He is most enslaved when he thinks he is comfortably settled in freedom.”²⁷

This thinking is in contrast to Marcuse who seems to claim that technics and technology can allow man to “triumph” over the forces of scarcity and various hardships so that he can reach an ideal state of “free human realization”. For Ellul, this is impossible and represents a false and dangerous utopia.

Lewis Mumford, writing in his work “Technics and Civilization”, uses the word “technics” rather than “technique” and the former comprises a broader range of phenomena. For Mumford, “technics” is not only rational, efficient systematic practices but also the artistic endeavours of a society. Technics constitutes both the habits and desires and goals of the society and its technical and industrial practices. In addition, Mumford divides “technics” into two types, one of which he deems overall to have a positive impact on humanity whereas the other tends towards the negative and destructive. The former is what Mumford calls ‘polytechnics’ which comprises a range of technical solutions that are implemented in human societies and comprise a holistic approach to dealing with problems. The latter is what he terms ‘monotechnics’ which is essentially an imposition of the most efficient technical means in organizing society. At first

²⁷ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Society**, Vintage, 1964, XXXii.

glance this appears to be similar to Ellul's definition of "technique", i.e. as rational efficiency involved in all methods of human action. However it seems that there are notable differences.

While Mumford does imply that monotechnics are an imposition of the "one best way" (to quote Ellul's words) onto the ways and means of society, his definition is more complex than Ellul's. For example, in his "The Pentagon of Power" he states that monotechnics derive from factors such as power, production, profit, prestige and property. These five things constitute the "pentagon of power" as Mumford deems it.²⁸ These five aspects seem to comprise an economic dimension to technics which seems less clearly stated in Ellul's definition. Ellul's definition seems more broad ranging as it specifically says "in every sphere of human activity". Mumford also talks about "monotechnics" as being a "machine" focussed form of organising society with humans being forced to act within the logic of the machine. At first glance this seems similar to what Ellul is saying with respect to the way "technique" makes people behave like machines. Yet, we shall soon see that there are differences between Ellul and Mumford's placing of the "machine" in terms of intellectual or philosophical influence.

As far as Mumford's definition of "polytechnics" is concerned, it also seems to initially correspond to Ellul's dialectical pole of 'freedom' with respect to 'technique'. But a closer look shows that this is not in fact the case. Unlike Mumford, Ellul is critical of systematic technically-efficient ways of attempting to solve all problems, and he is deeply critical of power or the concentration of power. Ellul is also deeply critical of the modern city and of the city in general, deeming it as a theological as well as a sociological construct that signifies both rebellion and alienation from God. Unlike Mumford, Ellul does not see "polytechnics" as a solution to the problem of "technique" and in fact might have criticized it as being a form of technique in disguise. Mumford's "polytechnics" proposes a variety of technical and aesthetic approaches towards organizing human society with one example being the diverse usage of transport as opposed to one monolithic "mono-technic" road network designed for cars. Cities should employ a diversity of local methods rather than submit to the hegemony of one dominating technical apparatus, according to Mumford. Thus he seems to say that polytechnics is more organic, a less

²⁸ E Mendelsohn. (1994) "The Politics of Pessimism: Science and Technology Circa 1968". In: Ezrahi Y., Mendelsohn E., Segal H. (eds) *Technology, Pessimism, and Postmodernism*. **Sociology of the Sciences**, vol 17, 1994 Springer, Dordrecht.

machine-like way of organising society than monotronics and that it has historical precedent.²⁹ Ellul on the other hand, does not appear to advocate more technical solutions to the current problems created by technique. For him, the problem of technique (as we shall see later) is a deeper sociological issue and it tends to run counter to human spontaneity, authentic personal relations and community, improvisation in the moment, and a religiously centred life. Technique is not simply technology, it is the imposition of rational order, of efficient organization and systematic ways and methods of doing things onto all human activities. Spontaneity, freedom, and tradition are all sacrificed to efficient rational systems, even if they be 'polytechnic' in nature.

As far as history is concerned, Mumford has stated that it was Europe and Europe alone that utilised technology not as simply useful tools and techniques but as the dictating force behind social and individual behaviour and organisation. Many other civilizations centuries prior to the Industrial Revolution developed a range of technologies that later formed key components of latter technologies adopted by the West. However, unlike Europe, these civilizations did not assemble all these various technical means into a unified force that would impact on the very nature and rhythm of life. It was only Europe that would develop what Mumford terms "the machine".³⁰ Yet Mumford seems to imply that the very development and proliferation of the industrial technique itself results in society being controlled by its systematic machine-methods. Methods that are dominant over other traditional means whether they guided by local wisdom, spontaneity, improvised creativity, and so forth. Ellul interestingly sees Mumford's thesis as very superficial, writing that:

"Mumford's thesis is incomprehensible unless technique is restricted to the machine; Mumford actually makes this identification. His distinction is then valid as a plan for the historical study of machines, but it is totally invalid for the study of technical civilization. When technical civilization is considered as a whole, this classification and explanation are shockingly summary

²⁹ S. Stoll, **Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America**, Hill and Wang, 2002, p.210-11.

³⁰ P. Critchley, 2012. "Lewis Mumford and the Moral Architectonics of Ecological Civilisation" [e-book] Available through ResearchGate website <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Peter_Critchley/publications>

and superficial.”³¹

Ellul finds that the development of new industrial techniques and forms of energy cannot alone explain how “technique” came to organise human life on such a penetrative socio-cultural level. He does posit his own theories namely mentioning the emergence of the French state following the French Revolution and the influence of Napoleon. The systematization and unification of all things into that which most efficiently serves the new state is something that the mere existence of machines in the economic sphere cannot alone explain. One example being the standardization and new efficient codification of law in the emerging modern French state. This represents a rational “technique” that erodes local forms of custom that are inefficient with respect to the new systematized rational “machine” of government. The development of rational systematic techniques in areas of intellectual study - even that of humanities subjects such as history and psychology, need a different explanation according to Ellul. He goes onto state:

“In fact, the Widespread mechanical development, spurred by the exploitation of energy, came after most of these other techniques. It would almost seem that the order was reversed, that the appearance of these other techniques was necessary to the evolution of the machine-which certainly had no greater influence on society than, say, the organization of the police. The revolution resulted not from the exploitation of coal but rather from a change of attitude on the part of the whole civilization.”³²

Ellul goes onto give a historical analysis of the various potential processes and events that contributed to such a change of attitude, something which we will revisit again later. I have simply mentioned this here to show the difference between Ellul’s perspective of “technique” and the concept of Mumford’s “technics”. Unlike Ellul, however, Mumford believes that “technics” is not outside the control of human beings and that it can be fully subdued to human ends. While Ellul states that human decisions laid the groundwork towards the development of a dominant technological or ‘machine-like’ ordering of life it soon reached the stage that the forces unleashed became too powerful for the genie to be put back into the box. Unforeseen

³¹ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Society**, Vintage, 1964, p.42.

³² Ibid p.44.

consequences resulted from the proliferation of technical methods which in turn required suitable technologies and their development. “Technique” has become outside of any person or institutions’ ability to guide or control in any predictable way. Yet, Mumford is more optimistic. He is perhaps not as utopian as Marcuse in such an approach, but regardless he clearly does not see an Ellulian dialectical struggle between the rational order of technique and the individual:

“No matter how completely technics relies upon the objective procedures of the sciences, it does not form an independent system, like the universe: it exists as an element in human culture and it promises well or ill as the social groups that exploit it promise well or ill. The machine itself makes no demands and holds out no promises: it is the human spirit that makes demands and keeps promises. In order to reconquer the machine and subdue it to human purposes, one must first understand it and assimilate it.”³³

In contrast, Ellul sees this as naive thinking which ignores the history of the development of techniques. Such history did not reflect simply the will to do “well or ill” but merely the will to increase efficiency and the means to have more rationally-derived power over life in general. Techniques and technology are by nature volatile with respect to outcomes arising from their development and proliferation:

“In demagogic formulations, techniques of peace must be developed and techniques of war rejected. In a less simple-minded version, it is held that means ought to be sought which palliate, without increasing the drawbacks of technique. Could not atomic engines and atomic power have been discovered without creating the bomb? To reason this is to separate technical elements with no justification. Techniques of peace and alongside them other and different techniques of war simply do not exist, despite what good folk think to the contrary.”³⁴

For Ellul, technique is a sociological phenomenon and does not exist as a universal intellectual or ideological phenomenon. Whether technique has always historically been free of conscious intellectual drivers or ideologies, is not made clear by Ellul. At the same time, Ellul states that modern sociological reality has been fashioned and shaped by forces of technique to such an

³³ Lewis Mumford, **Technics and Civilization**, Mariner Books, 1963, p.6.

³⁴ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Society**, Vintage, 1964, p.98.

extent, that it is useless to try and control the entire ensemble of means that technique is constituted of:

“Man, practically speaking, no longer possesses any means of bringing action to bear upon technique. He is unable to limit or orient it. The reality is that man no longer has any means with which to subjugate technique, which is not an intellectual, or even, as some would have it, a spiritual phenomenon. It is above all a sociological phenomenon, and in order to cure or change it, one would have to oppose to it checks and barriers of a sociological character. By such means alone man might possibly bring action to bear on it. But everything of a sociological character has had its character changed by technique. There is, therefore, nothing of a sociological character available to restrain technique, because everything in society is its servant.”³⁵

³⁵ Ibid p.306.

CHAPTER TWO

AN EXPLORATION OF 'TECHNIQUE'

In this chapter I will provide an examination of the theoretical dynamics and implications of Ellul's concept in more detail by referencing two of his sociological works on Technique namely "The Technological Society" and "The Technological Bluff". Following this chapter, and through having ascertained the dynamics and characteristics of Technique - I then aim to examine the relevance of 'technique' (as it impacts language and the image) to that of social media technologies and their various uses.

Ellul's Concept of Technique And Its Analysis

I will thus start now with an analysis of Ellul's concept of 'technique' primarily taken from Ellul's first work on the subject, namely his book 'La Technique' (known as 'The Technological Society' in the USA). One of the ways in which Ellul elucidates the multi-faceted and complex nature of the phenomena of 'technique' is through its tendency of imposing on life a form of standardization of means and methods which, while making things more efficient, essentially works against the human subject. It is 'impersonal' and stifling. Ellul quotes Antoine Mas as follows:

"Standardization means resolving in advance all the prob-blems that might possibly impede the functioning of an organization. It is not a matter of leaving it to inspiration, ingenuity, nor even intelligence to find a solution at the moment some difficulty arises; it is rather in some way to anticipate both the difficulty and its resolution. From then on, standardization creates Impersonality, in the sense that organization relies more on methods and instructions than on individuals"³⁶

³⁶ Ibid p.11-12.

In the words chosen for quotation we can see the dialectic nature of the picture of ‘technique’ that Ellul is painting. The qualities of ‘inspiration’, ‘ingenuity’ and ‘intelligence’ are hallmarks of the freedom of the individual to respond in his own way to a situation. It represents the relative aspect of ‘freedom’ as opposed to the counter force of ‘necessity’. Here, the force of standardization (which Ellul states is one of the hallmarks of ‘technique’) stifles the relative individual freedom of personally dealing with problems as they come, and in a unique way. All must be planned and systematized within an overarching framework that derives from rationality. This is also connected with Frederick Taylor’s system of “scientific management” which played a part in transforming industrial working practices in the USA at the end of the 19th century and soon spread elsewhere³⁷. Ellul summarizes the impact of such a technocratic methodology in a cogent way, showing that the imperative for more efficiency makes people like cogs in a rigid and impersonal machine. This machine way of thinking basically ensures that everybody conforms to the “the one best way” [as Ellul puts it elsewhere in his book] and thus personal faculties or ingenuity are less important than the time-imperative of getting things done with as minimum energy and time-cost as possible.

The bulldozing of “tradition” by the forces of rational efficiency is inevitable as far as Ellul is concerned. In his idea, the process of “technique” is both self-augmenting and rapid and thus operates and expands too quickly and widely [in its complexity] for people to respond to it and truly understand its implications and dynamics. For Technique “engenders itself” as the technical complex associated with it grows geometrically over time. It also grows and develops generally independent of other human influences or factors³⁸. At the same time, the idea of ‘technique’ may well be compatible with the idea of “cultural imperialism” which is propagated as a concept by contemporary cultural theorists. For example, the Finnish anthropologist Matti Sarmela chooses to mention among the components of this “imperialism” the ones that feature “the ideology of total efficiency”, “the cult of modernism”, “the ideology of productivity”, “the ideology of the supranational”, “the mechanistic system of knowledge and causal relations”, “group-centricity” and “the opinion industry”.³⁹ Whether “cultural imperialism” is a more

³⁷ Heames, J.T. & Breland, J.W. (2010). Management Pioneer Contributors: 30-Year Review. *Journal of Management History*, 16(4): 427-436.

³⁸ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Society**, Vintage, 1964, p.87-9.

³⁹ Matti Sarmela, “What is Cultural Imperialism?” In Carola Sandbacka (ed.), “Cultural Imperialism and Cultural Identity”, **Transactions of the Finnish Anthropological Society**, 2, Helsinki 1977, 13-36

opposite and comprehensive theory than Ellul's "technique" is worthy of analysis. Perhaps it is "technique" which immediately defines the nature of such "imperialism" and it seems that Ellul regards the forces behind such rational-efficiency as almost independent of human agency, as opposed to some directly calculated force that is just imposed by the "West". For Ellul, technique is a 'civilization in itself'⁴⁰, it transcends the mere idea of cultural imperialism and works independently even of the intentions and plans of governments and elites. This is not to say that Ellul denies the existence of powerful classes of elites within our technique-dominated world. He does talk about an 'aristocracy of technicians'⁴¹ but also states (elsewhere) that ultimately even they are not solely in control of the hugely complex edifice that they help to sustain. No particular class of people have any responsibility given the vast system of inter-dependencies and specializations. We are thus all responsible (and must be held responsible) for the perpetuation and continual feedback of the system, and of the impact it has on traditional ways of doing and being⁴².

Ellul writes:

"It is less and less exact to maintain that the user [of the machine] remains for very long in possession of a technique the results of which he can predict; constant invention ceaselessly upsets his habits."⁴³

This constant "upsetting of habits" by the forces of invention results from the "geometric" rate of progression of the force of technique. This in turn creates an "ensemble" which is analogous to a machine of varying parts and dependencies and which are often vulnerable to replacement. Changes also impact the society at multiple levels and this impact is currently labelled as "disruptive technology". Consider this report, as an example:-

"Disruptive technologies: Advances that will transform life, business, and the global economy, a report from the McKinsey Global Institute, cuts through the noise and identifies 12 technologies

⁴⁰ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Society**, Vintage, 1964, p.126

⁴¹ Ibid p.162

⁴² Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Bluff**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990, p.300-1

⁴³ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Society**, Vintage, 1964, p.14

that could drive truly massive economic transformations and disruptions in the coming years. The report also looks at exactly how these technologies could change our world, as well as their benefits and challenges, and offers guidelines to help leaders from businesses and other institutions respond."⁴⁴

Interestingly, in none of these reports are there any notions that such “disruption” should be strongly questioned. It is true that disadvantages are acknowledged but they are rather treated as ‘challenges’ to be overcome. According to this attitude, “progress”, though disruptive, is always apparently better than what came before. And this is what Ellul states in his work that it is “technique” after all - which does not tolerate any criticisms directed toward it.⁴⁵ The sociological reasons for such lack of criticism would be worth looking into further. The acceptance of rapid technological change simply as an inevitability, of innovation as something that will happen regardless of what we might wish - is a dominant worldview in our technique-governed civilizational spaces. Ellul will later state, as we shall see, that this blind acceptance was not a given in earlier periods of European history.

Ellul writes of technique as a concept that thrives in a universe of quantification. Problems and phenomena are made meaningful and important only if they can be quantified in some way. Technique and the primacy of the quantitative above the qualitative may have its philosophical roots in the so-called “Scientific Revolution” of the seventeenth century which may have been the foundation for latter industrial and bureaucratic revolutions that typified the totalising forces of modernity. Ellul disputes whether there can be a clear origin or understanding of why or how ‘technique’ came to dominate the way society became organised. He is skeptical that it can be reduced to forces of capitalism or that of the latter advent of industrial machines. He does seem to state however, that the centralizing mentality of French society following the French Revolution arose from a series of attitudes that replaced a former societal configuration where ‘technique’ was impaired by numerous religiously-imposed and locally-adhered taboos and

⁴⁴ Manyika J et al, “Disruptive Technologies: Advances that will transform life, business, and the global economy”, **McKinsey Global Institute**, May, 2013. Retrieved from <<https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/digital-mckinsey/our-insights/disruptive-technologies>>

⁴⁵ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Bluff**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990, p.145.

customs. Though Ellul by no means states that the socio-political example in France represents as a source of the development of Technique.⁴⁶

Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes in his book *Knowledge and the Sacred* that this was inherently a secular force in the deepest sense as it wiped the sacred connection and meaning inherent from an authentic relationship with the surrounding human and natural universe. Reductionism however, reduces the natural order to a series of merely countable elements and deprives it of its true qualitative telos⁴⁷. In addition to the theme of reductionism, C.F. von Weizsacker, in his book *The History of Nature* - argues that science cannot be a dispassionate endeavor based on curiosity alone. Knowledge for knowledge's sake (which is arguably a characteristic of “technique”) is the reason we fell from the Garden:-

"The scientific and technical world of modern man is the result of his daring enterprise, knowledge without love. Such knowledge itself is neither good nor bad. Its worth depends on what power it serves. Its ideal has been to remain free of any power. Thus it has freed man step by step of all his bonds of instinct and tradition, but has not led him into the new bond of love."⁴⁸

This theological perspective tallies much with that of Ellul who, throughout his works, critiques the nature of human power and he implies that ‘technique’ is a creature born and manifest from that desire for power above all other considerations. Love, for Ellul, represents God and is the dialectic pole of ‘freedom’ which in turn is connected to his theology of ‘hope’. It is knowledge for God’s sake which allows the sincere Christian to begin to set himself free from the universe of technique. This theology however is absent from ‘The Technological Society’ which purely deals with the sociological phenomenon of ‘technique’ as an apparently inevitable and irreparable problem. This is why I again restate that Ellul’s methodology cannot simply be isolated to one or two of his works alone.

Important to Ellul is a seeming dialectic relationship between the ‘ends’ and the ‘means’. Historically speaking we are in a time where the ends are as vague and abstract as ever and are subject to rapidly evolving means. The means are King in the universe of technique:

⁴⁶ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, Vintage, 1964, p.43-9.

⁴⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, State University of New York Press, 1981, p.37.

⁴⁸ C.F. von Weizsacker, *The History Of Nature*, Kessinger Publishing LLC, 2010, p.190.

“Our civilization is first and foremost a civilization of means; in the reality of modern life, the means, it would seem, are more important than the ends. Any other assessment of the situation is mere idealism.”

Here Ellul is saying that it doesn't matter what the end may in fact be. As long as the most efficient, up-to-date and rational means are employed then all the better. So for example, if somebody chooses not to buy a laptop or a mobile phone then one is supposedly deprived of the means of communicating in the most efficient manner possible. The ends are of course a problem regardless of our historical situation, there is always a required end - i.e. the need to communicate. But such technology is not about promoting the essential 'end' of communicating with human beings. Rather it is about making the means of communication most efficient and powerful to a spatial and temporal extent never witnessed before in human history. Though whether such means actually is concerned with the age-old end of true communication, is debatable. Later in my thesis I will assess research and studies that highlight new problems that such means of communication have created. However in our current technological milieu a person without employment of such efficient means would take much longer to accrue knowledge, and contact and communication would be difficult.

Ellul states that since `technique` results in changes in human organization and production it has consequences for all of society. For a large part of Middle Age Europe, Christian institutions regulated the adoption of new techniques in a way that considered their consequences from the point of view of Justice. Just because something is more efficient or more useful or more labour-saving did not make it inherently Just before God. Techniques were only utilised (though cautiously) by such societies only if they followed this Divine criteria in every respect. Thus God is what stood between the cold systemic rationalism of Technique and its domination of human society.⁴⁹

From the sixteenth and eighteenth century, while there were gradual developments in technical areas as well as in science - such things were still far from imposing technique onto thought

⁴⁹ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, Vintage, 1964, p.37

itself. The writing of books by scholars was guided by other, more spontaneous, more personal and subjective matters. Ellul states that books of “law, economy, medicine, or history” published in this era were not written in the sort of logically ordered, appropriately sourced and systematically coherent manner that modern treatises follow. Ellul writes that “Purely personal reflection and private experience form the foundations of these books; in no sense do they represent an effort at common inquiry, reciprocal control, or search for the best method, all of which are indispensable for *technique*”. The idea of the author distancing himself from his work through an attempt of following a systematic and progressive method is a fairly new phenomena in the world. The idea of having to cite and reference every statement that is not directly or originally conceived by one's own mind is of course alien to such scholars of that period. A work of science would often include frequent digressions and tangents into other subjects, often interrupting the main treatise to a considerable degree. Ellul states that for such scholars the aim was a form of ‘universalism’ rather than specialization of expertise as we see in later periods and today. For the philosophy was about synthesis and as Ellul says “Every author sought to put his whole self into his work, even in the case of a technical book. Not the subject but the author dominated the work : this tendency itself is contrary to *technical inquiry*.”

The idea of writing books for people to use as a source of reference and to peruse as a means of searching for facts was apparently alien to pre-modern scholars. Books and treatises were not about the efficient acquisition of information but were instead designed to be “read patiently in their entirety and to be meditated upon”.⁵⁰ Ellul states that crucial for the development of technique was the demolition of traditional social institutions such as the family and the guilds and this culminated in its fullest extent in the 19th century with the uprooting of people from their surroundings and the development of industrial cities with an increasingly atomized social fabric. Thus it is such ‘social plasticity’ that leads to the government and the state gaining in influence to fill the power vacuum left by the decline of the traditional social groups. The government then becomes a key means of rationally and systematically organizing society with all former taboos and parochial attitudes eroded.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ibid p.40.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.51.

An important aspect of technique is its tendency to prioritize standardization of efficient methods as much as possible, and this leads to an instrumentalism that devalues human ingenuity and individual skill. Since rationally efficient systems (such as the assembly line, for instance) are about incorporating human behaviour into the logic and rhythm of the ‘machine’, then humans become secondary to both the physical and organizational tools that exploit them. But prior to this the human being was more important than the tools or techniques that he used. Apparent difficulties and inefficiencies were not simply overcome by inventing a new scientific protocol or a new technical invention. Rather, the ingenuity, skill and creativity of each individual craftsman dealt with challenges as they came and through their own initiative, often passing down the technique to others in the locality, but never in a way that resulted in an “industry standard” or method to be imposed on all. The efficiency of dealing with such problems would thus vary from individual to individual; and with time not being a pressing factor in production such efficiency would vary from region to region. And so the “one best way” had not yet impinged its hegemony onto economic life at large.⁵²

Ellul states that for much of the Middle Ages, technique was very much a creature of the culture in which it manifested. Unlike today, where similar techniques span different nations across the globe, the techniques of the past were an expression of the culture that adopted them and thus could not simply be reduced to tradeable items in a global marketplace. Ideas and ways of doing things were not merely taken from one culture and applied to another unless the respective cultures were in the same stage of development or of the same civilizational “type”. Furthermore, whether a new technique was efficient was not the primary factor deciding its adoption and incorporation into various human spheres. This is very much unlike today, according to Ellul.⁵³

What we can see thus far is a picture of technique as a force fundamentally working against the power and freedom of the individual. We can perhaps see now how this relates to Ellul’s philosophical attraction to the ‘personalism’ movement of the 1930s as that was a reaction to seemingly vast, cold, and totalizing impersonal forces creating upheavals on a global scale. When writing *The Technological Society* in the 1950s, Ellul reached the conclusion that in the

⁵² Ibid. p67.

⁵³ Ibid p.69.

world of science the role of individuals (e.g. Isaac Newton) were far less important for pushing advances than the role of tiny amendments, sometimes accidental and often routine, made by countless scientists and technicians acting as highly specialised cogs in a massive technical complex. The system has become far too great for any single individual to transform significantly. As Ellul boldly states, “It is no longer the man of genius who discovers something”. What matters more are minds who can act efficiently within their own place in the grand ensemble.⁵⁴

Another important factor concerning technique is that of self-augmentation. Put simply, once a new technique becomes manifest it results in a whole array of implications for many areas. For example, the internal-combustion engine led to a whole variety of technical uses and methods that have had very considerable social, economic, political and cultural consequences. Not only physical techniques but also mathematical and computational system inventions originally meant for planning military activities have ended up being implemented in many areas of the private sector. One of these is called “Operational Research” (OR) which was originally used for the British Radar defense systems in the 2nd World War. One of the pioneers of it defined OR as “the application of scientific methods, techniques and tools to problems involving the operations of a system so as to provide those in control of the system with optimum solutions to problems”. This system of techniques is designed to assist a human being in making “good decisions”.⁵⁵⁵⁶ Thus if the military can benefit from these efficient rational standardized ways of making decisions then why not other areas? While this seems a trait of the self-engendering nature of technique, it may more likely be down to human decisions that intentionally decide to implement the possible consequences of techniques that occur in certain fields. In simpler terms, “if it can be done here, why not implement it over there?”.

Ellul does use somewhat technologically determinist language when stating that “technique engenders itself”. He is obviously not alone in this regard. Martin Heidegger argued that technological forces had triumphed over the individual human will and that no longer is it

⁵⁴ Ibid p.86.

⁵⁵ Ibid p.87.

⁵⁶ Harold B. Maynard, Maynard's Industrial Engineering Handbook, 5th Edition, McGraw-Hill Education, 2001, pp. 11.27-11.44.

possible for us to make impactful decisions over the course of its development. Instead, the sheer pace of development will cause man to be encircled by technological forces⁵⁷. Of course, Heidegger does not use the word ‘technique’ as a means of distinguishing technology from the ideology of rationally efficient systematization of all life, as Ellul does. Though the contemporary technology writer Kevin Kelly in his book *What Technology Wants* includes “ideas” along with machines and tools in a grand complex that he calls the ‘technium’. Though he does not think that this system has gained full autonomy, he does seem to be saying that humans are no longer under full control of it. Fascinatingly he sees humanity giving birth to a former child that is reaching adolescence, writing that “We worry, like all parents, particularly as the technium’s power and independence increase”.⁵⁸ In light of all this seeming determinism, it might be worth bringing in another perspective tied to moral philosophy. The idea is that humans, because they are subject to the ‘Fall’, often give in to the temptation of power and the maximizing of power over the real world and making it more amenable to quick and efficient results. A philosophical perspective of this can be found in the letters of the author and novelist J.R.R Tolkien who wrote of the ideology of the “machine” in theological terms:

“Anyway all this stuff is mainly concerned with Fall, Mortality, and the Machine. With Fall inevitably, and that motive occurs in several modes. With Mortality, especially as it affects art and the creative (or as I should say, sub-creative) desire which seems to have no biological function, and to be apart from the satisfactions of plain ordinary biological life, with which, in our world, it is indeed usually at strife. This desire is at once wedded to a passionate love of the real primary world, and hence filled with the sense of mortality, and yet unsatisfied by it. It has various opportunities of ‘Fall’. It may become possessive, clinging to the things made as ‘its own’, the sub-creator wishes to be the Lord and God of his private creation. He will rebel against the laws of the Creator – especially against mortality. Both of these (alone or together) will lead to the desire for Power, for making the will more quickly effective, – and so to the Machine (or Magic). By the last I intend all use of external plans or devices (apparatus) instead of development of the inherent inner powers or talents – or even the use of these talents with the corrupted motive of dominating: bulldozing the real world, or coercing other wills. The Machine

⁵⁷ Martin Heidegger, **Philosophical and Political Writings**, edited by Manfred Stassen, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003, p.92

⁵⁸ Kevin Kelly, **What Technology Wants**, Viking, 2010, p.186

is our more obvious modern form though more closely related to Magic than is usually recognised.”⁵⁹

The Dialectical Problem Of ‘Freedom’ of ‘The Word’ and ‘Being Determined’

Though Ellul did not involve any theological perspective in *The Technological Society* he did offer a theological dialectic counterpoint in his work *The Meaning of the City*. His theology of ‘hope’ and ‘freedom’ offers a contextualisation and antidote to the inevitable despair of technological determinism that may be garnered from only reading his sociological work on technique (whilst ignoring his theological insights on it). Though his theological perspectives are beyond the scope of this thesis, it is still important to bring them into consideration. In *The Technological Society*, Ellul generally avoids defining what ‘freedom’ is (i.e. as the freedom in Christ in his counterpoint work) but instead he seems to define freedom throughout the work as all that is *not* technique, in terms of characteristics. It is only in the Foreword that Ellul gives an explicit description of that ‘freedom’ which he often mentions in opposition to technique:

“In my conception, freedom is not an immutable fact graven in nature and on the heart of man. It is not inherent in man or in society, and it is meaningless to write it into law. The mathematical, physical, biological, sociological, and psychological sciences reveal nothing but necessities and determinisms on all sides. As a matter of fact, reality is itself a combination of determinisms, and freedom consists in overcoming and transcending these determinisms. Freedom is completely without meaning unless it is related to necessity, unless it represents victory over necessity. To say that freedom is graven in the nature of man, is to say that man is free because he obeys his nature, or, to put it another way, because he is conditioned by his nature. This is nonsense. We must not think of the problem in terms of a choice between being determined and being free. We must look at it dialectically, and say that man is indeed determined, but that it is open to him to overcome necessity, and that this act is freedom. Freedom is not static but dynamic; not a vested interest, but a prize continually to be won. The moment man stops and resigns himself, he

⁵⁹ J.R.R Tolkien, "Letter 131 to Milton Waldman (~1951)", Retrieved from <<http://www.tolkienestate.com/en/writing/letters/letter-milton-waldman.html>>, 12 Şubat 2018

becomes subject to determinism. He is most enslaved when he thinks he is comfortably settled in freedom.”⁶⁰

So freedom is a dialectical concept that can only exist conceptually if in constant tension with the default state of affairs for man, which is ‘necessity’ and the fact of being ‘determined’. It is a continual battle and there is no apparent victory that lasts. It seems that, at least philosophically speaking, Ellul defines freedom as even constituting people who, while being determined, at least consciously know that they are determined and try to do something about it. This, to me, doesn’t resolve the issue of technological determinism and the problem of ‘responsibility’. Ellul states that simply being aware of the extent of techniques’ impact on oneself counts as both an act of responsibility and freedom. It is at least a conscious step towards those two realities. However, in the meantime the technical system continues to act as a ‘civilization in itself’ and ‘engenders itself’ perhaps as a result of sheer inertia and momentum. Or perhaps as a result of the possibility, as Tolkien alluded to, that forces of human desire have been unleashed that are very difficult to now resist. Technology and the techniques behind it are even equated to ‘magic’ by Tolkien, and the sociologist Richard Stivers picks up this idea and runs with it in his book ‘Technology As Magic’. In it, he argues that techniques and means have become so dominant over human life that they have acquired a seemingly sacred and ritualistic force that serve primitive needs that were once met by pre modern rituals:

“Magic begins historically in the attempt to influence nature, which was experienced as sacred. How can we harness the power of nature, to make it work for us? In prehistoric times humans participated with the rest of nature in the re-creation or renewal of nature. Magic represented an attempt to persuade nature to act in the best interest of human beings. Today, however, technology is perceived to be a force greater than that of nature, for it is successfully used to exploit the resources of nature and to recreate nature. If the sacred was ultimately that which is experienced as absolutely powerful, then it was inevitable that technology would replace nature as the object of tacit veneration. There is a world of difference between nature and technology, however, for the latter is our own creation. To harness the sacred power of technology means to extend its reach over all of life; nothing can be excluded. But not all of human existence is so

⁶⁰ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Society**, Vintage, 1964, XXXIII.

readily subject to technology.”⁶¹

At the heart of Stivers’ thesis is that humans have come to adopt an irrational belief in the rationally efficient ability of technique to have all problems “engineered out of existence”. It is thus a form of magical thinking and faith in technical methods and means to surmount problems that face us. Like nature, our technological society is so vast, complex and influential that it overwhelms us and contains us. It gives us what is beneficial, just as it gives us what is harmful. Thus like the denizens of the “milieu of nature” (as Ellul puts it) who used ‘magic’ to try to appease nature, we in the ‘milieu of technology’ use techniques as a magical means to get the ambivalent force of technique to work for us⁶². But this is apparently mere irrational faith in forces that are indifferent to us. So despite the fact that technology created many new problems (such as pollution, overcrowding, etc) we somehow have faith in this same technical rationalism to solve such problems. Thus we think that the same logic that solved complex problems in the world of science and industry can be applied to areas such as psychology, the organisation of economic life, and so on. Yet, by apparently solving these problems we in turn create a whole host of new problems given the very complex and unpredictable forces of technique. Writing in his final treatise on technique, *The Technological Bluff*, Ellul cogently makes four propositions about technical progress that paint a terrifying fatalistic picture. Indeed, it is at the outset the very antithesis of ‘freedom’:

“First, all technical progress has its price.

Second, at each stage it raises more and greater problems than it solves.

Third, its harmful effects are inseparable from its beneficial effects.

Fourth, it has a great number of unforeseen effects.”⁶³

There are also, of course political consequences that arise from apparent technical improvements to areas deemed by many lay people to be apparently politically neutral. Ellul gives an example:

⁶¹ Richard Stivers, *Technology As Magic*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2001, p.2.

⁶² *Ibid.* p.41.

⁶³ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990, p.39.

“the new techniques of soil cultivation presuppose more and more powerful state control, with its police power, its ideology, and its propaganda machinery. This is the price we must pay.”⁶⁴

It is a world of statistics and quantification of society and individuals that does not simply passively quantify or record society, but in fact helps confine it within a mass system of numbers:-

*“But only opposition exists between statistics and organic society: the life of an organic, dialectic society cannot be completely enclosed in a technical operation like statistics. Statistics even implies a mass society.”*⁶⁵

We have encased ourselves within a world of numbers of increasing efficiency and standardization - e.g. of measurement of weights and currencies, of body-measurement indices, of PIN numbers, intelligence quotients, calorie counts, and so on. Ellul argues that this is a symptom of “social plasticity” that works against former societal trends of strong centred institutions such as family, the Church, guilds, and so forth. Thus with the weakening of institutions, taboos and customs that anchor individuals to their local milieu there is nothing left to resist the power of technique to move and manipulate human beings as if they were cogs in a giant machine. In light of this, we come again to the dialectic between freedom and determinism. Where is our freedom to act in response to the unwieldy and unforeseen forces of the technical edifice we have wrought? Yet we, according to Ellul, still have a choice in such matters. We can decide to take seriously and be influenced by scientific methods irrationally applied to psychology, management, politics and public communication; or we can reject them and expose such false faith in mechanistic solutions and depictions of human society. But such rejection cannot take us completely out of our technological milieu. It thus exists in a form of dialectic tension and opposition (through acts of conscience) that must always take place to retain and renew one's' humanity. Thus it might be interpreted as an act of continual negation (of technique) and affirmation (of freedom and the Word).

⁶⁴ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Society**, Vintage, 1964, p.107.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.206-7.

Language In The Analysis Of Technique

In *The Humiliation Of The Word*, Ellul produces a rare example of both theological discussion and sociological analysis contained within one book. His central thesis is that Technique (in the form of images and their hegemony) has devalued the former prominence and position of "the Word" and rendered it as a mere tool for an efficient world dominated by technical and rational imperatives. I will refrain from summarising his theological ideas, but clearly "the Word" for Ellul means both language and communication as well as the theological "Word" (or Logos) of Christ. The problem for Ellul is that modern life creates an artificial world of images that surrounds the individual. Why is this a problem? Well, for Ellul there is a dialectic between "reality" and "truth". An image-saturated society is concerned more about situating people in reality, in facts, in materiality rather than in the world of "truth". And it is language or "the word" which governs the world of "truth". This Truth, through the means of language, allows us the freedom to interpret or read reality and ascribe to it meaning and value. But images are also the realm of "necessity" since they reflect aspects of reality (though Ellul later shows that it is wholly artificial reality), and thus if they become dominant in a society then they stifle "freedom" (which is the dialectic opposite of necessity). Language is the means of our "freedom" in transcending that which is mere necessity, mere fact, mere materiality, mere function. We will also come to find out that Ellul says that a society saturated in a world of artificial images also renders the language subordinate to (and thus in service of) the image and hence "the word" loses its power, place and prestige in terms of meaningfully interpreting what is presented as "real" or as "fact".⁶⁶

The place of the image in much of modern society is certainly prominent. We see the images of public advertising and public relations, the dominant presence of images in newspapers and magazines as well as the power of the movie industry and television. All of this is what Ellul would have witnessed whilst writing his work in the late 70's and early 80's. With the advent of the internet and multimedia digital technologies it can be argued that Ellul's thesis of an image-dominated society remains as valid as ever. Yet what is the sociological and psychological effect of such a profusion of images? In his *Humiliation of the Word*, Ellul often writes from a first-

⁶⁶ Jacques Ellul, **The Humiliation Of The Word**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.220.

person phenomenological perspective and does not attempt to assess the impact of images in a purely scientific or empirical manner. He writes that the main result of the proliferation of images is that it prompts emotional reactions and visceral feelings and desires in people more than it does critical reflection, contemplation, or genuine judgement. Since images seem to duplicate aspects of reality, it also seems to immerse the viewer in them to an extent. This, according to Ellul "prevents me from taking my distance. And if I cannot establish a certain distance, I can neither judge nor criticize".⁶⁷

But where is Technique in all this and how is it relevant to images? Well, Ellul explains that the visual world is the realm where Technique manifests itself because it constitutes "the totality of my possible life in a world where I am both master and subject". The visual realm is that which allows the most efficient means of power and action. This is why techniques of selling things, of advertising and persuading people rely on images more than anything else. Science itself "now depends on visual representation" even more than mathematical formulae on paper, according to Ellul.⁶⁸

It is well known that we live in an "information age". Language has been employed and put to use primarily as a means of exchanging this information. For Ellul, however, the exchange of information is only one facet of language. It becomes clear upon reading Ellul's work that he is setting up language and "the word" as the dialectical counterpart to "reality" or the "image". This is not to say that the "word" is better than the image. But that the two are different and represent different roles and have a specific relationship with each other that has become dysfunctional in modern times. For if language becomes mostly about communicating material facts, then it becomes effectively the same as the "image" or at least, subordinate to it. But "facts" and "information" is usually about something or some property which is clear or concrete. Language, for Ellul, is most lofty and most useful when it expresses that which is uncertain, indefinite, ambiguous, rich in meaning, subtle and evocative. It is about the freedom of dialogue and of the creative freedom of weaving sentences formed by ones' subjective experience, wisdom, skill, desire as well as knowledge. Ellul writes:-

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 12.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.11.

"We are in the presence of an infinitely and unexpectedly rich tool, so that the tiniest phrase unleashes an entire polyphonic gamut of meaning. The ambiguity of language, and even its ambivalence and its contradiction, between the moment it is spoken and the moment it is received produce extremely intense activities. Without such activities, we would be ants or bees, and our drama and tragedy would quickly be dried up and empty. Between the moment of speech and the moment of reception are born symbol, metaphor, and analogy."⁶⁹

In contrast to the "image" and the world of "reality" and "necessity" (i.e. Technique), the "truth" and "freedom" of language does not impose itself onto the conscious in any restrictive or obtrusive fashion. Ellul states that language, unlike the image, is not something that "asserts itself on its own" but rather points to something other than itself. One could say that Ellul is arguing that language is fundamentally indicating something other than itself rather than being "self-indicative" like images and the world of visual reality tend to be. But when language becomes subservient to Technique, to brute mechanical power and efficiency then, according to Ellul, it loses its essence and identity. It becomes mere noise. The words that you hear on television or on a public loudspeaker are not actually words or language in the true sense, because "no dialogue is possible".⁷⁰ It is not quite clear what Ellul means about the lack of possible dialogue here, given the fact that dialogue is also not possible when reading a book. Though perhaps one could interpret this by understanding the process of reading a book as unobtrusive because it allows one time to pause and reflect (just as in a real conversation or dialogue). This is not the case when exposed to the public loud speaker, or the live radio-voice or the television. What results when Technique adopts words in this way is that they become a form of surrogate image, and they reduce language "to a useless series of sounds which inspire only reflexes and animal instincts".⁷¹

It is interesting that Ellul regards language and words to be enshrouded with an inherent "mystery". Unlike the efficient imperative of Technique, the "word" is not something that is

⁶⁹ Ibid p.18-19.

⁷⁰ Ibid p.23.

⁷¹ Ibid p.23.

mere information, mere data or mere knowledge. It is an "echo" of the person who is speaking it and it is also a reflection of the limitations of understanding when part of human dialogue. Mystery is something that Technique is not compatible with, because it is beyond the world of pure systematic "means".⁷² Since for Ellul, language (and by extension - 'mystery') is not the same as the world of 'reality' - i.e. that visual realm which "is scientifically measurable and pragmatically modifiable". Whatever mystery may have existed in the phenomenon of reality disappeared with the advent of philosophical materialism, which became simply about concerning itself with discerning quantities and physical processes and with language and words used as mere means to a rationalist view of reality. Words became efficient and were to reflect that which was merely apparent in the visual realm, with minimal embellishment and certainly not concerned with subjectivity. Ellul writes:-

"We think that truth is contained within reality and expressed by it. Nothing more. Moreover, there is nothing left beyond reality any more. Nothing is Other; the Wholly Other no longer exists. Everything is reduced to this verifiable reality which is scientifically measurable and pragmatically modifiable. Praxis becomes the measure of all truth."⁷³

Interestingly Ellul says that the attempt to be objective when writing a treatise, to try to be dispassionate and to distant one's own personality from a piece of study - is essentially an act of mendacity, an act of lying, a fundamental dishonesty. The words that one creates in such an endeavour become divorced from the subject of the person and thus become artificial, contrived and thus nothing more than an object. Ellul says of such tendencies "Since someone has tried to separate it from the person who speaks it, it has lost its relationship with truth and has become a lie".⁷⁴ Such words that are made into impersonal objects are not about an aim to facilitate an understanding of objective meaning or to evoke that which is "Wholly Other". Rather, these words become subject to Technique and become just like images in the sense that their only function is "to make action possible".⁷⁵

⁷² Ibid p.25.

⁷³ Ibid p.27.

⁷⁴ Ibid p.33.

⁷⁵ Ibid p.100.

Ellul states that before the mid 20th century, images used to be subordinate to language in books and even magazines. But from around the 1950's onwards a sea-change took place and it was the image which made language serve its ends.⁷⁶ At almost the exact time in which Ellul was writing this, the American writer and academic Neil Postman argued in a similar fashion in his seminal work "Amusing Ourselves To Death". In this book, Postman argues that the rise of visual media and television has fundamentally changed the structure of discourse because of the inherent "biases" dictated by the dominant visual medium. This medium will favour certain traits, ways of thinking and articulation and comprehension that are very different to a world where print-medium was dominant over that of images. Primarily the print-based medium was about logical and linear sequential thought as opposed to the sense of immediacy of images which, according to Ellul, lock the person in the present tense. The complex language of communication in a text based culture required a citizenry of readers who were familiar with their own past, their history, their language, philosophy as well as forms of rhetoric. But images do not supplement the culture of print, but in fact take over it and become the newly "dominant means for construing, understanding, and testing reality".⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ibid p.116-7.

⁷⁷ Frank W. Elwell, "Neil Postman On Media & Sociocultural Change". Retrieved from <<http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/users/f/felwell/www/Theorists/Essays/Postman2.html>> , 15th March 2018

CHAPTER THREE

TECHNIQUE, SOCIAL MEDIA AND “THE WORD”

Having ascertained the sociological characteristics of Technique and the dialectical problem of ‘freedom’ and ‘being determined’ - I aim to offer an examination of the extent to which social media and internet communication technologies match such characteristics. How do they fit into the problem of ‘freedom’ and ‘determination’ with respect to usage? Through reference to Ellul’s text “The Humiliation Of The Word” I shall look at how Ellul connects the ‘image’ with Technique and also examine the extent to which language and images have become part of the Technique of social media. To examine the relevance of Ellul’s thesis I shall be referring to various studies of social media and critically assessing them through a dialectical Ellulian lens. Prominent within this section are references to two works by Professor Sherry Turkle, namely “Alone Together” and “Reclaiming Conversation”. Through analysis of various case studies, I aim to uncover the extent to which Technique works through the guise of the “freedom” of social media as a form of “necessity” and “determination” of people, making human subjects and their words into efficient technicized objects.

The Origin Of Network Technology And Early Impacts On Language

ARPANET was a late 1960’s technology developed by the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) in order to connect and network together various computers that assisted and were involved with the US military and Pentagon. The aim was to create a network system of computers without a central node vulnerable to attack by the USSR. This was to ensure flexibility and durability through decentralised networking of machines.⁷⁸

ARPA had a policy of “flexibility and academic freedom” which demonstrated that the US government was not simply interested in walling-off these network technologies from other areas

⁷⁸ Richard T. Griffiths, "Chapter Two: From ARPANET to World Wide Web". Retrieved from <<http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/history/ivh/chap2.htm>>, 20th June 2018.

or spheres. Rather, it worked with various academics from different US universities who eventually acquired their own network known as ARPA-INTERNET, which was primarily aimed at developing ideas for future technological capabilities. ARPA thus became divided into MILNET and ARPA-INTERNET in 1983, with the former consisting solely of military planners. With time, the network technology developed by scientists in the US Defense Department was soon available for use by civilians and such usage and adoption by commercial computer companies was encouraged by the government. Though its core architecture was engendered within the sphere of the military-arm of the US government, the internet slowly emerged as a result of an international collaboration between government departments, universities and international research centers. It was not a technology that originated from the world of capitalist enterprise.

Having established this fact, I will now refer to Ellul and his concept of ‘self-augmentation’ with respect to Technique. The internet as we know it was not simply developed as a technology by particular people in the US Defense Department as a result of a particular intention, conspiracy or aim. Rather, it emerged gradually and through a series of steps, circumstances and contexts which included very crucial civilian and student input and experimental development iterations over time. The fundamental “packet-switching” network technology developed in the US military in the 1970s ultimately morphed into the HTTP protocol that is widely used by so many people today.

The consequences of that technological innovation to merely connect together military computers in a decentralised way has somehow led to a world-changing technological phenomena that has impacted so many spheres of life, including of course – language and communication. Ellul, in his “Technological Society” writes of the self-augmenting nature of Technique as an inevitable and necessary process:-

“There is an automatic growth (that is, a growth which is not calculated, desired, or chosen) of everything which concerns technique. This applies even to men. Statistically, the number of scientists and technicians has doubled every decade for a century and a half. Apparently this is a self-generating process : technique engenders itself. When a

new technical form appears, it makes possible and conditions a number of others. To take a plain and elementary example : the internal-combustion engine made possible and conditioned the techniques of the automobile, the submarine, and so on. In the same way, once a technical procedure has been discovered, it is applicable in many fields other than the one for which it was primarily invented. The techniques of "operational research," for example, were devised to help make certain military decisions. But it was immediately noted that they could be applied wherever any decision had to be made."⁷⁹

Thus it is Technique alone, from the Ellulian perspective, that has taken a fairly simple military network technology, developed it and then applied it to civilian domains in a very particular way. In addition to this self-augmenting determinism, another aspect of Technique lies in its possessing unforeseen consequences as a result of the technical means that it develops⁸⁰.

While the internet developed amidst a Cold War context within the US military, it did require collaboration with academics from several universities. The fact that the military did not police the usage of such a technology (perhaps even lacking the means to do so) led to its adoption and development by liberal minded students on university campuses during the 1960s and 1970s. A "culture of individual freedom" predominated in these spaces and the technology was used and developed in order to create "community networks" and a unique culture based around freedom of innovation, experimentation and discovery. The development of the "hacking" community also centred itself around principles based on sharing and co-operation as opposed to closed, proprietary software. Without venturing into the historical details concerning the evolution of the internet, there is an argument that its eventual development was entirely unforeseen since the days of ARPANET. The internet developed into a huge global network system that has been largely open and free from the bureaucratic control of the US government. On this, Manuel Castells writes:

"Without prejudging the effectiveness of these new institutions, the truly surprising accomplishment is that the Internet reached this relative stability in its governance without

⁷⁹ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Society**, Vintage, 1964, p.87

⁸⁰ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Bluff**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990, p.39.

succumbing either to the bureaucracy of the US government or to the chaos of a decentralized structure. That it did not was mainly the accomplishment of these gentlemen of technological innovation: Cerf, Kahn, Postel, Berners-Lee, and many others, who truly sought to maintain the openness of the network for their peers, as a way to learn and share. In this communitarian approach to technology, the meritocratic gentry met the utopian counterculture in the invention of the Internet, and in the preservation of the spirit of freedom that is at its source. The Internet is, above all else, a cultural creation.”⁸¹

From something that was confined within military circles to a technology that became open and “self-evolving”- the Internet’s development certainly lies within the Ellulian conception of unforeseen consequences. It is as if there was no careful human planning or step by step regulation in its eventual development and application. Additionally, and as I shall show later in this thesis, despite the intentions of those behind the “cultural creation” of this network, the Internet later developed into something that is arguably eroding the freedom of the individual human subject. This development of the Internet into a force that works against the freedom of the individual and which makes the individual more “determined” by its Technique – is actually a very recent development. Studies from the mid 90’s up until the millenium showed that the Internet was not having a significant impact on the manner and means of communication conducted by individuals in society. This appears to have confirmed the optimistic idealizations of certain individuals who saw the development of the World Wide Web as something that enhances communication, community, and the means and manifestations of language in general. In other words, Technique would improve and enhance the human subject and thus bring greater freedom and options.

The co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, John Perry Barlow had an almost cyborg-like conception of Technique (in the guise of the Internet) with respect to the human subject; enhancing language and communication between human beings and deepening connections. He expressed this sentiment during a dialogue between himself and a few other technologists and literary critics, published in Harpers Magazine in 1995. Barlow stated that the emergence of the

⁸¹ Manuel Castells, **The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society**, Oxford University Press, 2001, p.17-33

internet was allowing readers and authors to interact with each other in real-time and give feedback to each other in ways that were not possible in the age of print, stating:

"But in order to feel the greatest sense of communication, to realize the most experience, as opposed to information, I want to be able to completely interact with the consciousness that's trying to communicate with mine. Rapidly. And in the sense that we are now creating a space in which the people of the planet can have that kind of communication relationship, I think we're moving away from information - through information, actually - and back towards experience"⁸²

The essayist and literary critic Sven Birkets responded to this by arguing that the fluid, ever-interactive ephemerality of the Internet prevents the writer from committing to a unique style of writing, to limiting himself and practising a form of “self-sublimation into language and expression and style” that aspires permanence in the form of its manifestation on the page. Birkets also stated that the medium of the Internet tends to “flatten” language, to which the technology writer Kevin Kelly rebutted by emphasising that the point of communication on the Internet is not to replicate the printed word but rather to provide “experience” as opposed to simply “data”. Interestingly this emphasis on “experience” by both Kelly and Barlow seems to suggest that the phenomenon of emails and forum posts was something unique and different to both the printed word and the face to face conversation. The rapid sharing and proliferation of conversations and shared thoughts produces a phenomena and an “experience” that implies a kind of reality or at least an alternate type of reality. Ellul’s dialectical perspective might imply that this is the subjection of language to the image, the subjection of Truth (represented by “the word”) to Reality. If we turn words spoken by people into simply that of an “experience” then are we reducing words in terms of their depth and function? Later on this chapter I will explore this philosophical dialectic in more detail.

Despite the skepticism and pessimism of the authors and literary critics involved in the Harpers’ Magazine discussion as cited above, various studies conducted from the year of that discussion (1995 onwards) seem to show a negligent impact on both language and communication resulting from internet usage. In the chapter “Virtual Communities Or Network Society” of his work *The*

⁸² John Perry Barlow, "What are we doing on-line?," **Harper**, August, 1995.

Internet Galaxy, Manuel Castells documents several of these studies. A British Telecom study of domestic users of the Internet conducted in the late 90's found no significant difference between those who used the Internet and non-users in terms of their "social behaviour and everyday life". Interestingly, there was no conflict between the usage of the computer and the usage of the telephone in order to contact friends. In fact, these two mediums tended to "reinforce each other". This finding is interesting because it seems to contrast greatly with some studies and social trends of phone and internet usage that have been conducted more recently. The study found that despite the presence of the Internet, such a technology was not reducing the amount of time in which people socialised with others or read books or engaged in other non-internet media. A study in the US conducted in 2001 looked at various telephone surveys that took place in 1995, 1996, 1997, and the year 2000. The aim of the study was to analyse these surveys and see the extent to which Internet use was connected with "civic involvement" and "social interaction". Interestingly, usage of the Internet was a positive factor towards fostering individual involvement in community and in civil society. Internet usage, rather than impeding social interaction, actually increased its frequency and extent. Though the social network of Internet users was more widely dispersed, this did not impede their level of socialisation. Finally, a survey of 40,000 Internet users in North America carried out in 1998 found a positive impact of e-mailing on other forms of communication (such as the letter, phone call and face-to-face). There was an increase in the extent of all forms of social interaction and communication with friends in particular⁸³.

However, the rise of "Web 2.0" in 2005 has generated a whole host of critiques and concerns by a variety of writers and academics on the multifaceted impact of this new form of Internet. The nature of Web 2.0 that emphasises "interactivity, hyperlinking, searchability and multimedia" as well as syndicated user-generated content has not only changed internet-usage habits, but also arguably fundamentally changed the way human beings behave, communicate and think. It may indeed have created an entirely new form of human subject.⁸⁴

⁸³ Manuel Castells, **The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society**, Oxford University Press, 2001, p.119-22

⁸⁴ Pak-Hang Wong, "From Culture 2.0 to a Network State Of Mind: A Selective History of Web 2.0's Axiologies and a Lesson From It", **tripleC**, 11(1), 2013, 191-206

The Cyborg Self

Before I begin I just want to remind the reader of my discussion of Ellul's dialectical methodology in Chapter One. Ellul adopts the concept of "Freedom" and "Necessity" from Kierkegaard's dialectics albeit, as mentioned, with some differences. In *The Humiliation of the Word* there is a dialectical tension between several concepts such as "Truth" and "Reality" which at first glance seem non-contradictory for the uninitiated reader of Ellul. I will argue that there are important implications for the human subject, the sense of self, the dialectics of freedom and determination (when using these technologies) and the extent of subservience of language to the "technique" of the online world. Ellul's concept of 'technique' can show us the extent to which our language, our discourse and our sense of human subjectivity is significantly subjugated and constrained by the "technique" of social media, email, texting, and similar technologies.

In Chapter 8 of her book "Alone Together", Sherry Turkle gives an account of an interesting experiment that was conducted within the MIT Media Lab in 1996, by several young researchers. They carried small keyboards in their pockets and computers and radio transmitters in their bags and walked around the outside world (thanks to special digital displays for eyes) as "cyborgs" who were experimenting what it would be like to live both in the real and "virtual" world. They were always "connected" to the internet and thus not constrained by having to sit at an office or a desk in an office in order to receive information and media from others. Now from an Ellulian perspective it would be worth exploring to see whether these "cyborgs" were a form of empowered human being; whether they were in fact "free" in contrast to those who were not "cyborgs". For Ellul, "freedom" can never be absolute but it is a subjective state experienced by a person who achieves a degree of self-consciousness about the extent of his being "determined" by Technique. Freedom represents an effort at least, to try and overcome it. Whenever man comfortably rests in any particular state or mode of acting or being and assumes he is "free" then in reality he is in the most enslaved state, according to Ellul. Freedom is not about simply the ability to choose x over y. It is a conscious act that has to be constantly affirmed and striven for, in the face of constant "Necessity" and "Determination".

The colleagues at MIT said that such technology could "increase productivity and memory" and

that such technology had no apparent consequences unless intended by the user. It was "just a tool" for "being better prepared and organized in an increasingly complex information environment. The brain needed help". In light of this, it might be worth asking if our "increasingly complex information environment" is a result of our free decisions (collective or individual) or if, as Technique, it determines the ways in which we can respond to it? Is such "cyborg" technology just a neutral tool, or does it reflect the highly determined nature of individuals in a complex computerized world who must choose to adopt it in order to reduce difficulty and hardship? From one philosophical standpoint, such technologies that make life easier and more efficient make us "free" from relative hardship. To be liberated from a certain amount of hardship, to have more power available at one's finger-tips may imply a kind of relative freedom in contrast to not having such access or power. But from Ellul's dialectical understanding of "freedom", such tools may only serve to increase the extent in which Technique "determines" us. I ask the above questions not with the aim to answer them in my thesis, but as a means of providing resources for further research. These questions will likely increase in number as my analysis of Turkle's work proceeds.⁸⁵

Turkle gives an account of one of the young researchers participating in the "cyborg" experiment as somebody who apparently benefited from its enhancements. Due to the devices that he carried around with him, this shy and anxious young man felt empowered by the technology and gained a new confidence when dealing with others. His memory was also aided as a result of the information that it provided to him when needed:

' "With it", he said, referring to his collection of connectivity devices, "it's not just that I remember people or know more. I feel invincible, sociable, better prepared. I am naked without it. With it, I'm a better person." ⁸⁶

This raises an interesting question concerning the nature of the human subject and the freedom that it entails. We might ask that though such devices enhanced certain cognitive abilities of this anxious young man, did it come at a price to his freedom? Though it might be argued that the

⁸⁵ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, Basic Books, 2011, p.151.

⁸⁶ *Ibid* p.152.

technology empowered him and made him free from the grip of his social anxiety, did it make his sense of self more fragile in its being determined by technological necessity? Here we could be seeing a human subject that becomes fragmented, and in a sense constrained by Technique. I will return to this example soon.

Turkle writes that "The multiplicity of worlds before them set them apart: they could be with you, but they were always somewhere else as well". This could be construed as a strange and seemingly "alien" practise during the time in which the MIT experiment took place, but with the advent of smart-phones and internet access in every location it has become a new normal. "We are all cyborgs now", writes Turkle⁸⁷. She also states that the new technology has taken away some of our freedom even as it has given us new freedoms. The "faustian bargain" concept of technology as argued by the late Neil Postman, argued that technology gives us certain things that are advantageous even while creating new problems or taking away previous things that were once beneficial. Postman states that it would be foolish to speak merely of the benefits of information technologies without looking into the complex and often mixed "social and psychic effects of the alphabet, the mechanical clock, the printing press, and telegraphy"⁸⁸. But regardless we are dealing here with deeper philosophical issues concerning the human subject that Postman doesn't seem to focus on.

In *The Humiliation of the Word*, Ellul writes that the means in which the human individual truly becomes a free "subject" is through language. It is not the material condition of the person, nor his physical devices or his techniques that allow him to experience the actual sense of freedom of being a "subject". Rather it is the power of words, and in Ellul's view - the poetic word in particular that allows the human individual to feel sovereign. He writes: "Naming something means asserting oneself as subject and designating the other as object. It is the greatest spiritual and personal venture"⁸⁹. When examining the case of the young man in the MIT experiment - if such a person depends on a device to provide him with information prior to a social encounter in

⁸⁷ Ibid p.152.

⁸⁸ Neil Postman, "Five Things We Need to Know About Technological Change". Retrieved from <<https://www.student.cs.uwaterloo.ca/~cs492/papers/neil-postman--five-things.html>>, 29th March 2018.

⁸⁹ Jacques Ellul, **The Humiliation Of The Word**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.52.

order to help him in choosing the right words to say, then where has the human subject gone? If the words produced by this individual do not wholly come from his own person in the present (unaided by a machine), then seemingly according to Ellul, is he not constrained and, rather than being free, instead largely determined by Technique? Arguably Ellul would say that he has made the language of his previous encounters into a series of objectified bits of information, and thus made them subservient to Technique. This issue of the nature of language according to Ellul - its sense of “presence” and unexpectedness, its dependence on dialogue between human subjects, its ambiguity, its mystery, its open-endedness, etc will be explored as this Chapter proceeds. It will come apparent that such usages of technology raise questions as to whether language (in Ellul's philosophical view) has become something else, divorced from the human subject and the person speaking it, divorced from the temporal linear context of dialogue and instantiated into an image and a time-independent object.

Writing in “*The Cyborg Self and the Networked City*”, William Mitchell mentions how the multi-scale expansion of electronic networks in recent history has fundamentally altered the way people relate to both the physical environment around them as well as to each other. The human body and brain has become artificially extended over space to an extent never before seen in history. The sensory and cognitive abilities of humans have become not only enhanced but also have become components of bodies that exist “in a state of continuous electronic engagement with their surroundings”. This has arguably resulted in a human subject, or a human “self” that is not so clearly demarcatable or definable. Rather, Mitchell states that it permeated through “indefinitely extended electronic systems”. This has implications for the nature of consciousness of the human subject as well as the extent to which the individual possesses agency of action and will. Such a “cyborg self” is never wholly in one place and neither is that subject temporally consistent either. The result is that such a cyborg subject is an “indefinite entity” permeating through previously inaccessible social and physical boundaries and limitations and all mediated by a vastly growing network. Yet, Mitchell does not explore the dialectic tension of human freedom and determination in his work (albeit very briefly mentioning the fact that such networks influence human agency). The “outsourcing” of human memory into a vast, dynamic and ever-expanding complex internet network means that the human self has, to an extent, become part of the machine. Mitchell refers to this condition as a “man-computer symbiosis”.

However, he does not explore the philosophical implications of human freedom and determination with respect to this new hybrid form of human subject. Indeed, with this human subject becoming more incorporated into an urban environment replete with multiple “electronic feedback loops”, the human subject arguably becomes incorporated as merely one node amidst a vast urban neural mind-scape, a large-scale “cognitive system”. Mitchell then goes on to state that the repercussions of such a socio-technological structure are very significant:

“Not only are these networks essential to my physical survival, they also constitute and structure my channels of perception and agency—my means of knowing and acting upon the world. They continuously and inescapably mediate my entire social, economic, and cultural existence.”⁹⁰

From an Ellulian perspective, such a “cyborg self” now depends on a vast entity outside of himself that not only sustains him physically but also mentally and psychologically. These internet networks eliminate time and space and render efficient inter-connections with consequences for societal, economic and cultural phenomena. Technique has made geography and the sense of time completely subservient to it. The consequences of a cyborg self that outsources its mental functions to the internet may, as far as Ellul is concerned, constitute a relative freedom. But this freedom is in actual fact a freedom from being a full human subject, and thus the result is to become more and more determined by the “indefinite” sense of self that the network seems to offer. The cyborg self becomes, for Ellul, dominated by the universe of Technique that it inhabits. From Ellul’s point of view, Technique has replaced both “nature” and “society” as the milieu which sustains and envelops the individual. These three milieus of “nature”, “society” and “technique” not only sustain and support human beings that are inhabiting them but they also act as a source of danger and threat⁹¹. These sort of influences, for Ellul, imply that Technique has replaced the former milieu’s in terms of its “sacred” role and status. The milieu of Technique determines the limits of our freedom and choice and so the cyborg and internet world is an extension of that constraining environment. Freedom is perhaps possible, but it is restricted and determined by whatever parameters and possibilities that each of

⁹⁰ William J. Mitchell, **Me++ The Cyborg Self and the Networked City**, The MIT Press, 2004, p.61

⁹¹ Richard Stivers, **Technology As Magic**, Bloomsbury Academic, 2001, p.16-28

the particular milieu offer. Thus Mitchell's cyborg self is unavoidable in the world now that is dominated by Technique. Though the other respective Ellulian milieus are also subject to their own determinisms (with respect to the self), it is arguable that the milieu of "society" made it easier for the human subject to turn towards the dialectic pole of Freedom, Truth and the Word. This idea of the "word", of language, as "Freedom" will be further discussed later on in this chapter.

While the aim of my study is primarily geared towards the impacts of social media (with respect to Technique) I want to also explore the more general impacts of digital information networks. The internet has created a medium where people are constantly in contact with others and thus "tethered" to a human network that appears to attempt to simulate human interaction. Furthermore, such technology has now become a necessity and even a means to "liberate" working mothers from the limitations of having both a job and a home with a family. In one example, Sherry Turkle speaks to a group of lawyers who insist that "networked life makes it possible for them to keep their jobs and spend time with their children". So here we have a seeming paradox. The lawyers claim that life would be "impossible" without such technology, and thus the Technique of rationally efficient organisation of human networks and communication dictates their working life. Yet, while it dictates their working life, it at the same time offers them freedom from the shackles of only being able to work at an office. As a result of the technology they can work at home and be with their families when they wish. But perhaps one could argue that this 'freedom' has created new problems.

Turkle states that "they also say that their mobile devices eat away at their time to think". Since their devices have apparently liberated them from needing to leave home in order to work, they appear to have created a new form of slavery and dependency where the technology (that facilitates work) constantly intrudes upon their freedom to think independently of it. Turkle comments on the womens' statements such as "I block out time to think" or "I artificially make time to think" as being formulations that "all depend on an 'I' imagined as separate from the

technology, a self that is able to put the technology aside so that it can function independently of its demands".⁹² Thus perhaps this asks whether the subject appears to be determined more by the imperatives and parameters of Technique than the other way round.

Just as in the example given by Turkle of the working mothers who are tethered to their phones in a way that distorts time and space, a 2012 study of students found that they also were tethered to their mobile phones with consequences for relationships in their actual real-world surroundings. The study examined the usage habits of mobile phones amongst university students in several universities across the world. The study looked at how 793 students were using their phones within a 24 hour period in order to communicate with others or acquire information. It also looked into how these students perceived "of the role of mobile phones for communication and information needs in their daily lives"⁹³.

The working mothers used their phones to enable them to work from home, yet their tethering to such a technology appeared to have consequences for their ability to be free of its psychological demands. The lines between the domain of the demands of technology and work, and home and relaxation appear to be blurred by the smart phone. In the case of the 2012 student study, the students "find it increasingly difficult to distinguish relationships that exist in their pockets from those that exist in their physical surroundings". For the students who responded to the survey, the smart phone had a prominent role and hold over their daily habits. From the "cyborg" perspective, the frequent checking of phones at very regular intervals throughout the day indicates perhaps a level of dependency on the device in a way that is not dissimilar to a bodily organ (such as sight, smell, listening, and speech) that has experienced enhancement. One of the students in fact stated that "When I am without it, it is like I lost my arm". These devices do give the user the freedom to transcend geographical and space limitations, with the study finding that students were frequently informing their social peers about the "how, when, and why" of their daily activities and actions. Geography and time was not a limitation in such a form of communication, and students often spent time making comments and engaging dialogue via various social media applications. Yet, from an Ellulian perspective, the freedom from the

⁹² Sherry Turkle, **Alone Together**, Basic Books, 2011, p.167.

⁹³ Paul Mihailidis, "A tethered generation: Exploring the role of mobile phones in the daily life of young people", **Mobile Media & Communication**, Vol 2(1), 2014, 58 –72

constraints of time and space has a price. One such price is the humiliation of language as it becomes subject to the sheer quantity of information that the smart phones are processing and handling each day and the distracted attention spans resulting from daily usage. Nicholas Carr, states in his book “The Shallows” that the style of reading amongst internet usage does not facilitate the sort of steady linear and progressive thought or deep reflection that tends to be dominant when perusing a physical book:-

"The mental functions that are losing the “survival of the busiest” brain cell battle are those that support calm, linear thought—the ones we use in traversing a lengthy narrative or an involved argument, the ones we draw on when we reflect on our experiences or contemplate an outward or inward phenomenon. The winners are those functions that help us speedily locate, categorize, and assess disparate bits of information in a variety of forms, that let us maintain our mental bearings while being bombarded by stimuli. These functions are, not coincidentally, very similar to the ones performed by computers, which are programmed for the high-speed transfer of data in and out of memory. Once again, we seem to be taking on the characteristics of a popular new intellectual technology."⁹⁴

Thus here we are seeing Technique encouraging the human mind to handle large amounts of information in the most efficient and discriminatory manner which is not unlike how a computer processes data. We come to rapidly compartmentalize and scan things but we fail to deeply absorb and reflect on the information in a linear fashion. Again, the cyborg self that Mitchell wrote about seems to be present, and the phenomena of Technique is in turn reducing our focus on slowly reading and absorbing a length narrative. Rather, we are subservient to Technique through our approaching books and articles in the most efficient manner possible as opposed to patiently tolerating the inefficiencies of slow reading. The habit of frequently informing ones’ friends about ones’ daily thoughts and actions may seem like a technologically-enabled freedom over the problem of distance and time, but from the Ellulian perspective the distracted state of mind that such smart phone usage fosters is that of an increasingly restricted and thus technically-*determined* engagement with language and “the word”. Technique seeks to efficiently acquire information and data by adopting the best method possible. The act of deep

⁹⁴ Nicholas Carr, **The Shallows**, Atlantic Books, 2010, p.142

reading however, as Carr explains, is not just about acquiring information but about stimulating and evoking personal reflection and creative association of ideas and experiences with the text that is being engaged with:-

“The reading of a sequence of printed pages was valuable not just for the knowledge readers acquired from the author’s words but for the way those words set off intellectual vibrations within their own minds. In the quiet spaces opened up by the prolonged, undistracted reading of a book, people made their own associations, drew their own inferences and analogies, fostered their own ideas. They thought deeply as they read deeply.”⁹⁵

The Preference Of Texting Over Speaking

Considerable work has been done on the impact of texting and email on older forms of technologically-assisted communication such as the telephone and the letter. For example, Sherry Turkle’s work has found that people seem to avoid phone conversations in many situations - preferring the more efficient and comparatively impersonal text-message or email. This form of "communication" allows our attentions to be divided while we multi-task and communicate with several people at once, whilst doing other tasks. The author gives an account of a woman she interviewed who "shies away from the telephone" simply because it demands too much of her attention. Yet, Turkle states that the telephone allows people to be simultaneously present in time, it allows for the expression of nuanced and mixed sentiments, the asking and answering of questions, and so forth. Yet, despite its efficiency - the email conversation (especially when sent in order to try and discuss a problem or issue) "tends to go back and forth without resolution. Misunderstandings are frequent. Feelings get hurt. And the greater the misunderstanding, the greater the number of emails, far more than necessary. We come to experience the column of unopened messages in our inboxes as a burden. Then, we project our feelings and worry that our messages are a burden to others"⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Ibid. p64-65

⁹⁶ Sherry Turkle, **Alone Together**, Basic Books, 2011, p.167-8.

Ellul, in his *The Humiliation Of The Word* states that "the word" facilitates the freedom of the speaker and listener to not only listen to each other, but also to misunderstand each other, to choose to express certain words and leave out other words and that the word "even produces the freedom of the speaker when he chooses to say what he finally says"⁹⁷. At first glance this may seem to offer no insight as to the sort of "words" and conversation that happens in an email or text. In both a real conversation and an email/text conversation, there is clearly the possibility of misunderstanding. Yet, can we assume that in receiving a text or an email that we are actually "free" to listen to somebody? When in a real-time conversation, words come and go and we can seemingly choose to listen with varying attentiveness. Furthermore, if an email or text conversation continues to develop without ever being resolved then what of Ellul's claim of freedom in conversation? The freedom apparently inherent in choosing to express certain words, and to leave others out? The freedom to choose what one "finally" wants to say? Though it seems that through Technique, the email and text message is efficient in rapidly facilitating communication - it is not untinged by certain contentious philosophical and sociological implications. There is often no apparent "final" word in a string of temporally fragmented text messages. Furthermore, we may be seeing something more profound.

We are arguably seeing through the email and the text message, the separation of words from the person speaking them, and a severing of a connection with the subject who is speaking them. Thus the human subject becomes objectified and his or her words become objects.⁹⁸ In "Alone Together", Turkle writes that our networked life on the internet is an efficient multi-tasking experience that makes things altogether impersonal. Because of the sheer amount of contacts that we can accrue online, we are encouraged to deal with them as we deal with objects. We just process them as efficiently as possible. She writes:-

"when you are besieged by thousands of e-mails, texts, and messages - more than you can respond to - demands become depersonalized. Similarly, when we Tweet or write to hundreds or thousands of Facebook friends as a group, we treat individuals as a unit.

⁹⁷ Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation Of The Word*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.221.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p.158.

Friends become fans. A college junior contemplating the multitudes he can contact on the Net says, 'I feel that I am part of a larger thing, the Net, the Web. The world. It becomes a thing to me, a thing I am part of. And the people, too, I stop seeing them as individuals, really. They are part of this larger thing.'⁹⁹

In Ellul's perspective, this sort of way of living reflects the ever-increasing tempo of modern life, one that is increasingly divorced from natural rhythms and normal healthy interactions. This is indeed what Ellul says, and in *The Technological Bluff* mentions that a symptom of our frantically paced modern life is "the multiplying of superficial human contacts"¹⁰⁰. We can indeed ask whether our multitudes of exchanges on social media, email and other online network platforms are merely the continuation of such superficiality. And we can also keep pressing the question as to whether superficial human contacts are merely a reflection of objects interacting with each other in an efficient manner, as opposed to human subjects. Turkle writes:-

"Online, we invent ways of being with people that turn them into something close to objects. The self that treats a person as a thing is vulnerable to seeing itself as one."¹⁰¹

Could we say that when dealing with these "objects" (as opposed to persons/subjects) it is no different to just dealing with bits of information? Are the words of people not merely reduced to things? Does this ultimately render communication impossible? Ellul writes poignantly about the seeming damage done to human language by the sheer excess of information that people deal with, particularly with respect to media such as television and radio. Ultimately, such words become mere objects that are emptied of the human subject:-

"I have been exposed to too many words and too much information. I must defend myself against these invasions; my mind closes up spontaneously, to keep me from being torn to pieces. I am like Orpheus turned over to the media Maenads; I am blown by every wind of doctrine and

⁹⁹ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, Basic Books, 2011, p.168.

¹⁰⁰ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990, p.43.

¹⁰¹ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, Basic Books, 2011, p.168.

words; I am lured into every trap. I have stopped listening. I refuse to hear (without even realizing it). As noise, however, the anonymous word continues to flow. No longer is any kind of relationship established. Henceforth the word is definitively detached from the one who speaks. Nobody is behind it. When language theorists take their analysis to its logical conclusion, they declare that no person is speaking, nor is there any content to communicate.”¹⁰²

In light of this we might speculate whether the messages from our friends and acquaintances are all part of this excess and constantly flowing “noise” of information, and thus we process them like objects, as if they were in fact anonymous and impersonal. In addition, if we look at the (albeit small-scale) picture building from the empirical work Turkle has done, we can ask whether the freedom to communicate how one wants, and to share and present how one wants actually results in a “determined” self. It is likely that this “determined” self (via Technique manifest in social media and communications technology at large) is a fragmentation of the real human subject? Of course, answering these questions or making conclusions with respect to them is beyond the scope of my study, but it is only by positing such hypotheses and questions is there hope for significant growth in the scope of Ellulian studies in our particular age.

There are several examples in Turkle’s “Alone Together” that seem to indicate the efficient nature of text messaging and emailing triumphing over (in terms of popularity) that of more advanced technology such as live video calls as well as older technology such as ordinary phone calls. One example of the several interviewees who deem texting to be more beneficial than phone-calls is a woman called “Audrey”. I quote from Turkle:-

“Then Audrey makes up a new word. A text, she argues, is better than a call because in a call “there is a lot less boundness to the person.” By this she means that in a call, she could learn too much or say too much, and things could get “out of control.” A call has insufficient boundaries. She admits that “later in life I’m going to need to talk to people on the phone. But not now.” When texting, she feels at a reassuring distance. If things start to go in a direction she doesn’t like, she can easily redirect the conversation—or cut it off: “In texting, you get your main points off; you can really control when you want the conversation to start and end. You say, ‘Got to go,

¹⁰² Jacques Ellul, **The Humiliation Of The Word**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.156-7.

bye.’ You just do it . . . much better than the long drawn-out good-byes, when you have no real reason to leave, but you want to end the conversation.” This last is what Audrey likes least—the end of conversations.¹⁰³

The sense of control implied here with respect to “boundness” raises further philosophical questions. The example above gives the impression of empowerment and freedom. The person who writes the text messages has full control over the development of the conversation - controlling how it develops, regulating any unexpected turns or potential uncomfortable directions which the conversation is turning. There is a “distance” from the other person and the conversation can be ended instantly at any time. Given this sense of control, we could argue that this constitutes a form of freedom. Alternatively we could adopt the Ellulian argument that the users of text-messaging constitute a “technical self” that becomes determined by Technique - a mere “technical consciousness”.¹⁰⁴ Firstly, I want to look at what Ellul says about the impact of computers and machines on the nature of language in general. This might help answer the question as to whether the user of text-messages actually has true freedom with respect to language. Ellul writes:-

“Beginning in 1930, experts noticed that language was becoming impoverished because of the development of telegraphic style and basic English. Both of these reduce the construction of a sentence to its utilitarian elements, eliminating inflection and embellishment. Computer language completes this process. You think you still remain free to speak with someone using complex or flowery language? Of course you do! But it will be taken for an esthete’s or poet’s language, without importance.”¹⁰⁵

So though it is not just the text-message user who has an impoverished language and form of communication but so too does the person communicating without computers. Yet, this is all a result of technicization of society, according to Ellul. Thus we could argue that such impoverishment of language has become worse with the advent of increasing frequency of

¹⁰³ Sherry Turkle, **Alone Together**, Basic Books, 2011, p.190.

¹⁰⁴ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Society**, Vintage, 1964, p.126.

¹⁰⁵ Jacques Ellul, **The Humiliation Of The Word**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.161.

“conversations” via the medium of text-message and email. Despite the freedom - indicated by people cited in Turkle’s interviews - of having control over a conversation and its boundaries, there could be a lack of freedom imposed on the participants with respect to the level and depth of language that Technique allows them to use. Are they two human subjects conversing or are they two dialectically impoverished technical-selves conversing?

At first glance it may seem that a text-message conversation does not necessarily violate human freedom, for according to Ellul “the word” requires a speaker and a listener who are both present with each other in the same moment. Are we not in a way “speaking” and “listening” when texting in real time? Even as we read the word in a letter or on a page, the word is still arguably “sovereign” according to Ellul because we are still subject to its temporal reality. We cannot just glance at a word like we do to an image, we have to follow it and let it lead us to an expectant conclusion¹⁰⁶. Ellul also writes about the uncertainty and ambiguity of language and that conversation is constantly an attempt to navigate this reality. It is about the uncertainty of knowing whether a message is understood or not, or whether it need be revealed or restated in a new way. For Ellul, this inspires creativity. Again, we could argue that such ambiguity and misunderstanding occurs in a text conversation. Ellul also writes that the ambiguity of discourse allows somebody else to interpret what I say slightly differently to how I said it - and that this adds depth to the relationship, depth to meaning, and a sense of deeper understanding. Ellul states that “Mistaking a person’s language keeps me from "taking" the person -- from taking him prisoner.”¹⁰⁷ Language and communication, from Ellul’s perspective is also about “what is not said” and that also can reveal much about a person. Again, it might be arguably that these facets of conversation are present in a text-message conversation.

Here are three more of such examples from Turkles’ interviews:-

“All the Richelieu sophomores agree that the thing to avoid is the telephone. Mandy presents a downbeat account of a telephone call: “You wouldn’t want to call because then you would have to get into a conversation.” And conversation, “Well, that’s something where you only want to

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p.16.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid p.18.

have them when you want to have them.” For Mandy, this would be “almost never. . . . It is always too prying, it takes too long, and it is impossible to say ‘good-bye.’”

“A sixteen-year-old boy at Fillmore will not speak on the telephone except when his mother makes him call a relative. “When you text, you have more time to think about what you’re writing. When you talk on the phone, you don’t really think about what you’re saying as much as in a text. On the telephone, too much might show.” He prefers a deliberate performance that can be made to seem spontaneous.”¹⁰⁸

“I ask Deval how this conversation by text differs from placing a call to his Montreal cousin. He has spent the better part of the morning texting back and forth to her. Avoiding the phone cannot be about efficient time management. His answer is immediate: “She has an annoying voice.” And besides, he says, “Texting is more direct. You don’t have to use conversation filler.” Their interaction on text “was just information.” Deval says, “She was asking me direct questions; I was giving her direct answers. A long phone conversation with somebody you don’t want to talk to that badly can be a waste of time.”¹⁰⁹

The reduction of conversation to “just information” is perhaps one of the more extreme examples of text-message usage in preference over phone calls or face-to-face dialogue. Yet, the other two examples may reveal that the convenience of texting, the ability to carefully calculate ones’ words, the course of the conversation, the timing, the ending, and so on - all this might have diminished the “word” and the human subject into a manipulated object. The word can be edited many times before it is sent to the recipient, the subject can be cut off more easily or redirected, and the discourse can be ended abruptly at any time. Furthermore, we might ask whether a text messaging discourse actually always involves two people who are “present” (as Ellul mentions). They might pay attention to our words later on when they return to the text chat menu, but this constitutes a wholly new phenomena where the conversation is broken off from a natural linear progression in time - of speaking and listening. But is this always detrimental? It is not my place to argue whether this is such, but rather to produce questions and insights as to the extent which

¹⁰⁸ Sherry Turkle, **Alone Together**, Basic Books, 2011, p.200.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid p.201.

Technique is at work here and how language (from an Ellulian dialectical perspective) is impacted.

What indeed would Ellul say about the phenomena of text-messaging as a form of “conversation”? His *Humiliation of the Word* was of course written before this technology was invented yet perhaps it provides us some insights as to the difference between digital and organic conversation. For example, Ellul states that “Language never belongs to the order of evident things. It is a continuous movement between hiding and revealing. It makes of the play in human relationships something even more fine and complex than it would be without language.”¹¹⁰ Yet, we might ask where is the continuous “hiding and revealing” when one is willing to use text messaging (rather than phone) primarily in order to limit what you might reveal to somebody? Or is there a different level of “hiding and revealing” going on in the world of texting? We have seen from the examples in Turkle’s book that some of the interviewees deemed telephone calls difficult to control with respect to direction, boundaries, etc. This may be because language (of texting) has in a sense been made into something efficient, and while there is apparent greater freedom to control its course - in fact, such freedom is earned at the cost of the impoverishment of language and discourse, There is an interesting dialectic that could be forming here, as well as a paradox. The greater “freedom” to control a conversation is what texting gives us, but through that greater freedom there is a greater “determination” over the nature of language, of discourse, of the human subject as defined by the restrictive medium of technology.

Turkle argues that “We fill our days with ongoing connection, denying ourselves time to think and dream. Busy to the point of depletion, we make a new Faustian bargain. It goes something like this: if we are left alone when we make contact, we can handle being together”¹¹¹. But is this apparent freedom rather, making us more lonely and less connected with “the word” and of other human subjects? Ellul says that images correspond to the world of “reality” (Necessity) and words to the realm of “Truth” (Freedom), and that there is a dialectic tension between them in our world. Yet, Technique has turned words into images and thus reality and truth become confused. Ellul states that the “word can find a modest place for itself only if it is utterly

¹¹⁰ Ibid p.16.

¹¹¹ Sherry Turkle, **Alone Together**, Basic Books, 2011, p.203.

subordinated to the efficiency and the imperative of technique. The word has become image”.¹¹² Thus it can be argued that Ellul would see the “efficiency” behind texting and email conversations (as substitutes for face-to-face interaction or phone calls) as an example of words becoming the same as images. There is much to explore here philosophically and sociologically.

What may also be lost in a text-message, from an Ellulian perspective, is the sense of “mystery” inherent in the word and in the human subject that is present through the act of conversation. This mystery is particularly manifest in the “silences” that break up or punctuate a conversation, a series of periodic lulls. Ellul writes “The mystery is silence as a break in discourse, not silence in the sense of something that discourse fills up! The enigmatic, disturbing, saddening silence of the other person is an inconvenience as I wait. I expect a response, an explanation, or a statement from him. He falls silent, and I no longer know where or how to take my place in relation to him”¹¹³. This sense of awkwardness in trying to position oneself appropriately to somebody else during a lull in the conversation is the result of the inherent “mystery” that constitutes language, as well as that of the human subject of which “the word” is a mere echo. It is self-evident that text messages and emails are devoid of this phenomena of “silences” and thus to Ellul, it can be argued that nobody is communicating when on a computer or a screen. The natural flow of conversation and time is disrupted and made artificial when the “mystery” inherent in the human subject is lost. Again, is this part of the price for apparent freedom of controlling the boundaries of communication? Some of Turkles’ interviewees regard telephone calls as an intrusion and disruption of peoples’ activities and time and thus prefer sending “e-mails and Facebook messages” as well as looking at photographs of friends and families on social media in order to get updated and to “feel caught up”.¹¹⁴ We may live in a highly connected world, but as Ellul said concerning the technical system: “ we might say that the more these instruments bring us together, the more we are distant and strangers”¹¹⁵.

¹¹² Jacques Ellul, **The Humiliation Of The Word**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.160.

¹¹³ Ibid p.25.

¹¹⁴ Sherry Turkle, **Alone Together**, Basic Books, 2011, p.203.

¹¹⁵ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Bluff**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990, p.112.

Social Media And The Edited Self

For Ellul, our modern technical civilization gives rise to a fragmented “technical self” governed by one’s place in the efficient ordering of life. There is no sense of meaning except that which is statistical, that which is data, and that which is object. The essential qualitative and subjective nature of the individual becomes quantitative. And for Ellul, this leads to the fragmentation of the human subject where he becomes a useful cog in the machine of Technique - albeit a cog that carries several useful quantitative indicators about his or her attributes. In *The Technological Society*, Ellul writes “Men become accustomed to listening to machines and talking to machines.... No more face to face encounters, no more dialogue”¹¹⁶. For Ellul the human subject and self cannot truly exist in such a mechanistic context. For writers such as Foucault the “death of the subject” emerged by and large through the systems of power enabled by our modern technological universe. The new self is constantly in-flux, constantly in a dialectical struggle with technologies of power, and thus one could perhaps argue that the Marxian understanding of the “self as process”¹¹⁷ is present in his thinking. For Foucault, The Enlightenment has certainly not produced a free individual agent, a free human subject that rationally acts and produces history for himself and society. It has not produced a free agent who is able to create meaning and bring liberty and harmony. Instead, the technological systems of power have killed this human subject and instead made it into a self that is merely "a function ceaselessly modified"¹¹⁸.

For one particular Facebook user interviewed by Turkle, the new powers of freedom opened up by social media has created a paradox with respect to the apparent benefits of choices in how one generates a persona:

“Mona, a freshman at Roosevelt, has recently joined Facebook. Her parents made her wait until her fourteenth birthday, and I meet her shortly after this long-awaited day. Mona tells me that as

¹¹⁶ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, Vintage, 1964, p.379.

¹¹⁷ Erich Fromm, "The Nature Of Man". Retrieved from <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/fromm/works/1961/man/ch04.htm>>, 31st March 2018.

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Silviu E. Rogobete, "The Self, Technology and the Order of Things: in dialogue with Heidegger, Ellul, Foucault and Taylor", *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, No. 183, 2015, 122 – 128.

soon as she got on the site, “Immediately, I felt power.” I ask her what she means. She says, “The first thing I thought was, ‘I am going to broadcast the real me.’” But when Mona sat down to write her profile, things were not so straightforward. Whenever one has time to write, edit, and delete, there is room for performance. The “real me” turns out to be elusive. Mona wrote and rewrote her profile. She put it away for two days and tweaked it again. Which pictures to add? Which facts to include? How much of her personal life to reveal? Should she give any sign that things at home were troubled? Or was this a place to look good?”¹¹⁹

As soon as she started using this social media platform she “felt power”. We could interpret this to be a form of freedom opening up to her with respect to ways of free self-expression. For she at first thought she could reveal her true self. But she found that given the fact that new posts can always be created, edited and deleted there was always “room for performance”. The real self turned out to be “elusive”. Mona agonized over what information and what photos she should have included or excluded, and what impression she should give. Now it is simply beyond the scope of this thesis to look into the psychological and sociological implications of this. However, we can still reflect on this case-example within the framework of Technique. Is this “self” that this Facebook user is agonizing over, an authentic self or a “technical self”? There is much that is written today about the nature of the “self” in social media as a form of “performance” and intentional construction of personas produced by the user. For example, Erving Goffman’s (1959) theory of a “multiple, composite self”, “symbolic interactionism” and so forth - are oft argued as relevant when discussing issues of personality with respect to social media usage.¹²⁰ Though, the issue of “freedom” and the “technical self” is generally not raised in much of the new literature, as far as I’m aware. Yet, we can ask the question from an Ellulian perspective: When I’m on Facebook, with whom am “I” having a dialogue with? And, from an Ellulian perspective, does it actually constitute dialogue at all? Am I in fact “communicating” with others or am I sending a carefully packaged message to countless “people” at once, as if I were on a stage? Are other users actual selves or technicized selves? And what consequence does my

¹¹⁹ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, Basic Books, 2011, p.180.

¹²⁰ José van Dijck, “‘You have one identity’: performing the self on Facebook and LinkedIn”, *Media, Culture & Society*, 35(2), 2013, 199–215.

online representation of myself (through an amalgam of posted phrases and photos) have for “the word”? We see that in *The Humiliation of the Word*, Ellul writes thus:

“Through photographs, but even more through films and television, we are witnessing a fragmentation of society into series of images. They are cut out of the social fabric and presented more or less independently from each other....This universe is fragmented and without structure. Society thus comes to be seen as a place where images encounter each other, where things take place in a logical manner. The cohesion of these images thus comes only from a reinterpretation of society. We move from fragmentation to recomposition (and this recomposition will be presented and taken for reality itself). From a society of individuals and individual actions, we go to a society of roles.”¹²¹

The idea of one’s self as an object, as an “image” that is divorced from “the social fabric” seems to fit with Ellul’s previously written view of Technique as a phenomena that induces “social plasticity” and “dissociates” existing social, cultural, and religious structures and ways of meaning-making.¹²² Going back to Turkle’s empirical work, we can find tentative evidence for this. She writes about Brad, a college student and Facebook user who feels “pressure to perform” only one particular type of “cool” persona on Facebook all the time. Even though it seems (from the outset) that Facebook gives one freedom to shape ones’ identity in whatever way one wishes. Thus we could begin to argue that Brad is being “determined”. I quote from Turkle’s interview with Brad:-

“Brad says that “in a conversation, it might be interesting that on a trip to Europe with my parents, I got interested in the political mural art in Belfast. But on a Facebook page, this is too much information. It would be the kiss of death. Too much, too soon, too weird. And yet . . . it is part of who I am, isn’t it? . . . You are asked to make a lot of lists. You have to worry that you put down the ‘right’ band or that you don’t put down some Polish novel that nobody’s read.” And in the end, for Brad, it is too easy to lose track of what is important.”¹²³

¹²¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation Of The Word*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.140.

¹²² Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, Vintage, 1964, p.126.

¹²³ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, Basic Books, 2011, p.185.

It might be that the “language” of the Facebook profile is something that is more like an object, language taken out of the complex subtleties and nuances of daily contexts of dialogue that unravel with time and in an organic way. Ellul writes that language is not just about what you say to somebody but what you also choose to not say. And what you say also can sometimes reveal things that are not said. Language is not something that is part of that which is self-evident. “It is a continuous movement between hiding and revealing”.¹²⁴ There is a dialectical component here in Ellul’s conception of communication, i.e. there are not just two different people exchanging information, but also two people involved in a dialectical exchange of veiling and unveiling. If we look at what Brad the Facebook user is saying, if we look at his mentioning of “political mural art” as something “weird” if done outside the natural circumstantial flow of a particular conversation, it perhaps may draw our attention to Ellul’s conception of dialogue as an interpersonal process of hiding and revealing. Furthermore, it can draw our attention to the possibility that Facebook and social media is making of language something loudly assertive, obtrusive and self-evident. Ellul argues that dialogue cannot be made when language becomes utilised by powerful equipment such as loudspeakers and other media. For language, “even when it tries to be demonstrative...It includes an unknown aspect in the background that makes it something secret and revealed.”¹²⁵ Is this attribute apparent on Facebook? Furthermore, when ones’ interests and hobbies are loudly declared on social media, we could argue that this is a language that has become like an image? I aim to explore this later as the Chapter develops. For now we can posit the question as to whether the declarative language of social media constitutes a removal of what Ellul would call “the mystery of the person”, a removal of the ambiguity of discourse and of renewed attempts to understand and avoid misunderstanding, etc. That such social media is an attempt to form an efficient impression and perhaps stoke a reaction - like images. Ellul writes:-

“Discourse is ambiguous; it is never clear. It arrives from one person’s unconscious aggregate of experiences, desires, skills, and knowledge, only to fall into another person’s, thus producing a

¹²⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation Of The Word*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.16.

¹²⁵ *Ibid* p.23.

different meaning. Because of these continual misunderstandings, new life is breathed into the relationship. We must constantly begin all over again, and as a result the relationship becomes a rich, complex landscape, with unexpected mountain passes and inaccessible peaks. By all means let's not turn language into something mathematical, nor reduce the rich complexity of human relationships to identical formulas."¹²⁶

Is this richness of discourse, this ambiguity, this dialectic renewal of the attempt to understand even while creating new misunderstandings, of hiding and revealing, etc - is such a dynamic present in the world of social media? A quote from Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook seems revealing in the sense that it perhaps aims to make the human subject efficient and clearly-evident and free of ambiguity:-

“You have one identity. The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly.... Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity.”¹²⁷

Yet what we disclose to each other within conversations to different people reflects the subtle back and forth between different unique human subjects that choose to reveal or hide what they freely decide, just as they choose to listen how they will or interpret or misunderstand. This freedom inherent in the Ellulian concept of the human subject engaging with the “word” seems lost in the world of Technique that one might argue is inherent in Zuckerberg’s efficient ordering of “identity”. But whether people like Zuckerberg understand the concept of “identity” is another matter entirely.

Ellul’s *The Humiliation Of The Word* deals primarily with the way our modern society has rendered language as subordinate to the image, and Turkle’s studies appear to confirm this within the realm of social media. Facebook is an example where an edited form of your life as a series of stage-managed images can end up becoming part of your identity, as a form of

¹²⁶ Ibid p.18-19.

¹²⁷ Kirkpatrick D, *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company that is Connecting the World.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010, p.199.

surrogate you. I cite the example of a girl named Audrey who goes as far as to say: “If Facebook were deleted, I’d be deleted. . . . All my memories would probably go along with it.”¹²⁸ She is somebody who likes to experiment with identity via social media, even though she is using her real name and not some false identity. She thinks about which images that would be most suitable for her to upload and then changes her collage of uploaded images (as well as her comments) based on perceived feedback. Again, I want to come back to the dialectical issue of Freedom and Necessity which runs throughout Ellul’s work. Facebook, as far as Audrey is concerned, offers the user the freedom to control their perceived identity in a way that allows them to exclude negative or unattractive aspects of their person. Unflattering or daily pictures in mundane situations are not what these social media profiles are about. Rather, it is the apparent freedom to shape ones’ impression to others, the impression of ones’ life. I quote Audrey:

“You’re not going to post pictures of how you look every day. You’re going to get your makeup on, put on your cute little outfit, you’re going to take your picture and post it up as your default, and that’s what people are going to expect that you are every day, when really you’re making it up for all these people. . . . You can write anything about yourself; these people don’t know. You can create who you want to be. You can say what kind of stereotype mold you want to fit in without . . . maybe in real life it won’t work for you, you can’t pull it off. But you can pull it off on the Internet.”¹²⁹

It appears that social media platforms such as Facebook offer a form of freedom of self-expression, a full freedom of performing whatever role or identity that one wants. A freedom to escape reality. Yet from the Ellulian perspective this freedom is only facilitated by Technique and may, rather, be an artificial form of freedom. Artificial because it may well be a human subject determined by Technique and entirely within its bounds. A technical self and not even a performing self (as Goffman would argue) that would rather occur in everyday settings. The self projected on Facebook is an edited form of the person, it is arguably not the actual person as lived in the reality of day to day and thus perhaps neither is it reflective of the free choices of that person in performing his “self”. Thus when one posts on Facebook, comments on Facebook,

¹²⁸ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, Basic Books, 2011, p.192.

¹²⁹ *Ibid* p.191.

sends messages on Facebook - we could say that from an Ellulian perspective that nobody is actually communicating at all. We could argue that since we have artificial and false selves interacting, we in fact have mere objects interacting. We may also ask if anybody (in the true subjective sense) is actually there. Perhaps in the world of the network, there is no authentic human subject and no dialogue. Only object, and image. But are we to really entertain this as a possibility? Can we really say that when two lovers are sending text messages that there is no human subject there at all? Or are they just shadows of themselves, mere objectified echoes, reduced in their persons (as opposed to annihilated into total objects) by the constraining medium of Technique? Perhaps there is a metaphysical issue here that needs exploring with respect to how much of the human subject (i.e. the “self”) is affected by Technique (and thus made “object”) in the act of texting and the act of telephoning, respectively?

I want to go back to the example from Turkle’s book with respect to Facebook usage and images. We are seeing an apparent dependence of somebody’s memory on the images she chooses to upload to her profile. In *The Humiliation Of The Word*, Ellul writes that because we live in an “artificial” modern environment we “develop an extremely deep need for another reality”¹³⁰. Ellul argues that people cannot relate to their surroundings - their surroundings of steel, concrete, asphalt and other modern designs. They cannot relate to them as human beings have traditionally related to their environment and landscapes. Because of this, there is a need to find a reality they can connect with. We thus become so preoccupied and concerned with reality, that which is apparent, that which is material - that we leave aside narratives, ideas and abstract thoughts. Ellul argues that images of the camera and the film “reconciles contradictions, makes absent nature present and real again, makes the technical milieu familiar and admirable, and quenches our thirst for something concrete and real”¹³¹. The Facebook user who finds a part of their life and a part of their self on social media is somebody who is empowered by technology and is now able to see that they actually exist, that not only are their own lives real but so is the artificial and unnatural technical milieux in which their lives are immersed in. If Ellul is right, our modern technical milieux creates a form of alienation that, paradoxically, the same technical instruments (that caused said alienation) are tasked to ameliorate. Ellul seems to be saying that photos act as

¹³⁰ Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation Of The Word*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.207.

¹³¹ Ibid. p.207.

a substitute for authentic personal and existential relationships with the real world. Since we experience alienation from our daily reality, photographs on social media perhaps allow us to not only create our memories and manage them in an organised and efficient way but to therapeutically revisit those occasional experiences as a form of “reality”. This is perhaps because most of the time we are not able to accept the daily reality we are living in, thus the need for novel recollections of the past in the form of the image. Yet, despite this attempt of technical amelioration of alienation there are further problems caused by this form of Technique:-

“The picture becomes the substitute for something living, just as images always do. It is the elimination of the personal and existential relationship with the world, cutting oneself off from the milieu, from other people. And it is the means of not being subject to the impact of anything new. It is also the dreamed-of substitute in terms of a false, frozen reality that takes the place of the inability to face life. This is very symptomatic of technique: it prevents us from living but gives us the strong impression that we are living, assuring us that we are really alive!”¹³²

Thus again we have this apparent empowerment and freedom created by Technique to create and share collages of our own life on Facebook, to manage our own memories, to look at the imaged memories and experiences of others. Yet, though this Technique of social media seems to ameliorate a problem created by our techno-culture and civilization it further imprisons us within a “false, frozen reality” that acts as a salve for our daily inability to face our artificial reality. Thus here we see perhaps the dialectic of Freedom and Determination at work, with Technique offering us an option of apparent freedom from alienation, but in truth the “freedom” it offers is only further alienation from authentic daily experience.

In *The Technological Bluff* (as I mentioned before) Ellul states that though Technique solves existing problems it creates a new set of greater problems¹³³. One of these problems in the sphere of social media is that of privacy issues and the seeming permanent presence of images and text that people chose to share. The price of this freedom and enormous power to share what you will with countless people is the fact that the system, the network determines the “you” that stays on

¹³² Ibid p.123.

¹³³ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Bluff**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990, p.39.

there, and how that “you” gets cut up, manipulated, represented and contextualised. One rash action several years ago may be recorded forever, and often against ones’ decision or volition.

Turkle writes about the case of two women who are conflicted about their use of social media:

“There is truth in a view of the Internet as a place for experimentation and self-expression. Yet, from Elaine’s point of view, what she is free to do is to say things that will “be remembered forever.” Common sense prevails: “free” combined with “forever” doesn’t seem workable. Elaine says, “I feel that my childhood has been stolen by the Internet. I shouldn’t have to be thinking about these things.” Dawn tried to “scrub” her Facebook page when she got into college. “I wanted a fresh start,” she says. But she could only delete so much. Her friends had pictures of her on their pages and messages from her on their walls. All of these would remain. She says, “It’s like somebody is about to find a horrible secret that I didn’t know I left someplace.”¹³⁴

Again, the apparent freedom to express oneself on the internet comes at the cost of ones’ sense of self and history being “determined” by the network. If we accept the idea that our thoughts, our conversations and words are turned into mere objects on the internet - divorced from the human subject - then our memories are also made into objects. But Ellul says that what we remember is down to the complex relationship we have with the world on an individual experiential level and is not some mere objective collecting of experiences and moments. Memory is also about what we discard just as much as what we retain:

“Memory is a part of my total life. It appears and disappears, depending on the transcription of a whole world which I have assimilated and which is part of me. It is not just a product of memorization, but a progression dependent on the basis of my relationship with the reality integrated into my culture and my total experience of life. Every memory is like a many-sided

¹³⁴ Sherry Turkle, **Alone Together**, Basic Books, 2011, p.259.

and multicolored cube in an enormous mosaic...What deserves to be remembered -- whatever has been lived deeply -- is engraved in my being and in my memory. It changed me and made me a new person.”¹³⁵

When we rely on social media images to form our memories and then rely on the internet as a whole to retain whatever memories of our words and actions it deems fit - then what “reality” are we dealing with? What has become of the human subject and its “total experience of life”? Is it the same human subject that remembers only “whatever has been lived deeply”? And how does this relate to Ellul’s concept of Truth and Reality? Of Freedom and Necessity? It could be argued that the freedom to create and manage ones’ memories in the form of images is really a form of bondage, a form of determination. It encases us within the realm of Reality as opposed to the realm of Truth. For though Ellul states that memories are retained because they form an important part of ones’ self and experience, we might ask whether we were free to do so? It could be that our memories were created for us unconsciously. And what about the ability to forget? Is that a form of freedom from being “determined” mentally by every experience that one has in life (despite being arguably involuntary)?

In *The Humiliation Of The Word*, Jacques Ellul argues that our image-oriented civilization has resulted in words that have become stripped of their power to evoke ideas, thoughts and images related to ones own personal experience. Rather than invite critical reflection, they instead evoke “ready-made images” within the mind and thus retard intelligence and the imagination in the process. If we add to this also the nature of word-usage in the media and in newspapers then what we are left is with language that does not promote critical reflection but rather that which “retains only the power of inciting and triggering”. Words that are designed to provoke emotional reflexes are, to Ellul, just like images because they efficiently convey emotion in a way that clear depictions of reality seem able to do.¹³⁶ This brings us to the question of social media and the sort of posts and comments that are constantly shared and transmitted on the network. Sherry Turkle’s work has shown that the act of profile construction on a network like Facebook starts off with a “deliberate” series of acts and intentions. Speaking to people via

¹³⁵ Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation Of The Word*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.122.

¹³⁶ *Ibid* p.119.

instant messenger within social media is also deliberative as “one composes and recomposes one’s thoughts”¹³⁷. But Turkle also notes that this deliberation soon gives way to a sense of being driven along by the distractions and allures of the network. We feel an impulse or a temptation to just wander, often aimlessly from profile to profile, from shared video to shared video and comment thread to comment thread. This again raises interesting philosophical questions as to what extent this activity constitutes freedom or Technique. Are we free here both in our deliberative profile building and in our curiosity-driven wandering and surfing?

Ellul states in *The Technological Bluff* that in modern mass societies we generally have people interacting in a manner that is usually facilitated by Technique as opposed to traditional local human institutions, religion, ritual, taboos, natural rhythms, spontaneity, and so forth. Thus Technique erodes away culture and in fact, rules out any possibility of it. And before the rise of the internet as we know it, Ellul stated that “the new techniques form themselves into a network that can be self-sufficient and exclude us altogether. Networks are abstract, invisible, imperceptible. They impose themselves on real life and condition it. They evolve with a speed that is beyond us. They thus eliminate any possibility of culture, since any culture that might be set up cannot express human life or stability.”¹³⁸ Thus perhaps upon examining the accounts of social media usage that Turkle is documenting, Ellul would reiterate his thesis that “the network” is conditioning human beings as opposed to the other way round. We might feel free to determine what features on social media but in reality we are swept along in its current that excludes any authentic sense of human identity and behaviour - identity and behaviour which traditionally was bound to a strong sense of culture. As mentioned at the start of this thesis, Ellul is not saying that before the reign of Technique man was somehow much more free and not as determined. Man has always struggled within this dialectic problem of freedom and determination. But rather, our modern age provides us with different means of being determined and now it is Technique that is doing so.

Social media encourages people to share whatever random thoughts come into their head, no matter how poorly conceived or incoherent. “Every day each of us is bombarded by other

¹³⁷ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, Basic Books, 2011, p.276.

¹³⁸ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Bluff**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990, p.146.

peoples' random thoughts. We start to see such effusions as natural"¹³⁹. We can ask what Ellul's perspective on this would be. Perhaps such random effusions of feelings and opinions are part of what he would call a humiliation of language, and its subjection to Technique. Ellul argues that modern people have arrived "at a purely emotional stage of thinking" and that we require the intrusion of images in order to stimulate thought. But such thought never prevails within the domain of calm reason and reflection. We are also bombarded by an excess of information and words that are expressed as mere noise and thus emitted without sincerity and true connection with the human subject. Ellul says "Words are just wind.

They pass by and have no importance: as long as no one puts the weight of his entire life behind the word he speaks, how can we take one statement more seriously than any other?"¹⁴⁰ Further inquiry could examine the extent to which Technique encourages us to share our thoughts and opinions on social media in a context in which they have never before appeared. Previously they would appear in the form of conversations or within the context of letters written to particular people. But now it seems apparent that we are ready to exclaim sentences to an audience of acquaintances just in order to get a response. But is this truly a humiliation of the word if I can share my thoughts and get feedback instantly and have them shared so widely? Is this not freedom to use the network technology as I will? Or am I determined (in terms of behaviour) by the structure of the network itself and the media that appears on it? How does this differ to previous forms of social, cultural and institutional determination in terms of communicating thoughts? Is frequent sharing on social media an unleashing of genuine human dialogue and new possibilities of engagement? Or is it just another manifestation of an emotional form of thinking facilitated by a life immersed in images? Ellul writes:-

"Furthermore, the emotional quality of what we moderns call our thought produces an extreme violence of conviction combined with extreme incoherence in our arguments. I refer here to ordinary people and not to an intellectual elite. We do not involve ourselves in studying the meaning and consequences of a fact calmly and objectively. The fact asserts itself through its image and associates itself in unchallengeable fashion with other images which, in this mode of thinking, are its true context. Emotions justify as well as provoke or command opinions, which

¹³⁹ Sherry Turkle, **Alone Together**, Basic Books, 2011, p.276.

¹⁴⁰ Jacques Ellul, **The Humiliation Of The Word**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.158.

still seem intellectual and reasoned.”¹⁴¹

Sherry Turkle mentions a lady called Hillary who states that the internet and social media is tiring to keep up with, that it is distracting and impedes the ability to reflect and contemplate things. There is for her a constant pressure to maintain a performance on social media and that perhaps life without the internet would offer opportunities for more creativity¹⁴². Perhaps at least in this case we can see that Ellul’s view of excess information and its resultant impact on the depth and significance of the meaning of words might also apply to the ever-present noise of social media. Ellul, as mentioned before, writes on how an image-oriented society prevents the ability to stop and reflect because even words now simply evoke a “fanfare of images” that we have been exposed to everyday, and thus impede rational reflection, contemplation, and imagination.

Thus far I have attempted to show how Ellul’s concept of Technique as well as his various dialectical concepts can help draw insights and new philosophical problems and questions with respect to the world of social media and communication via the internet. I now want to draw attention once more to the dialectical concepts present in *The Humiliation Of The Word* which are namely “Truth” and “Reality” as well as “Freedom” and “Necessity” respectively. For Ellul, the realm of language, the realm of “the word” constitutes the dialectical pole of “freedom” both from a sociological and theological point of view. For language and the word allow us to find meaning and express mystery and depth beyond the mere world of form, beyond the mere world of “reality”. Words allow us to access the world of Truth that is deep within this visual realm of Reality. Given the fact that we are a modern society immersed in countless images, we are thus constantly immersed in mere form. However Ellul says:

“But reality belongs to the world of necessity. Everything about it is both necessary and evident. The word is both the locus and the expression of freedom (or, if one prefers, the pretension of freedom, or its intention or illusion, as well as the falsification of freedom). Wherever the word is excluded or subordinated, freedom is eliminated. When a person is subdued by images, he is

¹⁴¹ Ibid p.210.

¹⁴² Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, Basic Books, 2011, p.276.

situated in a necessary world filled with necessities. He sees what he must know, learn, do, and decide. He accepts necessity at the very time he accepts images. But to the degree that evidence is always involved, he never becomes conscious of this necessity.”¹⁴³

For Ellul there is an inherent freedom in the spoken word, in authentic personal dialogue both between men, and between man and God that no other medium can replace. It is a medium that allows the listener the freedom to choose to listen as well as to choose how to respond. But for a modern person immersed in a world of images, there can be no such freedom. Rather, Ellul says, that they carry a powerful emotional stimulus that carries us along and helps to add colour and interesting and fascinating distractions from an actual real-world reality of Technique that is far from pleasant in itself. But these images do not allow time for critical thought, reflection, or true dialogue. It is far harder to ignore, to criticise, to imaginatively explore or reflect when one is constantly exposed to one artificial image and then to another. Images offer an escapist form of fantasy and an apparent freedom. Ellul writes:

“Images are also indispensable as a form of compensation. The word would only increase my anxiety and uncertainty. It would make me more conscious of my emptiness, my impotence, and the insignificance of my situation. With images, however, everything unpleasant is erased and my drab existence decorated by their charm and sparkle.”¹⁴⁴

Yet paradoxically, it is the word with all its inevitability of discomfort and uncertainty that allows us to take a step towards Freedom. The freedom to become conscious and aware with respect to the way the universe of images that we are exposed to are determining our behaviour as well as stripping language of its authentic subjectivity, its mystery, its connection with the Wholly Other, the metaphysical, its freedom to transcend mere Necessity. For Ellul, dialogue is an important part of the freedom inherent in the spoken word. And thus far I have attempted to ask questions about whether the “dialogue” of social media impedes Truth by further encasing us in Reality, and whether it impedes Freedom by further encasing us in Necessity and Technique.

¹⁴³ Jacques Ellul, **The Humiliation Of The Word**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.220.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid p.128.

The Conflict Between Power And Vulnerability

There is an interesting paradox when it comes to online communication which has implications for the sense of 'freedom' (from an Ellulian lens) it allows. It is the issue of vulnerability and being vulnerable. Sherry Turkle states that "Research tells us that being comfortable with our vulnerabilities is central to our happiness, our creativity, and even our productivity". But online we are under pressure to continuously "perform" a kind of self that appears invulnerable. This creates an internal conflict, according to Turkle, where there is uncertainty about whether one should show one's "best self" or one's "authentic self" and this inner conflict often leads to psychological problems¹⁴⁵. At first glance we might question how vulnerability can be related to freedom as opposed to being determined? Is a word carefully edited and managed not a word inherently more "free" than one that is not? Yet, it is vulnerability that gives us, and our words, the freedom to be fully human. Dr Brene Brown writes in *Daring Greatly* that:

"Vulnerability is the core of all emotions and feelings. To feel is to be vulnerable. To believe vulnerability is weakness is to believe that feeling is weakness....Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity."¹⁴⁶

Vulnerability leads to being fully human and thus a real human subject. If one performs online in a way that tries to hide vulnerabilities then can we argue that the online user has become a "technical self" and has allowed Technique to reduce his freedom and at least, partially turned himself into an object? Has the online user of social media submitted himself to Necessity as determined by the restrictions of the network, as opposed to the Truth and Freedom of the word which can only come from words fully connected with the vulnerable human subject? In using social media, do we seek a form of freedom - a kind of transhumanist flight from traditional boundaries and human emotions? Ellul does offer some insight in *The Humiliation Of The Word* when he speaks of the natural silences that emerge and punctuate conversations and dialogue

¹⁴⁵ Ibid p.24-25

¹⁴⁶ Brene Brown, "Daring Greatly". Retrieved from <<http://qualiacounselling.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Daring-Greatly-Brene-Brown1.pdf>>, 19th April 2018.

between people. When these silences and lulls in conversation occur there is a sense of awkwardness with respect to how the subjects involved proceed. Ellul does not use the word “vulnerability” but one can perhaps infer from his words that there is a vulnerability present amidst these silences. He writes:-

“The enigmatic, disturbing, saddening silence of the other person is an inconvenience as I wait. I expect a response, an explanation, or a statement from him. He falls silent, and I no longer know where or how to take my place in relation to him. More precisely, I no longer know how to be as I face him. I find myself faced with a mystery which eludes me when there is a lull in the conversation. I expect words, but this silence constitutes a chasm in the word, which continues unspoken. It is unheard, but it cannot be eliminated. Thus in all sorts of ways the word is related to mystery. It expresses and engulfs us in mystery.”¹⁴⁷

Thus the mystery of the word and the human subject, the sense of vulnerability with respect to the silences that emerge and not knowing how to position oneself in relation to the other - these are all part of the ‘freedom’ of the word and the human subject that speaks it. But artificial images do not possess this comparative freedom. If our words have become mere images or subservient to images, then they have also been robbed of this “mystery” and thus become inhuman.

Yet, what research continues to reveal about our world of constant connection is a seeming persistent offer of further power and apparent freedom in the hands of ordinary people. Smart phones seem to give people a new found freedom or promise that there will always be an audience to hear them speak at any moment. This appears to abolish the possibility of being alone without choosing to. Thus we can freely connect with others at a whim. We are thus perhaps free not to have our social lives subject to the determination of our societal and interpersonal relational boundaries. With a click or the touch of a finger, we can connect with others and thus become apparently free from being “determined” by our existing social and cultural milieu. If we are not popular in our neighborhood or workplace we can be liked and paid attention to online. Yet, would this not give rise to a new form of ‘technical’ determinism,

¹⁴⁷ Jacques Ellul, **The Humiliation Of The Word**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.25.

though abolishing old forms of determinism? In addition, Turkle also writes about how silences that naturally punctuate conversations are instead being filled by smartphone usage. People find them boring and want to escape them. Turkle has found a “problem”, namely the apparently dull and awkward existence of silences and has provided a “solution”.¹⁴⁸

Images As A Form Of Conversation

In another case, Turkle comes across a group of youths who gather together with their smartphones and converse both directly face to face as well as via their phones. She finds that the people who have gathered together are often resorting to the use of images as a means of commenting on the conversation. Images are seen by them as a form of connection that is no less valuable than the use of words and body language. Turkle notes that their verbal conversations do not “go very far” because of its competition with the online conversations and sharing of images that is also happening. From an Ellulian perspective this is a set of conversations where the word is humiliated because people are simply not ‘present’, they are always distracted and thus never operating as a full human subject.¹⁴⁹ But as far as the resorting to images as a form of connection and communication, we can really only speculate what Ellul might have said. When people use images to replace what would be normal conversation then we perhaps are seeing what Ellul would see as a conformist tendency. Since images do not reflect the world and the experience of the individual subject, they instead reflect the “dominant doxa” of the societal context in which they have been formed and perpetuated. They reflect a kind of reality that is collectively participated in and to which everybody seems to connect with in terms of efficient and self-evident meaning. But such a medium of images is devoid of what Ellul refers to as “mystery” or of insights that disrupt the everyday world of reality and the image with “vibrations of reason”. Only the realm of language and “the word” can do this. For the word, unlike the image, is potentially a vessel of Truth and, unlike Reality (i.e. the image) the truth is never self-evident.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Sherry Turkle, **Reclaiming Conversation**, Penguin Press, 2015, p.26.

¹⁴⁹ Jacques Ellul, **The Humiliation Of The Word**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.16.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid p.25.

Thus the imaged-form of communication within social media would suggest a trend towards impersonality, collectivism and conformism. Since these images are a series of objects, they cannot reflect the experience of a person. Instead, these images incorporate the person (via Technique) into their own autonomous universe of collective and efficient meaning¹⁵¹. We might ask what happens to the Freedom of the human subject here when one is sharing animated images or other graphical forms as a substitute to words in a conversation. Ellul also states:

“we are continually told that audiovisuals will bring about human perfection by economizing 'imaginative,' effort (in the etymological sense of taking the word and forming images from it). For the audiovisual image is ready-made: it is there, and the word fits it perfectly. We forget all too easily that imagination is the basic characteristic of intelligence”¹⁵²

When using social media to communicate via the use of images there is a likelihood that the imagination is lost, as well as improvisation and spontaneity in conversation. The loss of improvisation and spontaneity in particular, are according to Ellul, one of the symptoms of the efficiently mechanistic and standardizing force of Technique.¹⁵³ The erosion of imagination and subsequent impact on intelligence from immersion in audiovisuals may also have troubling implications for the Freedom of the human subject in the face of an efficient visual Technique that hems the individual further within its domain.

Ellul has argued that our modern immersion in images has acted as a sort of compensatory force for the unnatural environment that we have become immersed in as a result of Technique and the mechanistic logic of our civilization. We cannot quite accept the reality that we are living in and so this artificial and constructed world of images “give us some certainty that we exist”.¹⁵⁴ Now Turkle mentions a growing phenomenon amongst modern people and users of social media in particular. It is, in a way, resulting from a fundamental feeling of isolation and a lack of ability to be comfortable with the idea of experiencing solitude from time to time. Turkle writes that our

¹⁵¹ Ibid p.113.

¹⁵² Ibid p.257.

¹⁵³ Jacques Ellul, **The Technological Society**, Vintage, 1964, p.383.

¹⁵⁴ Jacques Ellul, **The Humiliation Of The Word**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.119.

online culture of perpetual connection “is changing the way people think of themselves. It is shaping a new way of being.” She goes onto say:

“ I call it ‘I share, therefore I am.’ We share our thoughts and feelings in order to feel whole. In order to feel more, and to feel more like ourselves, we connect. But in our rush to connect, we flee solitude. In time, our ability to be separate and gather ourselves is diminished. If we don’t know who we are when we are alone, we turn to other people to support our sense of self. This makes it impossible to fully experience others as who they are. We take what we need from them in bits and pieces; it is as though we use them as spare parts to support our fragile selves.”¹⁵⁵

Perhaps this tallies with Ellul’s observation about images helping to reassure the individual that he or she actually exists despite their technological mileux. It seems that we share fragments of our thoughts, words that have become objects on a screen. We construct an image of ourselves via the instruments of Technique on social media. And if we take from others in the form of “bits and pieces” then this constitutes the reduction of the human subject to that which is object, that which is most rationally efficient, that which conforms to the Ellulian framework of Technique.

Turkle interviews people who are quite unable to sit by themselves and just think things over. For such people there is always a recourse to external stimulation and connection with others via the internet. For one particular young lady, Facebook has become a substitute for time in solitude with one's ' thoughts. In addition, she is unable to think about her past without the aid of social media and the images and messages that it has stored up for her. For such a person, recourse to one's ' own memories (without social media) constitutes an effort that has become too much and almost redundant. Ellul writes that “The picture diminishes enormously the experience of a trip; it externalizes it, prevents internalization, and concentrates everything on the "visual souvenir.”¹⁵⁶ This is all part of the reduction of the human memory to that which is visual alone, but not only that - it is also argued by Ellul that such artificial images reduce and relegate the rich overall impression of places that the mind filters and processes without the aid of cameras. Technique has thrust our memories into an artificial visual realm of snapshots of reality that have

¹⁵⁵ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, Penguin Press, 2015, p.46-47.

¹⁵⁶ Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation Of The Word*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.122.

been made (oft arbitrarily) into objects divorced and cut out of the overall mental, emotional and intellectual impression that may not simply be formed as instantly as a photo. Going by Ellul's argument, such a visual artifice has caused ourselves to be cut off from a genuine past that forms a continuum with the present¹⁵⁷.

Turkle talks about examples of how the conversations that take place within American families are impacted by the intrusive involvement of the internet. From the point of view of the parents, Turkle writes, the act of stopping a conversation or altering it by using the internet to bring "more data" into it is a benefit. But children do not see it that way. They see it as a turning away from being present in the conversation and thus showing a divided attention. It is bringing in a whole series of third parties who, while not physically present in the room, might as well be there to compete with the people in the room:

"Recall the fifteen-year-old who stopped her dad when he went online to "fact-check" a question that had come up at dinner. She said, "Daddy! Stop Googling! I want to talk to you!" She wants her simple presence to be enough. She doesn't want to be trumped, quizzed, edified, or in competition with the whole online world. A college junior whose father is in the habit of taking out his phone during dinner in order to make conversations more accurate describes its effect as putting conversations on a punishing "time-out." He says, "It's like pushing the reset button that takes things back to square one. Conversations aren't given a chance to develop."¹⁵⁸

We are seeing here how the imposition of Technique onto daily conversations results in a humiliation of the words shared by the free human subject. Ellul might say that such interventions of the internet into conversation constitutes the intrusion of Reality into the sphere of Freedom. Further, it could be argued that such fact-checking of conversations results in the reduction of the conversation to the mere communication of information, that which is apparent, that which is simply 'fact'. Turkle mentions people who feel that their personal and intimate relationships have become eroded by the mere sharing of information, rather than a meeting of

¹⁵⁷ Ibid p.159.

¹⁵⁸ Sherry Turkle, **Reclaiming Conversation**, Penguin Press, 2015, p.119.

subjects. Conversations lack depth and come down merely to what Ellul would call the realm of Reality and Necessity only. The smart phone technology is constantly interrupting the potential of these intimate couples to have meaningful encounters together, with all the awkward silences and tensions that such a thing implies:-

“Ray, twenty-eight, comments on what it’s like to have a relationship when you compete with screens: “I think the way we’re going, a lot of people are getting the feeling that even though the person they’re with is there, you don’t get the feeling of real connection. You just have information.” Kim is a college junior from New Jersey. Like Callie, she is frustrated by a boyfriend who is always on his phone. And she shares Ray’s concern that conversations in her relationship are mostly about information. It’s hard to make them about more because they are usually being interrupted by an incoming text.”¹⁵⁹

Sharing information of course is part of conversation, but what happens when the internet (in the guise of Technique) repeatedly subjects the ambiguous, inexact, personally-rooted words of somebody to its brutally efficient judgements on reality? Must what we say always be “right” or “correct” as approved by Reality? Ellul would say that it must not be so, and that language and its often indirect and inexact comparisons with external reality can offer us a window into Truth. And furthermore, does the fact-checker of the internet have wisdom? Or does it merely have information? Since the internet is not a human subject or even a collection of human subjects, it cannot intervene in a conversation except as an impersonal force that disrupts it towards the efficiency principle of the network. When our subjective thoughts and reflections are so easily and efficiently able to be subject to the scrutiny of fact (dialectically as the pole of Necessity and Reality) then what happens to the Freedom of our words, our language and the human subject? Conversation, for Ellul, is about discovering the other person with a shared means of language, which has a quality beyond mere ‘fact’. Our words are never self-evident but the facts, images, and representations of reality on the internet seem to tell us that they are self-evident. When we bring this into the language of our conversations it, from an Ellulian perspective, erodes the Freedom of our language. This is, of course, counter-intuitive if one believes that the internet makes our conversations freer because we can bring in so many things that we might not be able

¹⁵⁹ Ibid p.193.

to produce on our own. Yet, is this not the imposition of the “technical self” on the authentic human subject? Does not this intrusion of the internet (as Technique) in conversation erode that which is opposite to Technique - namely improvisation, spontaneity, imaginative reflection, and all that is imprecise and mysterious arising from the human subject?

The elimination of the human subject perhaps cannot be more strongly stated in the brief example given of the application known as Snapchat. Here Turkle writes that “young people have moved from wanting to put their energy into managing a Facebook-style profile to being more interested in ephemeral ten-second communications on Snapchat. They seem less interested in being defined by what they say about themselves and would rather be known as they are in the everyday, by how they behave and what they share. Snapchats and Instagrams and the very short videos of Vine have become the media of the moment.”¹⁶⁰ Unlike the image, words and language belong to the domain of the temporal, and that which is rooted in sequential development, time, and history. For Ellul, the modern individual who immerses himself in images is somebody who “has no past”. Images, he says, are only concerned with the present time or moment and thus there is no need to recall the past through the tool of language and personal reflection. Images are enough to prompt such an individual and remind him who he is. And this particular individual is somebody more driven by emotions and instincts, than reflective thought or intellect¹⁶¹. Furthermore, he is somebody more concerned with Reality and Necessity than with Truth and Freedom. What one says about themselves is, for such users, inferior in comparison to simply choosing to share bits of text, images, animation and video which does the job of unveiling the self. We are free to avoid the burden of self-description and creating a narrative by choosing the path which is more technically efficient. The question is, however, whether such freedom makes us able to truly express who we are beyond what is felt and expressed in the transient moment.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p.139.

¹⁶¹ Jacques Ellul, **The Humiliation Of The Word**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.210

CONCLUSION

It seems apparent that the Ellulian concept of “Technique” as well as his theological and sociological dialectics can uncover some intriguing dilemmas concerning our relationship to social media and internet communications. I have attempted to utilize Ellul’s dialectic concepts of ‘Freedom’, ‘Truth’, ‘Reality’, ‘Determination’ and ‘Necessity’ while approaching certain case-studies with the aim of philosophical and sociological analysis. Through doing so several questions have been raised as well as points for discussion. I would argue that at the heart of the issue of social media and internet communication lies the question as to whether such a medium enhances our freedom or restricts it. An Ellulian analysis shows a dialectic interplay at work. For example, in one case a young man felt that the technology empowered him and made his social anxiety lesser. In this sense, it could be argued that freedom was not restricted by the new technology. Yet, Ellul shows us that despite the sense of empowerment and freedom, such a person is in fact completely determined by the technological means that he is using.

Then there is the issue of emailing and text messaging and the impact it has on the sense of freedom pertaining to the human subject. Is such a technically efficient means suitable as a replacement for a telephone conversation? I may be free to be more careful in the words I choose and to think more with respect to how I react to the words sent to me. But to what extent is my conversation impacted and constrained by the ‘technique’ of this internet medium? Does it ‘determine’ me more than it offers me ‘freedom’? If email and text conversations do not have any sense of finality, then perhaps I do not have the freedom to choose what I finally want to say? And it seems that I can have no assurance that each of my statements are being listened to, either through the direct response of certain words, utterances or with a silence.

The relevance of the idea of the ‘performed self’ (as expressed by Erving Goffman) is challenged by Ellul’s view of ‘Technique’ which essentially limits the freedom of the human subject with respect to how it performs its subjectivity (its personality) and why it chooses to do so. We may well be performing selves, but in the world of internet networks the ‘selves’ which do the performing may not necessarily be the same sort of selves that Goffman was exploring in

various social settings. For instance, Ellul in his *Technological Bluff* writes that modern society is fundamentally a place of totalizing networks:

“The very idea of a fluid, all-encompassing network rules out humanity's dominant position. Human beings are simply within the network. As one network combines with others, their reality reduces both human subjectivity and human independence. We can only rely on the networks, which even as they increase our power reduce our independence, since without them we can literally no longer do anything. Basically, the attempt to create a counterculture or subculture in the 1960s, an attempt which finally failed when it came up against the structures of our society, is no longer conceivable to the extent that technique functions in networks.”¹⁶²

Though Ellul here is talking about networks in general, rather than the internet, it may still be pertinent towards the context of the human individual in relation to the vast, ever-changing fluid networks of the internet and social media. Our sense of power to reach others is increased, but with this increase in power results in a lessening of “human subjectivity and independence”. We become both dependent on the social media platforms to define ourselves, i.e. “I share. Therefore I am” and our sense of subjectivity becomes eroded by the techniques of communication and expression. For instance, on Facebook there is the real issue with respect to what happens to human dialogue. Does this approach anything near non-internet forms of communication? From Ellul’s perspective, Sherry Turkle’s studies suggest that the self becomes more like an object, and with language and words instantiated and made efficient in ways never before seen. A Facebook post, for instance, or a post on Twitter often seems to be produced in order to facilitate a response and a reaction. Ellul might say that such forms of online language are like artificial images because they emerge suddenly as instantiated events cut out of a normal linear temporal context. They are not thoughts penned as part of a long letter addressed to somebody, or as part of a daily diary, or any other linear development. Instead, they are thoughts that must immediately be shared, in the moment, in the present. In this sense, the words are very much concerned with the present and the moment just as the artificial image is.

¹⁶² Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990, p.146.

For Ellul, our words have come to serve images because often they are formed out of and affected by the same “universe”. Words and language are in their truest sense part of linear progression and development, but the person who lives in the world of images has no past, no history. There is only the thought of what one must express now, with urgent efficiency and so we can ask how this differs to the functional efficiency of images in conveying perceived Truth and Reality. Ellul shows us that the language of our Facebook profiles is a language that has become like an object, divorced of its connection to the subject. It is an objectified and fragmented language that does not reflect the complex nuances of dialogue that unravel in an uncertain, often inexact, oft awkward series of progressions in time. The normal dialogue between two people is a dialectic process of hiding and revealing, according to Ellul and is beyond the mere exchanging of direct opinions or information. The depth of language of face to face conversation, or that employed in a penned letter addressed to somebody is arguably of a different nature to that produced in internet discourse. In text messages, emails and facebook posts we may seem more free to edit, change and continually connect with others but ironically this freedom may well be increasing the impersonality of communication as a result. How is our communication on the internet less representative of ‘Freedom’ and ‘Truth’ (in the Ellulian sense) and more representative of Technique and Necessity? We might start by briefly looking at an older and now largely defunct technology applied at a distance to connect individuals across great distance and time.

Tim Jordan, a Professor of Digital Cultures, articulates certain distinguishing features of historical letter writing that attempt to affirm a connection between two human subjects and a sense of “co-presence” despite the gap of time and distance:

“Signatures, seals, self-identification, references to other letters, self-exposure and the ubiquity and nature of greetings and farewells are a strong set of material practices which, taken together, function to create the transmission of meaning by stabilizing who the author is and where meaning can be found.”¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Tim Jordan, **Internet, Society and Culture: Communicative Practices Before and After the Internet**, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, p.35.

These particular physical attributes of letters and the way they are designed to interact with a specific sender and receiver - prove quite a contrast to the impersonality of sending messages via the internet. There may not have been the technically-enabled freedom to send electronic letters instantaneously across the world, but perhaps one could argue that because time and distance is not destroyed by Technique; the older technology of the letter involves the full commitment of the author in terms of his subjectivity. He is not simply responding to an email as he responds to several other distractions and information. His full focus and his full personality is entrained on the letter and this is captured physically and in a ritual manner. In this sense, Ellul might argue that the human subject and his language is freer and less “determined” or subject to “Necessity” than the users of electronic communication.

As efficient as it may be to communicate on social media via sending messages, images and animations it, according to Ellul, may not constitute a legitimate form of human communication between actual subjects. Gone is the sense of presence of the “mystery” of the other person obtained from the natural silences that punctuate conversations face to face and perhaps sometimes on the telephone. We may have freedom to control the boundaries of communication online, but the price may well be an increasingly technically determined “self”. The Facebook, Twitter and Instagram “self” is an edited form of the person and thus we could challenge whether that person is still a human subject. Perhaps he or she has become at least in part, an object. In my thesis I wrote the following on the phenomenon of uploading photographs on social media as a tool for memory facilitation:

“Since we experience alienation from our daily reality, photographs on social media perhaps allow us to not only create our memories and manage them in an organised and efficient way but to therapeutically revisit those occasional experiences as a form of “reality”. This is perhaps because most of the time we are not able to accept the daily reality we are living in, thus the need for novel recollections of the past in the form of the image. Thus here we see perhaps the dialectic of Freedom and Determination at work, with Technique offering us an option of apparent freedom from alienation, but in truth the “freedom” it offers is only further alienation from authentic daily experience.”

Our dependence on images are a means of not only helping us process a Reality dominated by Technique, but they also (as we have seen) help us process our memories and experiences. But the effects of this may be profound with respect to impact on culture and society as a whole. Our own memories have an impact on how the collective culture develops and evolves.

Anthropologists have come to find that memories stored in our minds are not simply about what distinguishes us as unique individual subjects, but that they also have repercussions for what is transmitted to the next generation in terms of culture. But when we make our memories dependent on photographs stored on Instagram, on Facebook and other online-based media - we remove the transmission of culture from the human subject and outsource it to the means of Technique. We, thinking that we are free to access any memory via the efficient visual tools of social media - are in fact no longer free to transmit anything but the most superficial of cultural inheritances. Writing in his book, *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr provides an interesting summary of the thoughts of the playwright Richard Foreman on this very recent development and threat to culture and memory:

“In a recent essay, the playwright Richard Foreman eloquently described what’s at stake. “I come from a tradition of Western culture,” he wrote, “in which the ideal (my ideal) was the complex, dense and ‘cathedral-like’ structure of the highly educated and articulate personality—a man or woman who carried inside themselves a personally constructed and unique version of the entire heritage of the West.” But now, he continued,

“I see within us all (myself included) the replacement of complex inner density with a new kind of self—evolving under the pressure of information overload and the technology of the ‘instantly available.’” As we are drained of our “inner repertory of dense cultural inheritance,” Foreman concluded, we risk turning into “pancake people—spread wide and thin as we connect with that vast network of information accessed by the mere touch of a button.”¹⁶⁴

With respect to memories, I have shown that Ellul’s conception of human memory is based on the experience of the human individual and that it is not simply a series of collected experiences

¹⁶⁴ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows*, Atlantic Books, 2010, p.196

and moments. It is rich and complex and includes perceptions and reflections and other aspects intertwined with the memory. And for Ellul, memory has value because it is just as much about what we discard from our minds than what we retain. It makes who we are. But the social media and internet imagification of memory results in the human subject and its sense of personal history becoming “determined” by the network. The memory of a person becomes an object, to be manipulated and used however the structure of the network dictates. It seems that Ellul would say that the offloading of peoples’ memories into this world of social media and internet is a form of subjection of the human person to Technique and Reality, as opposed to Freedom and Truth. Of course, this opens up more questions about the nature of human memory, the extent that it impacts culture, the sense of self, as well as how free we are in choosing to remember and forget.

In summary, this thesis has paved the way for further research into the dialectics associated with Ellul’s concept of Technique with particular attention to the role of language and the image in internet communication. Given the restrictive empirical sources and case-studies used (i.e. from Sherry Turkle’s two books) the conclusions that can be reached may be tentative at best. It may seem that the way language develops and is communicated online has an impact on the human subjects involved. For Ellul, a freely expressed language is the highest expression of Freedom and serves as a contrast to Technique which aims to turn language more and more into a quantified, reductive, objective construct. Though we may feel free online when controlling how we communicate with others - our language is impacted and constrained to the dictates of Technique. This in turn, has repercussions for human Freedom as a whole and the sense of the human being as a stable human subject becomes unclear. It may be that the human subject becomes at least, partially an object - as do his or her words. We may be free to control the boundaries of communication and conversation as well as free to offload our memories via the usage of images. But the price of that freedom may well be a further erosion of the human subject and its further encasement into a technicized self at the service of an increasingly vast “civilization” of Technique.

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Recent Academic Profile

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2015 to present – Masters student in Civilization Studies, MEDIT Institute at Ibn Khaldun University, Istanbul.

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