HELPING HANDS

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Introduction

As technology advances, it reverses the characteristics of every situation again and again. The age of automation is going to be the age of 'do it yourself'.
(Marshall McLuhan, 1957)

I guess the most plausible thing to think would be: McLuhan was right. Automation, computerized in particular, has enabled (or forced) us to be less dependent on other individuals to get certain things done, such as banking, mailing, shopping, etc. We all have our personal assistants in our pockets and on our desks, but should we settle with the belief that the act of giving a set of instructions to a system that finishes the rest of the job is really increasing our level of independence? Are we really 'doing things ourselves'?

In this essay, I will try to formulate a critique on the general assumption that modern technology is the helping hand of man, while in fact I think the tables are turning, or at least the conditions have changed. Did we reach or cross a certain threshold or tipping point in the development and use of our technologies? In my attempt to clarify this, I will mainly draw on the ideas of Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher who's work is viewed as one of the cornerstones of media theory, and the writings of Lieven De Cauter, particularly his view on capsularity and the importance of technology in this process. Next to this I will briefly touch the subject of *McDonaldization*, a metaphor for the rationalization process of our society, introduced by sociologist George Ritzer in the early '90s. The relationship and distinction between man and tool, where the latter is supposed to be subordinate to and at the service of the first, is maybe not as clear-cut as generally presumed or presented.

I   The capsular aspect

In the spirit of McLuhan's theories, one could say that every extension of man – his general idea of what a medium is – results at the same time in an amputation or restriction of some kind. The automobile would be the classic example: the car allows us to travel, just as our feet and legs do, only faster and with less physical effort. The amputations resulting from this would include loss of muscle strength, weakening of walking skills, etc. As the medium evolves, it takes over the abilities from the organ, sense or function it originally meant to intensify, making us completely dependent on the extension itself. This is nothing

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new, in fact, it is as old as the existence of man. From the invention of stone tools to cut, pound or dig to the space satellites we use to navigate, communicate, observe,... technology has always been an interplay between amplification and diminution.

All media enhance speed in some sort of way: traveling, communication, information, commerce, etc. The speed of movement and the increase of flows of information induced by the rise of technological media, particularly the last decades, makes that the human species, not exactly the toughest of beings, has to build in protections. Lieven De Cauter, a Belgian philosopher, art historian, writer and activist who teaches Cultural Philosophy in Leuven, Brussels, and Rotterdam, considers most, if not all media – and therefore our extensions – as capsules or as technologies that have capsular counterparts (De Cauter, 2004, p.78). They could be defined as artificial occlusions that protect us from an outer environment. A clear example would be a house that protects us from the outside, or even more obvious, a space capsule that makes it possible to survive and travel in a vacuum. Again, this concept of 'shells' is as old as our existence or the existence of culture. We are surrounded and enclosed by our extensions, anytime and anywhere. According to De Cauter, culture as a whole could be considered the capsule of man (De Cauter, 2004, p.77). This aligns with McLuhan's theory that all media or technologies, languages as much as weaponry, create new environments or habitats, which become the milieu for new species or technologies (McLuhan, 1969, p.160).

Next to building physical capsules as extensions of the body, there's also the equivalent of the mind: virtual capsules. Much of our recent technology could be described in terms of virtual capsules, but again, and I seem to be caught in a feedback loop here, this is an ancient concept. When watched, any type of screen for instance creates a closed-off mental environment, a virtual space, that is detached from the actual space one is physically occupying at that moment. Although it is the content shown on the screen and one's personal relation to it that determines the level of detachment, it is the screen that makes it possible to create the split between the virtual and the real. Film screens, television sets or computer monitors are the obvious examples that come to mind, but books, billboards or even ordinary windows could be regarded as screens that have the ability to create a temporary self-contained mental space, a rupture between the actual and the imagined. Information technology, our world is immersed by it, relies on and cultivates this constant creation of virtual spaces.

So if this process of equipping and encapsulating ourselves with all kinds of extensions is historically inherent to the evolution of man, what's the point of questioning the ethics of technology today? Why should we think critical about this process since it is has always been part of what we are? I think the answer to that question is to be found in the paradoxical disabling or numbing effect each extension produces, and accordingly, the impact of the speed and multitude with which we develop new and renewed media on this 'paralysing' effect. To cope with the implications and effects of media, we have to protect ourselves against the shocks or stimuli they entail. McLuhan refers to this as the 'Narcissus narcosis':

> *[...] All media, from the phonetic alphabet to the computer, are extensions of man that cause deep and lasting changes in him and transform his environment. Such an extension is an intensification, an amplification of an organ, sense or function, and whenever it takes place, the central nervous system appears to institute a self-protective numbing of the affected area, insulating and anesthetizing it from conscious awareness of what's happening to it. It's a process rather like that which occurs to the body under shock or stress conditions, or to the mind in line with the Freudian concept of repression. I call this peculiar form of self-hypnosis Narcissus narcosis.*
> (Marshall McLuhan in The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan, March 1957)

While a plane enables us to travel at high speeds, we transfer the 'hostility' of the outer environment – being the air here – onto the tool itself. We experience mobility in a highly immobile state. We literally go fast sitting down. De Cauter speaks of 'sedentary nomadism' (De Cauter, 2004, p.79). In this respect, capsules can be seen as environments of simulation and exclusion. They create an artificial climate which reduces the communication with the 'outside' to a bare minimum, if not completely eliminating it, but at the same time mimic conditions that are part of this outer environment. A typical example would be the television. It represents public sphere while abolishing it at the same time, on a physical as well as a mental level. It is external space simulated within (De Cauter, 2004, p.46).

It is perhaps in this 'exclusionary' effect of media that we have reached or crossed a certain threshold. To put it very simple: my impression is that we are starting to 'lose touch' with the capsules we build. While the concept of 'extensions' implies the presence of a certain attachment – physical or not –, a point of reference to or a connection with the sense, organ or function it was meant to extend, amplify, improve, aid,... this link seems to fade gradually with the excessive growth of media. Extensions are extended by new extensions, capsules nested within capsules. It is as if we are at the centre of a matryoshka doll to which layers are continuously being added. The more layers, the bigger the distance between the smallest and the largest piece, respectively man and his newest, capsular, technologies. This process of layering is also reflected in the opaque character of many of the contemporary tools we use. Their membrane is more and more hermetic. This notorious 'black box' principle we are all familiar with – even without thinking about it – emphasizes on the movement of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion I mentioned earlier. As we are locking ourselves in, we are locking ourselves out.

We tend to have a great deal of confidence in these nontransparent technologies, as we entrust a lot of our daily activities to them without too much questioning. Sure, technology has an emancipatory power, but this empowering effect has its implications, too. While it creates a greater sense of individual control and capability, this feeling manifests itself on a rather 'superficial' level. We are generally in a position of giving imposed commands in order to achieve largely predetermined – if even discernible – results. The in-between process, and in many cases the results (those 'shown' to us as an outcome and those produced are not necessarily the same), are beyond our scope. At this point, we are at the mercy of the systems we use, and thus at the mercy of their maker.

II   The generic aspect

The generic embodies the phantasm of weightlessness and mobility in the artificial paradises of consumption, where people sample a personal identity based on corporate material.
(De Cauter, 2004, p.44)

When talking about the evolution of usage and development of technology, one cannot ignore its enmeshment with a capitalist mode of production. One of the characteristic features of capitalism lies in its generic aspect. While the term generic is most commonly used as a reference to products without a brand, more generally it means that every product is not an individual in itself, but an instance of a corporate identity, of its brand, its kind. It literally belongs to a sort, a genus (De Cauter, 2004, p.43). Needless to say that over the past century, we've experienced a wave of globalization regulated by multinationals that compromise the model of the local artisan stores with the concept of chains. This process of *McDonaldization*, a term coined by the American sociologist George Ritzer in a book called *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993), thrusts society into an ever more generic bodice. Ritzer outlines four

dominant themes: efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. To do this, he starts from the work of the German sociologist and political economist Max Weber, who saw the late nineteenth and early twentieth century society he lived in as the centre of the ongoing process of rationalisation. While Weber considered the bureaucracy as the archetypal manifestation of this process, Ritzer sees the socially structured form of the fast-food restaurant as the paradigm of organisational force representing and extending the process of rationalization further into the realm of everyday interaction and individual identity in the late twentieth century. Without analysing the ideas of both sociologists too elaborately – this would provide me with enough material for another essay – I will quickly go through each of the four intertwined dimensions Ritzer distinguishes in this *McDonaldization* (i.e. rationalization) proces.

Efficiency

In short: choosing the optimum means to a given end. While the idea of efficiency is obviously to the interests of business and industry, it is in the first place heavily marketed as a real benefit to the costumer. Supermarkets, cash machines, take-away, microwave dinners, the list of things that save time or effort compared to their previous, 'inefficient' predecessors (specialized local grocery stores, bank employees, home-cooked dinner, etc.) is endless. In this, mostly institutionalized, process of streamlining various processes, simplifying products and services, the customer ultimately ends up doing more work, formerly done by paid employees. And this 'privilege' comes at a cost. In the long run, the customer ends up spending time learning new technologies, has to remember more numbers, and often pays higher prices in order for the business to operate more efficiently. For workers, more efficiency mostly equals a more deadening, unvaried job. The model of the assembly line is undoubtedly a very efficient one, but that it has a significant reductional effect on the work of the people manning it is hardly arguable. Ritzer claims that the continuous search for more efficiency results in the dehumanization of customers and workers (Ritzer, 1996, p.35).

Calculability

Product, service, competence,... simply everything in contemporary society has to be calculated, counted and quantified in some way. Important in this context of calculability is the alliance between quantity, quality and speed (this is also the case for efficiency). All of them are measured in relation to one another, they are like communicating barrels that are in a constant state of comparison, tussle, influence, etc. In Ritzer's view of a *McDonaldizing* society, there tends to be an emphasis on quantity rather than quality: the fixation on 'more is more', the widespread efforts to create the illusion of quantity and the tendency to reduce production and service processes to numbers (Ritzer, 1996, p.78). He also mentions the importance of computer technology in this process:

> *Many aspects of today's quantity-oriented society could not exist, or would need to be greatly modified, were it not for the computer. [...] Although society undoubtedly was already moving toward increased calculability, continuing advances in computer technology have greatly expedited and extended that movement.*
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> (Ritzer, 1996, p.77)

Predictability

Perhaps this dimension has the closest connection with De Cauter's notion of the generic, capsular civilization. Predictability emphasizes on themes such as structure, discipline, systematization and routine (Ritzer, 1996, p.99). It is the attempt to cancel out the unexpected, minimize the space for surprise and reduce the chance of unplanned spontaneity as much as possible. The rise of chains mirrors this evolution. Not only fast-food restaurants, hotels or shops pop up like daisies everywhere, also the entertainment industry and broadcast media has its share in the increasing level of predictability in our contemporary environments. The spin-off series in television programming, the endless list of Idol contests, the ridiculous amount of reality shows, the movie industry that churns out sequel after sequel, and so on. Concepts with high ratings get sold, slightly modified at best, and shown in different countries all over the world, resulting in a predictable profit for the chains that produce them. They are all instances of the same formula, they all belong to the same genus. Predictability results in a flattened, generic landscape that is shaped by a few standardized templates such as the shopping mall, the theme park, reality TV or the fast-food restaurant, all permeated by elements of enclosure, safety and simulation.

Control

Finally, and arguably the most disturbing element of the *McDonalidization* process for Ritzer, is the level of control which is required to ensure such standardisation. This emphasis on strong control is achieved through the intervention of what Ritzer describes as non-human technologies. Such technologies, according to Ritzer, serve not to empower the individual but instead subjugate him or her to the rhythms of the rationalized world. Examples of this are the conveyor-belt, the timed deep-fat fryer or the computerised, itemised cash register. The great source of uncertainty, unpredictability and inefficiency in any rationalizing system is people – either those who work within it or those served by it (Ritzer, 1996, p.101), so in order to optimise the system, reducing human involvement is favourable, if not necessary. This is how Ritzer describes the logic behind this mechanism of replacement and control:

> *The basic idea, historically, is for organizations to gain control over people gradually and progressively through the development and deployment of increasingly effective technologies. Once people are controlled, it is possible to begin reducing their behaviour to a series of machinelike actions. And once people behave like machines, they can be replaced by actual machines such as robots. The replacement of humans by machines is the ultimate stage in control over people.*
> (Ritzer, 1996, p.101)

III   Conclusion

It's hard to agree with all the arguments Ritzer brings up about the rationalization process of our society. I don't. The urge to cram everything into the universal mold of McDonalds in order to expound every single aspect of this process is at times tiring and farfetched. It is almost ironic that this itself in many respects represents some sort of *McDonaldization* of the scholarly text. Throughout the book, everything is presented to the reader in bite-size chunks, which turns it into a fairly pleasant reading experience overall, but as with the fast food he criticises, it leaves you with a certain sense of emptiness not long after. Perhaps it was Ritzer's intention to emphasize and exemplify his theory this way, but that seems highly unlikely. Nevertheless, I think that the four main themes he broaches, particularly the aspect of control, offer a valuable framework for critical thinking about the implications of technological evolution today.

There are several ways to take this critical position. The use of old, 'obsolete' technologies can be one of them. Justifying this by means of nostalgia would be insufficient, to say the least. I think that the value of 'old' media is to be found in the attempt to re-establish and experience the connection between ourselves and the tools we use, by 'reconnecting' the extensions that they are with whatever human capability they were meant to extend, improve, amplify or surpass. It is a matter of questioning and redefining our position in this relationship and the way this influences the very nature of our competences. Let us take the act of writing for example. The typewriter has not only extended this particular skill (preceded by other inventions such as parchment, paper, ink, brushes, pens, etc.) but also shaped our understanding of what it means to write. The computer in turn has transformed this perception, among an endless list of others, over and over again. The development of new software continues doing so every day. The invention of the plotter, the printer, the fax machine, the monitor, the mobile phone,... they all produced and modelled our contemporary perception of writing (next to a range of other abilities). Taking a few steps back and unwrapping some layers of the matryoshka doll can help us not only to get a better understanding of modern technology, but also of the ways in which culture is constructed. De Cauter's earlier cited statement that culture is the capsule of man also reflects this intertwinement.

While criticism does not equal scepticism or reluctancy, the risk of being dismissed as a Luddite – the nineteenth century technological/industrial equivalent of an iconoclast – always lurks around the corner in this context. I would not consider myself a technophobe that shudders at every technological innovation, on the contrary. I have my personal assistant in my pockets, too. But what I do think is that technology has a huge part in the evolution towards a more generic, calculable, predictable and above all controlled society, causing huge shifts in our relationship with the tools we use. The feeling of individual independence, mobility and control is often an illusion, heavily marketed by a consumerist system that dictates the rules and is ultimately pulling the strings. As automation has become the production standard for many of our everyday activities, perhaps the question is whether we can still speak in McLuhanian terms of media as the extensions of man. If personal identities are defined by a handful of form fields, adequacy by a list of numbers, control by the push of a button, isn't it rather man who is slowly turning into an extension of the binary logic, committed to changing 0's into I's?

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