

Capital vs Technology: Are We Shaped by the Device or the Debate?

Trevor Norris
Brock University

INTRODUCTION

Mamlok and Knight Abowitz engage in one of the most pressing issues in education today, too often driven by its corporate-funded champions, and students who have been immersed in the online world all their lives – with very little exposure to critiques. With their article, we get a more rounded and balanced view.

My first questions concern youth and the online context in general. Since children and young people already spend a great deal of time online, should education concede to that and adapt to their habits? We often assume that we should meet students “where they are.” But perhaps education should provide a *contrast* with dominant habits, and we should introduce them to something out of the ordinary — their classmates in person. But more substantially, let me engage two main aspects of the article regarding citizenship and technology.

CITIZENSHIP

A defense of citizenship seems to be of ever greater importance, as corporations now claim the mantle of “citizenship” even as citizens think of themselves more and more as consumers. Where has the citizen gone? Perhaps online. However, I would suggest that maybe we should do a better job with traditional citizenship first before turning online. Do we take citizenship online because of our failures offline, in the hope of correction or redemption?

Can there really be such a thing as a citizen in an online environment? What kind of political community is a digital citizen formed by, hold commitments to, or solidarities with? Are there elections online? Does digital citizenship

provide access to certain social or public goods or services? These citizens don't vote for any leaders or necessarily hold any deep or lasting community affiliations. It could be argued, based on many conceptions of citizenship, that there is really very little distinctively *political* about the notion of digital citizenship; it is just a way of reducing citizenship to decorum and respect. But let me turn to technology and communication before returning to political projects.

TECHNOLOGY

Mamlok and Knight Abowitz explore what they call the “epistemological assumptions for teaching and learning in the age of digital technology ... that ground current educational practices and policies; namely, the notions of neutrality, technical, and objective rationality.”²¹ Their main concern is “that devices are perceived merely as tools that serve instrumental ends” and, additionally, that digital technology is governed by interests who claim that technology is neutral. While these authors challenge those who construe technology as neutral, they still see it as a tool that can be used to promote a political project — without that tool affecting its users or that political project. In doing so they have fallen into the technological trap that Heidegger warned us about: they believe that technology is neutral because it depends on how we use it. But we don't necessarily decide how it is used, or how we are shaped by it. While I am largely in agreement regarding the importance of advancing critical perspectives in order to question dominant liberal assumptions, I am concerned that something fundamental about technology itself is overlooked in their article.

The authors' hope is that “these devices can help us examine, untangle, and act upon complex problems ... as a *means* for developing creativity, imagination, communication, political action, and social life” [*italics mine*]. But as Heidegger famously said, “technology is no mere *means*. It is a way of revealing.”²² What does it reveal to us about ourselves, our political projects, our pedagogical hopes?

The authors' further concern is that prevalent notions of digital citizenship emphasize civility and etiquette. So, their critique is not of digital

citizenship itself, but rather that it doesn't currently incorporate critique. If it did so, however, what other problems with the online might still continue? While Mamlok and Knight Abowitz are critical of claims about the neutrality of technology, they themselves see technology as a tool. They just suggest that it be used critically, instead of liberally. In other words, their critique is political rather than technological, in the sense that they don't engage with the *implications* of technology as much as the *political message* it conveys. However, we are led to wonder: what would a *technological* critique of digital citizenship look like? What would a critique of its non-neutrality look like?

Perhaps the technological implications of the online environment are more significant and influential than the political. In other words: even if digital technology is used for critique, it may yet still have a deeper pedagogical, political cultural effect as a *medium*, distinct from any content. What does the medium teach? What is the lesson of the digital?

British philosopher of education David Lewin describes how cell phones present the illusion of empowerment in part because we can hold them in our hands, but more so because the user interface dominates our vision, and as a result its mechanical aspects are hidden. By foregrounding the interface, means and end are separated. As a result, we don't ask deeper questions about the impact of technology because we are so captivated by its function.³

I believe this tension comes down to the tension between Marx and Heidegger. Is the question concerning technology simply about who owns it, and which class benefits from it? Marx was less concerned about technological progress as which class was driving it and benefiting from it. For Marx, it is *ownership* of the mode of production that determines consciousness, not the *technology* used in production. On the other hand, is the problem with Heidegger that he speaks of technology without accounting for how different classes are affected by it and use it towards specific political ends? Is the challenge to determine how technology can align with promoting class-consciousness and class emancipation? Or are all classes caught up in the incontestable logic of it, since it is technology that determines its own use and influence — not us?

Some of this critique of Marxist approaches to technology has appeared in earlier issues of this Yearbook. In “Philosophy of Technology & Education: An Invitation to Inquiry,” David Blacker noted that “most every major school reform movement (for example, Marxism, free-schooling, de-schooling, liberal democracy) is haplessly contained within [the technological mindset], doomed merely to advance it.”²⁴ Blacker notes that Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis share this instrumental attitude towards technology when they claim that: “[I]f meaningful educational reform requires a transformation of production relations, as we believe, we must begin by creating a new social structure, not a new technology.”²⁵ Blacker turns to an earlier PES Yearbook article by Richard LaBrecque, who also minimized the effect of technology, claiming that “technological innovation is driven by interests and values that exist outside technology itself, and therefore we ought to focus on those who call the shots, not on the tools themselves.”²⁶

This contrast between Marx and Heidegger raises questions about historical progress or decline. Marx was optimistic about our capacity to improve ourselves, and saw history as a dramatic and dialectical arc that curved towards liberation from class oppression through revolutionary action. Heidegger, by contrast, was concerned that we lose something important about ourselves — and our very being — even as we develop things to improve our condition. Both account for how forces we create stand over and against us (capital and technology, respectively), and function according to their own principles and logic. Any understanding of education and the digital must account for how we create forces beyond our control — even if one class profits from them more than another, even if these forces can be used to challenge class consciousness.

I will close with a concession and confession: while I do hold the concerns I describe above, I have found myself invigorated recently while participating in online political debates (with a personal cap of 10 minutes a day). I have learned much and have been changed by it. I have also found my commitments to politics “offline” to be strengthened and deepened and clarified — and I have been motivated to action.

But perhaps I am shaped as much by the device as by the debate. Per-

haps political authoritarianism shapes us less than how we communicate about it. Either way, I believe that these political and pedagogical dynamics can only be better understood through exploring how Marx and Heidegger may align with, and even advance, complementary emancipatory projects. Other minds much greater and nobler than my own have attempted this marriage ... so I will stop here.⁷

1 Mamlok and Knight Abowitz, this volume.

2 Martin Heidegger, "A Question Concerning Technology," in *A Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. and introduction William Lovitt (Garland Publishing, Inc.: New York, 1977), 12.

3 David Lewin, "No Place for Wisdom: Technological Thinking and the Erosion of *Phronesis*," (paper presented at the annual conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, Oxford, UK, March 2013).

4 David Blacker, "Philosophy of Technology & Education: An Invitation to Inquiry," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook* (Normal, IL:, 1994), 2.

5 Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 69.

6 Richard LaBrecque, "Capitalism, Technology and Education," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook* (Normal, IL: 1987), 351. See also the now-dated but quite insightful: C. A. Bowers, *The Cultural Dimensions of Educational Computing: Understanding the Non-Neutrality of Technology* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988).

7 See various Frankfurt School thinkers.