

New Technologies and the Praxis of Silence in a Developed World

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ABSTRACT

As a result of the technological development we are witnessing some profound global changes that affect our lives in a very direct and ambivalent way. In fact, we have the feeling that technology is as useful as it is dangerous. And this double face produces in us some restlessness. This uneasiness is at the root of some practices that imply the total or partial renunciation of certain technological modes. These practices are not always endowed with a clear sense and foundation. They are rather fuzzy reactions guided by our sensations and intuitions. In the other pole, we have the work of some philosophers who have reflected on technology. Consequently, they have put forward valuable advices that remains, however, at an abstract level. Our hypothesis is that the notion of *technological silence* can function as a bridge between philosophical speculation and effective praxis, providing the first with concretion and the second with lucidity. To prove it, we will present, first, the very notion of technological silence (section 1), and then some contemporary practices aimed at the reduction of technology (section 2). Thirdly, we will present the recommendations of Heidegger and Kierkegaard for our use of technology (section 3). We will see, next, in what sense technological silence can act here as a bridge between philosophy and praxis (section 4). We will collect, finally, all the issues in a conclusive summary (section 5).

KEYWORDS: technology, releasement, uneasiness, Heidegger, technological fasting.

§1 WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND BY TECHNOLOGICAL SILENCE?

We shall call *technological silence* the deliberate and temporary interruption of the use of a given legitimate technology. With regard to illegitimate technologies, we are bound to refrain from them by a moral duty. For instance, refraining oneself from cloning humans or developing chemical weapons is not to be considered technological silence. In both cases we face technologies that violate all sensible moral criteria. On the other hand, a paradigmatic example of technological silence would be to temporarily stop using mobile phones. It is a ubiquitous technology, which by itself does not raise particular moral problems, and, on the contrary, provides great practical advantages to human life. Now, in some cases it may be fitting or beneficial to temporarily refrain from its use.

In fact, the concept of technological silence, or digital silence, derives from clinical psychology and is linked to the disconnection from social media and from digital tools, such as the cell phone or the tablet, which allow access to social media and which apparently may cause addiction pathologies (García Huete, 2017). Therefore, technological silence is recommended by clinical psychology as a kind of preventive or therapeutic measure.

However, our approach is philosophical, and not psychological. It is previous and somehow independent from any clinical consideration. We want to explore the meaning

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of technological silence for human life. Furthermore, our approach attempts to be wider, since it refers to all legitimate technologies and not just to those related to digital communications. Thus, technological silence, by metaphorically interpreting the notion of silence, extends to all technological realms and uses. For instance, we can talk of technological silence with regard to the use of cars or elevators.

A few other precisions regarding the concept of technological silence are in order. Refraining from using a certain technology, even momentarily, implies the use of another one or, at least, of some kind of technical device. If we refrain from mobile phones, probably it would be in order to use the traditional phone or the postal service. There is no level of human action completely free from technics. Abstaining totally from it would require avoiding the use of fire or cutting tools, something absolutely incompatible with human life, given our mere anatomic features. In other words, as humans, we can aspire towards some autonomy from a particular technology, but not from technics in general. Humanness already involves technics.

However, Ortega's observations (2013, 2) regarding the specificity of technics in modern times are perfectly fitting in this context: "Today, the progress of technics allows us to enjoy already made a large number of things that previously each one had to make or, at least, take part in its making". Consequently –Ortega adds (2013, 2-3)–, "the placement of today's man toward his own life is more unreal, more unconscious, than the one of the medieval man".

Ortega is right in placing the tipping point precisely in the transition from the Middle Ages to Modernity. Such passage coincides with, and sometimes consists of, the passing over from one model of technics to another, that is, the passage from technics to technology. Technology is a specific and new model of technics, whose distinctive feature is its symbiosis with science. Science and technics are two different historical and conceptual realities. However, our modern civilization is marked by their mutual cooperation. From the onset of modernity, science and technics cooperate and foster each other, thus causing a significant global change. This new modality of technics, which is called technology, places us in a type of life that Ortega labels as "more unreal". At the very least, it is a type of life far removed from the biological and historical foundations of humanity. It is for this reason that we speak of technological –and not just technical– silence.

What deserves to be silenced from time to time is technology, or some of its uses and applications. Thus, we shall be able to recover for a moment a certain sense of reality, to connect with our biological and historical foundations, to know ourselves. Once achieved such lucidity, we may go back and use technology, using it in a way that would be freer, less blind and dependent. Putting into practice a technical silence, refraining ourselves, for instance, from the simplest techniques, like those used to cook food or to keep warm from the cold, would be less interesting. Yet, the reflection on voluntary practices of extreme survival is still fascinating in order to understand our human condition². Among other things, it shows how indispensable is technics for the human being –since, in the end, any difficulty is solved by resorting to survival *techniques*– and how inhuman their lives become as they do without the most basic techniques.

Therefore, here we shall refer above all to a temporary refraining from advanced and legitimate technological devices. It is mainly this type of praxis that can be useful and meaningful in the daily lives of (post)modern humans, and we shall refer to it.

² See, for example, *Man vs Wild*, a TV program by Edward Michael Grylls.

§2 PRACTICES OF UNEASINESS

Nowadays, many people temporarily and voluntarily refrain from some technologies. They do it for a wide array of reasons, both after careful meditation and in the spur of the moment. We shall now present some significant models of this kind of behavior, with no pretension of thoroughness or sistematicity, but rather as a way of example. All in all, we get the impression that technological fasting responds to some kind of uneasiness, to some kind of basic mistrust. It seems that we do not like to place ourselves completely into the hands of technology and are glad to do without them from time to time.

We have already mentioned the disconnection from digital devices as the paradigmatic example of technological silence. Enjoying some time without accessing social media, without an internet connection, without the unceasing assault of phone calls and messages, without the glitter of screens, is for some people almost a hygienic measure. The regulated use of this type of technologies is also recommended for minors. The *American Academy of Pediatrics* advises to totally refrain from them during the first two years, followed by a supervised and regulated use throughout childhood³. Therefore, the expression “digital detox” has been coined, which *Wikipedia* (AA.VV., 2018) defines as follows,

Digital detox refers to a period of time during which a person refrains from using electronic connecting devices such as smartphones and computers. It is regarded as an opportunity to reduce stress, focus more on social interaction and connection with nature in the physical world.

There are already institutions devoted to providing times and spaces for the so-called digital detox. The advertising of a leading center of digital detox is quite telling: “We provide individuals, families and companies the opportunity to put aside their digital arm, gain perspective, and reemerge with new found inspiration, balance and connection”⁴. Whatever we may think of this type of companies, it is undeniable that they have found the key to a widely extended sentiment in our society.

We have mentioned above the practices of extreme survival, where most technologies used in our daily lives are left aside. To such cases we might add many others. For instance, there are set dates to silence a given technology, such as *World Car Free Day* (September 22) and *No Elevators Day* (April 25). Furthermore, every day thousands of hikers or pilgrims all over the world choose not to use planes, cars and other modern means of transport and instead to cover a large distance on foot or by bike. Why? Moreover, bicycles have experienced in recent decades a true revival after a period of eclipse⁵.

Even more striking is that, in the age of cars, the number of people covering voluntarily large distances on foot is also increasing. Hiking has become a very common practice. It is noteworthy the boom of routes such as the Way of Saint James (*Camino de Santiago*). It is a network of European pedestrian pathways coming down from the Middle Ages. It

³ In the institution’s webpage (<https://www.aap.org>) there are some recommendations regarding limits in the use of media according to age.

⁴ Available at <http://digitaldetox.org/>.

⁵ Information available at <http://www.worldometers.info/bicycles/>.

is quite telling the fact that this kind of activity declined with the advent of modernity only to grow steadily in recent decades⁶.

There are many other practices, ever more common, pointing in the same direction: washing clothes and dishes by hand, cooking with fire, knitting or weaving, playing board games, doing home improvement projects, doing some revitalized craft or farming... Particularly significant –and troubling for some– is the fact that e-book sales have stagnated in recent years while traditional paper books stand their ground and even recover their market share⁷. Even among educators, there are people who from time to time do without digital paraphernalia. What do we seek with this kind of post-PowerPoint pedagogy?

Today, this way of proceeding is not just adopted by citizens or consumers, but also by companies and by society in general. For instance, in the so-called energy mix we can combine facilities provided with cutting-edge technology and modest waterfalls. Industries can also mix highly-technologized production lines with others far closer to traditional crafts. Therefore, products made by using a less technological production system become more valuable due to a number of variegated reasons, from esthetical to ethical motives and from didactic to ecological reasons, not to speak of the recognition of its distinctiveness, halfway between art and technology.

Let us consider also the rhythms. There are people who do not obsessively go after the latest digital gadget, taking their time before changing hardware. There are even some people who have developed a taste for “vintage” technology, not only for vintage decoration or fashion. None of these cases reveal an ultimate or total renouncement to technology, but rather a temporary interruption of its use or a preference for a slower pace. We deem appropriate to include in this list the so-called *slow movement*, with its taste for slowness and tranquility, since often technologies are used precisely to speed up some processes in life (AA.VV., 2017). The movement was born as an alternative to fast food, but quickly it spread to other realms of life. Whoever chooses slowness may indeed practice a form of technological silence. In this path of slowness we also find the many forms of meditation, whether traditional or new, that are so fashionable nowadays and that can be seen as a way to temporarily refrain from technology.

Finally, we shall mention two versions of technological silence deriving from a clearly religious inspiration. First of all, we must refer to the so-called *technological fasting*, evidently linked to other fasting religious traditions such as Lent or Ramadan. It is also connected with the *Shabat* or Sunday observance, insofar as they are the traditional days to rest from work and to reduce technical activities. The praxis of technological fasting is also used nowadays with therapeutic purposes.

In the second place, we shall consider the curious case of the Amish, who, for religious reasons, have chosen to do without some modern technologies, not all of them. The criterion does not seem to be consistent and therefore there is a large diversity among Amish groups. For instance, some Amish use washing machines or chainsaws, whereas others refuse to use them⁸.

⁶ Information available at <https://www.editorialbuencamino.com/estadistica-peregrinos-del-camino-de-santiago/> and at <https://oficinadelperegrino.com/estadisticas/>.

⁷ Information available at <https://universoabierto.org/2017/02/21/tendencias-del-libro-electronico-2017/comment-page-1/>.

⁸ See the report at <http://amishamerica.com/amish-technology-friendliness/>.

The Amish case calls for some further clarification. Their refraining from some technologies, such as television and cars, is not temporary, but rather permanent. Consequently, strictly speaking, we cannot say that the Amish practice technological silence with regard to them. Furthermore, their renouncement derives from the fact that they see such technologies as illegitimate. Thus, the Amish somehow resemble the most radical forms of contemporary ecologism and, like them, depart from moderate or tolerant positions, which are far more common in our society.

Finally, as a conclusion to this section and as an introduction to the next, we must say that the Amish foster in their lives an attitude called in their German dialect *Gelassenheit*. It may be understood as serenity, calm, detachment, acceptance, renouncement to revenge and to prominence. It is the very term we shall read in a key text by Heidegger, probably a not so casual coincidence. The term is etymologically related, for example, to the French verb *laisser*, to the Italian verb *lasciare*, to the Latin adjective *laxus* or to the Spanish noun *relajación*, all of them deriving from the Indo-European root *sleg*.

§3 RELEASEMENT (*GELASSENHEIT*)

Facing the uneasiness caused by the technological development, Heidegger has advised to adopt an attitude far removed both from technologism and from luddism.

An attitude is a stable disposition to act in a given way before a set of variable circumstances. If a certain attitude predisposes us to do the right, we call it a virtue. The virtuous attitude we are to display toward technics is called releasement (*Gelassenheit*) by Heidegger: “I would call this comportment toward technology which expresses ‘yes’ and at the same time ‘no’, by an old word, releasement toward things” (1966, 54). It is noteworthy the fact that the whole digital world is based on the disjunction “yes or no”, that is, “0 or 1”, while Heidegger precisely proposes the conjunction “yes and no” as the epitome of the fitting attitude toward technics.

A similar formulation –that may be clarifying– is the one offered by Søren Kierkegaard (1993, 208). According to him, the fitting attitude of detachment will be achieved

only when the human being, though he works and spins, is just like the lily, which does not work or spin, only when the human being, although he sows and reaps and gathers into barns, is just like the bird, which does not sow and reap and gather into barns.

Now, let us go back to Heidegger (1966, 54): “We can affirm the unavoidable use of technical devices, and also deny them the right to dominate us, and so to warp, confuse, and lay waste our nature”. We see how Heidegger uses a more philosophical formulation than Kierkegaard, although, in the end, both point in the same direction.

We should be clear: there is no need to save human beings from technology. Heidegger never demonizes it: “It would be foolish to attack technology blindly. It would be shortsighted to condemn it as the work of the devil. We depend on technical devices” (1966, 53). However, human beings must be saved from a wrong attitude toward technology, from a thoughtless, rushed, acritical, and hardly free attitude: “We can use technical devices, and yet with proper use also keep ourselves so free of them, that we may let go [*loslassen*] of them any time” (1966, 54).

In the end, as Michael Sandel suggests, whereas nature conditions and constrains us, it is at the same time a prerequisite for the exercise of our freedom. Technology provides us with some autonomy toward nature, although it imposes new conditions and restrictions upon us. Therefore, our freedom, both with regard to nature and with regard

to technology, is always characterized by negotiation. We cannot do without them –nature and technology–, but we must try to keep a certain distance from them. In Sandel’s words, “part of freedom [...] consists in a persisting negotiation with the given” (2007, 83).

These are the recommendations of philosophers, based on a profound understanding of technology and of human nature itself. We may miss in them a greater specificity, a closer proximity to daily praxis. We are told to use technological devices without attaching ourselves to them, always preserving our human essence. Now, how do we do that? What particular actions do substantiate such an attitude? We must remember that, on the other extreme of this dialectical game, we have a set of very concrete practices which tend to respond to feelings and intuitions rather than to philosophical meditations. They are sometimes carried out with the best of intentions, but provide little insight with regard to the criteria or meaning behind them. Is it possible to bring them closer, to establish some kind of contact between both extremes for their mutual benefit?

An initial step in that direction will be taken by offering an interpretation of Heidegger’s words: “Yes and no” to technology. How shall we understand them? Maybe Heidegger is inviting us to consider our human essence as the defining criterion. We have to say “yes” to the technology that respects our essence and “no” to the technology that devastates our humanness. This is a fruitful interpretation. It serves us to rebut all applications that destroy human beings, as it is the case with much of the anthropotechnics proposed nowadays by transhumanism (Marcos, 2016; Diéguez, 2017). It is also useful to oppose all technologies harming the environment, the home of humanity, and therefore human life. At the same time, we can still say “yes” to technology in general and to some particular uses insofar as they favor a truly human life.

Let us offer some examples in order to see how this criterion can be both precise and useful. In the field of biotechnology, if we follow this principle, we should emphatically say “yes” to the reprogramming of somatic cells (iPS) and to RNA editing with CRISPR-Cas13, while we should say “no” to other biotechnologies involving the destruction of human embryos, identity conflicts or the modification of humanity’s genetic heritage, as it is the case, for instance, with some forms of genetic editing or human cloning (Cox, 2017; Yamanaka, 2012; Marcos, 2016a).

By way of a preliminary hermeneutical move, we have brought closer the advice of philosophers and the praxis of laboratories. We know that iPS can be obtained from many somatic tissues. Therefore, this type of technology does not imply the destruction of human embryos. On the other hand, genetic editing with CRISPR-Cas13 refers to RNA, not to DNA, thus leaving untouched our genetic heritage. Both technologies are welcomed from a technological and an ethical viewpoint, whereas other illegitimate technologies must be turned down.

However, Heidegger’s statement can be interpreted in still another way. We can understand that both, yes and no, refer to the same technological application. Of course, it should be one of the applications that have stood the earlier test, that is, a legitimate application of technology. Accordingly, we cannot say “yes” and “no” to human cloning, since it requires a “no”. On the other hand, the examples we are considering help us to see how we cannot simply say “no” to some technologies. Once we have them, its use in some circumstances is a must. If, by using CRISPR-Cas13, we could heal some illnesses, it seems obvious that we should not do without it. Obviously, it would not be acceptable that a hospital decided that twice a month it will not use anesthetic when doing surgery. On the other hand, it is acceptable for a person to choose how frequently he or she is going to use or stop using a computer, a car, an elevator or a GPS device. Therefore, there

are some technological applications we must say “no”, there are some others we must say “yes”, and there is a wide range of technological devices we may say “yes” and “no”. This is the meaning of our second interpretation of Heidegger’s text. And this is the area that has to do with technological silence.

§4 PRACTICES OF RELEASEMENT

Let us suppose, then, that technological silence is a way to practice the attitude of releasement toward technology recommended by Heidegger, an attitude that says yes and no at the same time. Now we can ask ourselves what we get with such an attitude. Heidegger reminds us that “there are, then, two kinds of thinking, each justified and needed in its own way: calculative thinking and meditative thinking” (1966, 46). The temporary refrainment from a given technology involves the passage from calculative thinking –which tells us that we will arrive earlier by using the car than by walking– to meditative, reflective thinking. Technological silence provides us with some distance from technological devices, a distance that allows us to think meditatively about them. It does not prevent us from using them, but it helps us avoid using them in a thoughtless, automatic, and, in sum, hardly human manner. If we dispensed with meditation, maybe technology

could so captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking [...] Then man would have denied and thrown away his own special nature — that he is a meditative being. Therefore, the issue is the saving of man's essential nature. Therefore, the issue is keeping meditative thinking alive (Heidegger, 1966, 56).

By virtue of the meditative distance it provides us with, technological silence gives us a clearer understanding of the true value and meaning of technology. We appreciate better what a car gives us after walking some kilometers and what a calculator offers us after doing some operations by hand. Technological silence provides us with lucidity in order to understand the proper goals of technology and its anthropological roots. It teaches us *that* we need technology, since, when we dispense with one model, we always adopt another one, but it also teaches us *why* we need it. Even the most transitory technological fasting will contribute to establish the right order regarding human goals and technical devices, regarding what is important and what is secondary; it will provide us with greater freedom from technology, not to do away with it, but rather to put it at the service of the flourishing of human life. It will help to guide technology toward *becoming ourselves*, which is its deepest meaning. In the end, technology is meant to produce and help blossoming a truly human life, that is, a life according to our common human nature and to each person’s identity.

This is what is essential; yet, do we get something else from technological silence? Yes. Specifically, it fosters the knowledge of our human nature and of each individual person. Since, when we silence some technologies, we need to adopt others –probably simpler ones–, for a moment we are positioned closer to the roots of our own humanness. When we silence a fast means of transport or a system of digital communication, our placement in time and space changes. We go back to a position similar to the one which conditioned our biological evolution. Provisionally we revert to the type of space-time relations that existed during most of our biological and cultural evolution, we get closer to our body and our history, as well as closer to the natural world. We know by experience that, just by turning off our mobile phone, our coordinates in time and space are modified. Whoever was close, at the touch of the screen, is now far away, whereas the person seating

next to us, who we had not even looked at, becomes the nearest human being. We should not renounce the new coordinates derived from technology, but we should not forget either the traditional coordinates based on our biological and social conditions, those conditions which have defined our foundations for centuries.

Technology uproots us from our ancestral ground. It modifies space-time relations and changes our biological bases regarding nutrition and sleep. It alters the rhythm of our sensorial experiences, exposing us to new radiations and even removing us from our usual gravitational field. For good or bad, it disrupts social relations, family settings and reproductive models. However, we still need a foundation, maybe no longer our ancestral ground, but a ground that, after all, must be welcoming to human beings. Heidegger (1966, 55) thinks that we can find a new ground on which we can blossom. According to him, it is precisely releasement what promises “a new ground and foundation upon which we can stand and endure in the world of technology without being imperiled by it”.

Furthermore, the technological silence used with regard to legitimate technologies contributes to the personal development of virtues such as fortitude, courage, generosity and temperance, which are necessary to stand up to illegitimate technological applications whenever we are forced to do it. Moreover, the technological devices we silence may occasionally malfunction, and therefore the technical levels we (re)activate when practicing this type of technological silence may be useful as a safety net. For instance, we can sail using a GPS device or a compass; however, if the GPS device fails, it would be a good idea to have some notion about how to use a compass.

Finally, we must point out that the advice to have moments of technological silence, however specific it may be, cannot become a meticulous recipe book. There is no need to offer thorough guidelines regarding different technologies and recommended periods of refrainment. It is important to stress that technological silence must always be practiced under the guidance of prudence. This, however, does not condemn us to irrationality or subjectivism in our practical decisions, since prudence is true rational knowledge aiming at objective truth. It is a type of knowledge built in the subject as a habit, as a second nature. The subject is able to attain it through action, by practicing it and under the initial guidance –or *paideia*– of those individuals who already are prudent (Aubenque, 1999; Marcos 2011).

§5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

“Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind”, Kant wrote (1998, 193-194 [A51])⁹. Our goal here has been to provide philosophical thoughts about technology with some content, as well as to provide the intuitions behind certain practices with clear concepts. In order to do so, we have expounded the idea of technological silence as the embodiment of Heidegger’s recommendations, and we have connected it with some present practices related to technology, for it may become their guide and criterion. We have interpreted in a twofold way Heidegger’s advice to say “yes” and “no” to technology. First, it suggests that we cannot offer a monolithic response to technology, neither by resorting to technologism nor to luddism. On the contrary, some technological applications deserve a “no” and others a “yes”. At a second level, we assume that it is advisable to temporarily do without many legitimate technological devices, always under the guidance of prudence. And it is advisable because this practice

⁹ Here Kant is talking about the relationship between rationalism and empirism and about the need to go beyond them by linking concepts and intuitions.

provides us with some autonomy, some freedom from technology, thus fostering our human growth and our fulfillment as persons. This use of technology gives it its true meaning. Technological silence helps us avoid becoming slaves of technology, putting it at the service of the human being.

In sum, as we have seen, Heidegger's releasement finds partial expression in what we have called technological silence, and the specific practices we have referred to become meaningful as they reconcile meditative and calculative thinking; however, they are meaningless if they are born out of some kind of thoughtless nostalgia, laziness or fear to innovation.

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