



Challenges in Our Relationship to Technology

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On several occasions, Rudolf Steiner made bold, prophetic predictions about what life would look like in the coming one to four years, also concerning technology.¹ It is striking how precisely he formulated these predictions and how accurate they have been so far. Steiner was able to read the signs of the time and could therefore develop a prophetic vision. This article is devoted to the following questions:

1. *What perspectives open up when we consider the development of technology?*
2. *What would an adequate way to deal with technology look like?*
3. *What can we do in order to influence cultural development and steer it in a positive direction?*
4. *What consequences will information technology have for the healthy development of children and adolescents?*

1. Rudolf Steiner on technological progress

Technology bringing death – one aspect

Rudolf Steiner spoke enthusiastically out of his spiritual-scientific research about the being of technology.² Contemporaries report how he once rode in his car through the Ruhr region, then the largest industrial area of Germany, and said, looking out of the window, “All dead.” For him this was a simple statement of fact, not a lament. In his lectures he explained further how technology would bring death for the earth because it uses up our energy reserves and brings in its wake both destruction and profound upheaval.³ Not only is technology dead in itself; it also has the effect of bringing death. Our steel industry is not only responsible for many

“peaceful” machines and cutting tools; it also has global ties to the production of weapons, which bring death, to say nothing of the use of atomic energy for both peaceful and destructive ends. A responsible, environmentally conscious use of technology, therefore, presupposes a highly developed morality.

Technology setting us free – a second aspect

If modern technology carries within it a kernel of death, which is intrinsic to it, was this why modern technology made its appearance? Surely modern technology did not appear in order to show people the dramatic spectacle of the machine and industry. There was a fundamentally different reason why modern technology appeared in the course of time. And yes, technology appeared exactly because it does have this death-bringing character. Human beings need to develop the consciousness soul, and they can do so only within a dead, mechanical culture, because it provides the resistance necessary to bring that development about. [...] Detached consciousness and the force which brings death are closely related.⁴

Death processes give us the possibility to free ourselves from the material world and thereby detach ourselves from our ties to matter. However, on this gradual path to freedom, the following questions arise:

What should we do with our freedom, and what can we do?

Let us begin by bringing a few basic historical viewpoints to mind. The origins of natural science lie in the 15th and 16th centuries, which gave

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rise to increasing industrialization in the 17th and 18th centuries. Machines which take physical labor away from human beings were the first to come into existence, for example the mechanical loom. As a result, many people lost their jobs. That was the shadow side of the development. The positive side of this development, then and now, is that human beings are liberated from the drudgery of physical labor. In its wake came the development of measuring techniques and information technology. What was taken away by these great revolutions was work that involves muscles, senses, and feelings (e.g., measuring temperature), as well as spiritual routine.

On the one hand, so-called joblessness creates widespread want. But it also has the effect that millions of people are set free to do what they want all day long. Joblessness opens up the opportunity to seek out freely chosen assignments. If, however, people are merely educated to become wage earners, they won't quite know what to do with the freedom at their disposal and will be "jobless" in the truest sense of the word, facing questions such as:

What do I do with my freedom? What sense does my life have, apart from work?

Which brings us to the next question:

Can one educate people to become entrepreneurial in the way they handle their freedom?

2. Education toward freedom – but how?

In the 1990s the specter of a "20/80 society" was evoked for the near future, a prognosis made by great economic visionaries, backed up by specific numbers and facts. It predicted that, if trends continue the way they have, only 20% of the population would give and have work in

the future. In this scenario the entertainment industry will be the most important carrier of culture. In ancient Rome, those in power adhered to the principle that the populace needed to be occupied with "bread and plays," in order to "keep them quiet." Make sure people have enough to eat and are entertained, otherwise it gets dangerous for society. And indeed, social development around the globe is actually going in this direction. Each individual will be living a great

deal more independently than was possible until now.

So what should our educational plans and our institutions do to awaken an appetite for a creative use of freedom?

Joblessness now looms large; it is a theme relevant

for all of society. Again and again, researchers point out the danger of sliding into addictions and petty theft, if not criminality. The latter are signs of a gradual process of dehumanization, which is a side effect of economic development. There is far too little awareness of the fact that this development has the potential to create unhappiness for up to 80% of society. Therefore the most important questions for the future are:

What can be done for the people in this 80% category? What parallel developments are needed to offer them a different perspective? How do we open the eyes of politicians and civic leaders so that they will steer these developmental processes more consciously and more responsibly?

And what can we contribute to this? A core goal of Waldorf pedagogy is to educate children toward both freedom and social responsibility.⁵ In the future we will understand more and more why that is so important. Education toward freedom has to go hand-in-hand with media literacy.⁶ Technology creates conditions for us to develop freedom, and freedom is a

cultural treasure of humanity. With this premise, technological advances will serve human development only if they are accompanied by an education which takes the signs of the times seriously and prepares children for the world of tomorrow.

Moral implications

This leaves unanswered for the moment the question of what we should do with our freedom, nor have we answered the question of what we actually *can* do. And it brings us to the next one: *Out of which particular spiritual orientation should we act?* Probing further, we come to the question of doing the good, and that implies morality and responsibility. Steiner defines morality as interest in others.⁷ That means: We become more moral to the extent that we are able to develop more interest in other people, nature, or the world, and thereby develop a truer understanding of interconnections and phenomena, big and small.

In the children's service of the Christian Community, we can hear the following sentences. "We learn so that we may understand the world. We learn so that we may work in the world. The love of human beings, one to another, enlivens all the work of Man. Without love, human life becomes desolate and empty. Christ is the teacher of the love of Man."⁸

These words could serve also as a kind of manifesto for the concept of *salutogenesis* (the process of healing, recovery, and repair). The American medical sociologist Aaron Antonovski proclaims that human beings will increase in health when they have the feeling they understand something, can digest things in a meaningful way, and are able to sustain what is important to them. The words he uses are: understandability, meaningfulness, and manageability. Others call this *resilience*.

3. Possibilities to influence human development in a positive way

The big question is:

What more can I do as an individual, within the means at my disposal, to step up my efforts to have a positive influence on human cultural developments in the coming decades?

Visions of computer and speech programs

To start off with, here is what Steiner said as early as 1913: "We haven't yet come to the point where schools have stopped teaching religious traditions, but we can't fail to hear the increasing demand for a curriculum which confines itself to natural science."

Germany is one of the few countries that still teaches religion in school. In North America this is just as much of a taboo as it is in Northern Europe, where all that's left is the teaching of ethics. Steiner's prediction has thus been fulfilled to a large extent.

For external life, the demands of these people will become so strong that humanity will become utterly focused on outer things in a very short span of time. People still learn to write today. In a not

so distant future, people will only remember that human beings were writing in previous centuries. A form of mechanical stenography will be there, and it will be machine-written at that.⁹

Steiner foresaw the computer and how it would have possibilities to complete words or sentences, the way one now only has to say the beginning of a word and immediately a text box appears with three or four choices—one click and the right word is there. Speech recognition programs are improved by the day. In another lecture Steiner points out how one will be able to "move a ball of cotton from Liverpool to Rome." In this context he repeatedly uses the word *schieben* (move/push), the way we

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move electronic data around with a click or a push. He had quite a clear picture of what this “mechanization of life” would look like.¹⁰

We must become clear about ourselves.

Steiner urges us to engage in a parallel development running side by side with the developments in technology, a complementary endeavor which can help us succeed in putting our freedom to good use.

Outer life will be externalized to an extreme degree, but inner life will claim its rights. What we practice today as spiritual science may still be spurned by some people, but there’s no stopping the inner clamoring for the spiritual worlds, which will force materialists into retreat, and people will begin to recognize the Christ. This will take place in epochs which will have an open eye to spirituality, even though this openness will be due to a reaction against the externalization of life.¹¹

In the development of technology, Steiner sees the possibility of waking up to the necessity of going through the outer surface to penetrate into the depths of our being, where we can recognize the Christ as an innermost evolutionary factor. People’s longing will tend toward getting away from the extreme of externality in order to attain the opposite inwardly. To a large extent, this will be a question of education and self-education.

Education toward freedom is not only education toward competence in handling media, the latest games, or mastering the digital world. Education toward freedom also means education toward spirituality.¹² The point is not to “prepare” young people for political or denominational choices, but to enable them to find spirituality by themselves. They need to be prepared to find whatever form fits them and matches their humanity. This is the reason why Steiner used the word *anthroposophy* for his spiritual science. Not the easiest of words, it is of Greek

origin, but in essence it says: True knowledge about being human is there. We can develop a consciousness of our own humanity. It is about building up this consciousness, about becoming clear who we are. Therefore the noblest realm of anthroposophy constitutes the study of the human being, no matter whether one chooses the medical or pedagogical approach or goes at it from an evolutionary point of view.

4. Anthroposophical study of the human being: What does it give us and where does it take us?

How growth forces metamorphose into thinking, feeling, and willing activity

Steiner’s fundamental discovery, his salutogenetic paradigm, shows us a metamorphosis. There are forces which make incarnation possible and give life and form to the body as we grow and develop, and it is these very forces that help us develop in soul and spirit. Just as the body is not formed solely by physical and natural forces, but reveals the workings of life, soul, and spirit, so there are four comprehensive systems which obey archetypal laws. Steiner calls them:

- Physical body
- Ether body/life
- Astral body/soul
- Ego organization/individual human spirit

These forces which are at work in the ether body are active at the beginning of human earthly life—most clearly in the embryo—as growth forces. In the course of a human life a portion of these forces emancipates itself. Instead of being active in forming the body, they become forces for thinking, the very forces which bring forth the world of thoughts, a world which appears shadowy to ordinary consciousness. It is of the utmost importance to know that the ordinary forces of thinking are a finer form of the growth

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forces that shape the human being. The way the human organism takes shape and grows reveals something spiritual. For this then subsequently appears in the course of life as spiritual power of thinking.¹³

Accordingly, the differentiated forces of the astral body show themselves in the course of development as a body-free feeling life. The integrating forces of the ego organization, which are responsible for the overall shaping of a human life, show themselves in that they enable the will to unfold free from the body. Steiner's thesis goes as follows: The forces which build the body, once they have fully formed an organ, are able to leave the body again and also transcend the death of the physical body, living on as "eternal human spirits."

When the human being is fully formed, the forces of regeneration begin to slacken in due course, which brings about the process of aging. Thus these forces can also be seen as leaving the body and giving rise to the riper life of thinking and feeling of older people, provided one guides these freed-up forces into their proper channels of learning and acquiring self-knowledge.

Now the place where this process of becoming free from natural bodily functions occurs is the heart. For the heart is the only place where it is physiologically possible that the enlivening circulation comes to a standstill for a fraction of a second. Here the reversal of direction of the bloodstream occurs at the end of the diastole, in the so-called diastasis (a passing stop). That is to say, the blood entering the heart has to leave the heart again, but in the opposite direction. In between lies a moment when the bloodstream halts and is totally rudderless. This is a "full stop" for the enlivening circulation, in which the ether body is at work. Therefore the ether body can disengage from its work in the body at these moments and, not being tied

down, metamorphose into body-free thought activity. The brain therefore doesn't produce thoughts, but reflects them. However, the available thoughts have to be made conscious

by means of concrete processes of observation and learning.¹⁴

At the midpoint of a biography, the life forces come to an equilibrium between working for the spirit outside the body and working for the physical inside the body. Due to the decline of regenerative ability, the aging human being then begins to show the typical processes of decline, and individual weak spots appear in the body. A brief indication will suffice.

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Growth in childhood and youth

Between birth and death the physical body goes through an interesting development, which I would like to sketch here briefly.

- In the first seven to nine years the sense organs are built up, and the nervous system comes to a basic stage of completion.
- Up to the 16th year the rhythmical functions, that is to say breathing and circulation, gradually come to full fruition.
- The metabolic system and the skeleton need longest to mature and are only fully formed around age 21.

Processes of aging

As we pass the biological midpoint in life, aging begins. Between ages 40 and 50 the first phase of a downward turn takes place, during which the metabolic system and the skeletal system lose vitality. Women enter menopause, experiencing hormonal changes more clearly than men do. First among typical illnesses of this age period are skeletal problems, for example backache, rheumatic complaints, the arm/shoulder syndrome, and metabolic problems such as the onset of diabetes 2 and gallstone colics.

Between ages 50 and 60, there is a further decline of vitality in the lungs, as well as in the heart and the circulatory system. With it come possible dispositions to illnesses in these areas. This is the age when one can expect cases of smokers who are unable to shake their bronchitis, because it becomes chronic. Heightened blood pressure and rhythmic disturbances of the heart begin to occur and can even lead to a first heart attack.

What we see from age 60 on are increased symptoms of degeneration in the sense organs and the central nervous system. The last functions to be affected are the brain and the senses, which decline gradually. An education which promotes health is therefore preventive medicine with an eye to the last third of our lives. Education has the potential to make one fit for old age.¹⁵

From this developmental perspective dying can be seen as the completion of the disengagement of the forces of the different members. They let us live on after death as purely spiritual beings.

Independent activity and learning processes

From the beginning, human development basically obeys the following principle: Self-motivated action leads to self realization. When we are allowed to figure things out by ourselves as children, first through imitation, then through guided learning processes, and finally by setting our own goals, we foster bodily and spiritual development, and this gradual process allows us to become ourselves. Outside interference or indoctrination foster listlessness and fear, setting up blockages and barriers.

So when it comes to dealing with technology and electronic media, the fundamental question arises: At what point in life is access to the media, the Internet or social media a positive

stimulus for development? As long as the child is still growing, one needs to be very cautious, for electronic media have a strong impact. They force one to be reactive; they do not leave one free. Worse still, one-sided, false stimulation gets embedded in the brain and hampers sensory-motor development.

The healthy scenario would be active learning that develops sensory motor intelligence. This

comes about when we can be guided by our own curiosity, when we can learn through our own effort, set our own tempo, and choose the example we want to follow. In doing so we stir body, soul, and spirit. But when we sit in front of a screen, we shut off all our senses except eye, ear, and touch. In addition, we practically shut off motoric activity and lose touch with nature, for the media stimuli have no correlation to living reality and are foreign to the natural origin of our bodies.

Again, the optical and acoustical structures and proportions mediated by the screen bear no correlation to the body and its natural surroundings. This situation has resulted in an ever-increasing number of people no longer feeling at home in their own bodies, for their bodies were not formed through independent activity and therefore don't fit their surroundings. On the contrary, their bodies were formed from the outside, as it were, and now contain impulses that are not rooted in joyful self-determination.

Bodily movement

The study of medicine teaches us that movement is the best stimulus for the nervous system. With brain-damaged children we do gymnastics, baby gymnastics, and curative gymnastics in order to practice appropriate movement and good bodily coordination. The English language coined the words

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“support of embodiment,” and there are “embodiment treatments” that support healthy physical maturation for the many nervous, underdeveloped, and ill-adapted children of our time. Preference is given to movement which the child carries out vigorously. By contrast, sitting in front of a television or computer is exactly the opposite of what is healthy. This is especially important during the first nine years of life, during which time the development of the nervous system and the sense organs stands in the foreground.

Soul activity and inner mobility

During the 15th or 16th year, soul activity and movement come first and foremost for human development. Our bodies bring to fruition the circulatory system: the heart and the organs of breathing. How deeply do the children breathe in? Are their hearts filled with joy or stiff with fear? It depends on the degree to which their souls are engaged.

How is the child's soul set in motion in a healthy way?

This can occur, for example, when a child connects emotionally with what is offered in the lesson. It will happen when the tension varies within one lesson, and students can go from a mood of seriousness to one of total hilarity. All this stimulates the whole spectrum of feelings and the inner mobility and power of expression, which in turn foster the development of rhythmical functions of heart and lungs.

When I was working as a school doctor at the Waldorf school in Witten, a mother once told me how this could be experienced in the school life of a child. She told me how her son came home in fifth grade and enthusiastically kept her abreast of the story of Julius Caesar, each day telling her the latest event that had been recounted in the history block. Then one day he simply threw

his schoolbag in a corner, ran up to his room, slammed the door shut while shouting, “Mom, Caesar is dead!”

The best remedy against computer dependence is when children find life exciting, without the computer, and are not bored, especially not in school. Ideally, computers are technically explained in 10th grade in Waldorf schools and employed in the process of teaching from then on, where appropriate.¹⁶

Mental flexibility and authenticity

What needs to be developed in high school is mental flexibility. One can speak of conscious media mastery only when freedom and mental flexibility begin to become a reality. Jacques

Lusseyran describes in his autobiography, *And Then There Was Light*, how at age 16 he and a friend agreed to tell each other only the truth from then on. The first thing they did after that was to say nothing for long stretches of time. ... Clearly, this

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marks a birthday for independent, responsible thinking! From this moment onward, it can begin to develop. I remember a less noble experience at age 15, when I first really became conscious of this kind of inner awakening. This instance happened in ninth grade at the Waldorf school I was attending. There were over 40 students in my class. I looked around the classroom and noticed a boy with whom I had never exchanged a single word—and became very ashamed of myself. We had been together for nine years in the same class, yet I had never spoken with him! I also knew in that moment why not—because I found him a “goofy.” I didn’t even know why. It was based on a prejudice, on outer sympathy, or rather on antipathy. During the break I then went up to him and asked him in Schwabian dialect what subject we had the next period. “Euro,” he said, which was our abbreviation for eurythmy. That was our first dialogue. And I was happy how “normal” it felt.

Self-reflections and actions of this kind are typical for the birth process of freedom in thinking, feeling, and responsible action. By means of thinking one learns to distance oneself from one's feelings and emotions. One is no longer at their mercy, but is happy to learn to look at them, observe them, and control them. With that, one feels freer from them than was the case before, more self-reliant and "authentic."

How the etheric works by day and at night

In the process of thinking, which we owe to our etheric forces having become free from the body, as described above, we are exercising a body-free activity during the day. At night, when we're not thinking, these etheric forces connect with the ones remaining within the organism, and they regenerate especially the nervous system. Then follows a separation of the ether body, i.e., the part that is free from the body by day, away from the combined astral and ego, a separation whereby the latter organization remains active outside the body at night, even though we are not aware of it, except in our dreams. Thereupon pictures and images which were thought and experienced during the day are imprinted into the body each night, where they either support or hinder regeneration, in accordance with the qualities they possess. When we are active during the day and full of enthusiasm and warmth in our thinking, this will bring uplifting, lively aftereffects from our thought life into the nightly regenerative processes taking place in the nervous system. And the bodily functions will likewise benefit from all our positive efforts, since they are tied in with the nervous system. The reverse will have the opposite effect.¹⁷

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What the Internet and the social media can do to bring our culture forward

We have spoken about inward liberation, self-reliance, and self-governance. Once we have taken steps toward those three ideals—now we can also say: toward authenticity—we have made ourselves available for new tasks.

Our bodies need a lifelong, healthy form of egoism—a strong immune system, that is, so that we can stay fit in body and spirit. However, this doesn't contradict the need to "serve others," a capacity we human beings have as well. This may sound as if we would be in for a process of self-erosion, but it is actually the exact opposite. The more free we feel, and the more capacities we have, the more competent we will be to bear the

sorrows and needs of others and to meet the demands that come toward us from our surroundings. We can become instruments to take on things that are essential to us. In the ideal case, the demands of the world, whether they come as necessity or in the form of questions, pleas, or wishes,

will become synonymous with our own personal wishes. Or, to put it another way: When you have a strong self, you can also let go or renounce without feeling diminished. You can be totally available to do what is being asked. Therefore Steiner says in his book on self-education that the highest form of freedom is to be free from oneself.

When we talk about the place media should have in education, we should always keep in mind what a superb cultural achievement the media are and how useful they can be! Media are highly valuable because of the role they can play in an education toward freedom. I myself use social media enthusiastically, because I see their great potential for networking, and I also value their contribution in civil discourse on social and political questions. Social media facilitate participation and input, and when there are

enough free people, the Internet is a superb instrument to help build social engagement and global consciousness. The media can be addictive, however, and for users who are prone to dependency, they present a lifelong danger.

I haven't been on Facebook all that long yet, only since 2012. I travel a lot, and every time someone tells me we are friends on Facebook, it makes me happy. I like it even though I lost the overview long ago. Likewise, the Aktion ELIANT of the European Alliance of Initiatives of Applied Anthroposophy would not have been possible without the Internet. But I always ask myself what types of content and information are underrepresented on the Internet. There's so much gossip, pornography, and commercialism to be found there, but too little culture as yet...

We need two aspects:

- The largest possible global outreach through the media, which is today's trend; and also
- A maximum amount of deepening of the inner life in order to compensate for this horizontal reaching out.

Both worlds—our spiritual lives and electronics—lie outside the body. Therefore we need a strong spiritual life which is not body-bound, in order to compensate for the harm electronics can do. The etheric body is compromised by the electronic smog, shown both by the fact that people get tired far more easily today and by the penchant to adapt and seek the easy way out. This can be compensated for by a corresponding measure of wakeful meditation.

Our contribution toward a healthy use of technology

There is something which anybody can do straightaway when one wants to use technology responsibly. This goes for technical means in

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a general sense, including machines such as an elevator, an escalator, a light switch, or a dishwashing machine. Use them when you need them but remain active wherever that is possible

and sensible. Technology should not tempt us to become lax or soft, because the independent activity which we can do instead of using technology is what keeps us healthy, and we can save energy and electricity at the same time. That way we

won't shun technology; we will become savvy in using it. The point is to stay awake at all times so that we don't get captured by the world of technology.

ENDNOTES

Translation of quotes by JKS, unless otherwise indicated. The most recent American translation of the German titles is given where possible, followed by the original German GA (CW) number and page/chapter numbers in parentheses.

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