Cem Sina Çetin 9192

Although technological determinism and cultural materialism seemingly support opposing ideas, I believe both ways of thinking are necessary but not sufficient to understand how technology and culture shape each other, in terms of technological advancements and shifting cultural dynamics. Newborn technologies do nourish from cultural necessities, yet it does not mean that they do not change the culture in return. In this essay, I will elaborate on the idea that neither technology nor the culture is prior to the other.

Technology inevitably changes the culture and its dynamics. Especially with the technological advancements, which are in the area of communication, this can be understood much better. Internet, for instance, is an ideal medium to witness this, as everything changes so fast. By the emergence of information networks, the way the people are connected was dramatically changed. Just because of the existence of the Internet, we became exposed to countless amounts of people over the world and by extension, their own cultures and ethics. This immense amount of interaction and the blurring of the boundaries between countries and people inevitably creates the need for a new set of unspoken rules as the conventional and already existing rules become obsolete in this new condition. The two obvious examples of this situation about the internet would be **the internet ethics** and the concept of **internet memes**. The term "meme" means a concept that spreads virally from one person to another and becomes a part of the general knowledge base of a culture. In case of the **internet memes**, the spreading process is so fast and the culture is so dynamic, these internet memes become known to all the users of a specific age range through out the entire world in a matter of days and become a part of the internet culture. It is culture and location independent, so the way the information is shared over the internet continuously shapes the trends and thus the information that is actually being shared, in a self contained manner. In this sense, "the medium is the message" argument partially makes sense, as the medium is a major actor that shapes the message, which is being transmitted. The memes are most of the time irrelevant of the process, but the way the internet community respond to them is most of the time the same. Although correct in this scenario, this approach does not take cultural parameters into equation, unlike cultural materialism, which I feel more inclined to believe yet find incomplete without a support from a technologically deterministic way of thought.

The cultural materialism suggests that the underlying cultural and socioeconomic dynamics are the causes of the downfall or the success of any given technology. In relation to my previous example, I prefer to continue with the case of the internet memes. As countless amounts of (potential) internet memes are produced each day, only a few of them survive to be a part of the internet culture. Some of them are based on things that are decades old, yet only at some specific point in time there happens an instant spread. As an example, the "rick rolling" meme is based on fooling people to listen to Rick Astley's 30 years old song, "Never Gonna Give You Up". The song has been around for 30 years yet only in 2009 it becomes an internet phenomenon. In this case, if the invention of the internet was enough to alter the way of thinking in the way that all the content would be shared and distributed homogeneously, the rick rolling would have never existed today, or it would have happened on the day the internet was born. Because, according to the

technological determinism, the content is irrelevant and the song was already around by the time the internet was invented.

In order to give an example in favour of the cultural materialism, I'd prefer to elaborate on an hypothetical technology to be invented today. Suppose that there was a breakthrough in science, which made it possible to share ideas telepathically, just like we do on Facebook. Such invention would also require its own infrastructure of privacy, sharing, connection regulations etc., just like the Facebook. This technology, as marvelous as it sounds, would cause serious upheavals today, because the way our private lives are shared online is already an unsettled topic of discussion. If the level of sharing was to extend right into our minds, it would cause instant hatred, distrust and rejection towards this technology; at least in the public domain. Maybe after a century, our entire understanding of privacy is going to change and what we find sacred and unspeakable will be completely different. Only then the humanity might be ready to endorse the thought sharing technology. But as of today, there is utterly no possibility of acceptance before we as the internet users come to perfect peace with the tools we expose ourselves to the others, either willingly or unwillingly. If the technological determinism were absolutely correct, then such technology, if invented, would instantly take us to another level of consciousness (a unified state of consciousness perhaps) and it would shape our lives without the need of our consent. Yet, where technological determinism is correct is the fact that this technology would indeed change our way of thought, after it is invented **under the right circumstances.**

Consequently, I do believe that both of these notions are correct in their own way, although I am more inclined to think in parallels with the cultural materialistic way of thought. Cultural materialism is more logical, because in order for a technology to be a part of our daily lives, it first needs to be able to address and answer contemporary needs. A useless but state-of-the-art technological advancement's ability to change the human kind's way of thought would be comparable to the effects of Bach's harpsichord pieces on a nation of deaf people. Yet, where technological determinism is correct is the fact that new technologies change the way we think. Recently there have been videos of a baby, who tries to interact with printed magazines the way she would normally use an iPad. What used to be our motor functions in our babyhood are now being replaced with **pinch zoom** and **swipe**. A fundamental change like this unquestionably changes the wiring of our brains, and by extension the way we think and perceive the world around us. But again, in order for iPad to change the way we interact with the information, the prior condition is the acceptance of iPad itself. Hence, both technological deterministic and cultural materialistic ways of thought are correct, as long as they are not purely accepted on their own, but understood in conjunction.