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Commentary

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We have never been voluntary: Techno-genetic reflections on Ricœurian freedom in digital societies

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Abstract

This commentary poses the question: how do subjects recognise and evaluate what they are able to change for themselves under algorithmic conditions that increasingly shape attention, desire, and anticipation? Bringing Bernard Stiegler into dialogue with Ricœur, I consider what becomes of freedom in digital societies if one is also to recognise Stiegler's argument that human life is technologically constituted at its genesis. We were never voluntary, following Stiegler, since there was never a notion of voluntary human choice that could be bifurcated from involuntary acts of technologies from the start. This techno-genetic line of thought insists instead that freedom, needs, and desires at the level of the human subject concern a task of enacting a liberty to think differently given an originary human-technological entwinement.

Keywords

Algorithmic mediation, desire, digital geographies, freedom, technogenesis

Knowing me, knowing you

Long before artificial intelligence came to dominate thinking on technology in the 2020s, questions around the production of freedom, agency, and subjectivity between human and technological things were already a lively feature of geographical enquiry: how best to explain processes of attention capture and the enveloping of human perception by technological interfaces? What is meant by free will, agency, and decision making given that technologies routinely mediate thinking and acting as a subject? And given the mediation of the human and technological at the level of the subject, what kinds of ethical negotiations and impasses are created in trying to carve out a life worth living?

Thinking with some of these geographical questions, Whitehead and Hannah (2025) develop the relationship between freedom and digital technologies in a specific direction by turning to Paul Ricœur's *Freedom and Nature*. Here freedom is defined in terms of the 'temporal activity' in an act of decision (2007: 152). On one level, freedom must be understood temporally because it describes a whole history of prior acts, hesitations, and needs informing how a subject comes to experience freedom in decision making. Given this temporal character, freedom is absolutely not construed in an abstract or absolute sense but emerges through

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specific negotiations. These negotiations, according to Whitehead and Hannah's reading of Ricœur (2007), include the way that the subject comes to 'consent' to certain necessary conditions – including biological rhythms like sleep, unconscious activity like habits, and an indeterminable sense of selfhood or 'character' (also Vallée, 2018: 13) – that act as limits informing the way decision making takes place in practice.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this Ricœurian intervention is the idea that freedom emerges through the co-constitutive movements of the voluntary and (digital) involuntary. If Ricœur (2007) distinguishes the voluntary and the involuntary through an act of decision – where the voluntary is what is typically understood as the realm of the choosing subject, whereas the involuntary is to be understood as all that exceeds the subject yet shapes its capacities for choosing (biological tendencies, the unconscious, habits etc.) – then Whitehead and Hannah's unique manoeuvre is to extend this argument by developing how the involuntary today concerns the freedom-shaping participation of digital technologies (mostly used here to refer to social media platforms). It is not simply that freedom is 'lost' within digital society, but that it is always negotiated between voluntary and digital involuntary limits that the subject has no determination over. Developing the digital involuntary in terms of algorithmic nudging, data profiling, and the alluring pull of infinite scroll – and thus linking to wider work in digital and habit geographies (e.g. Bissell, 2020) – Whitehead and Hannah's argument offers an interesting counter to the idea that acting ethically as a subject simply requires disconnecting from digital technologies (see Turkle, 2015). Differently, and through a melding of Ricœur with the SenseMaker®, they draw attention to certain freedoms emerging from acts of hesitation and compromise enacted by the subject – acts of negotiated freedom that fall between disconnection and a full consenting embrace of digitality.

In making this argument, Whitehead and Hannah develop the following Ricœurian refrain taken from Part III of *Freedom and Nature*: 'I change it for myself since I cannot change it in itself' (Ricœur, 2007: 344). Here it is possible to discern a certain pragmatism to this reading of the voluntary and (digital) involuntary insofar as freedom demands attention to specific practices in which willing negotiations occur – such as the way a subject in digital society may choose to accept only essential internet cookies, judiciously select the digital platforms it participates in, and carefully manage the visibility of certain social media posts. Yet, thinking with this refrain, I am left wondering: how does one *know* what the subject is able to change in itself? Are there not things a subject cannot change in itself nor for itself? And how does a subject avoid either underestimating or overestimating its capacity to enact self-change?

Clearly, some of these questions are already countenanced by Ricœur (2007): knowing what one is able to change oneself occurs phenomenologically through the subject's embodied experience of a history of prior subjective decisions and motivations that make up the (in)voluntary production of the will. Ricœur's commitment to an embodied phenomenology of the subject is also partly why Whitehead and Hannah are keen to distance this work from both post-phenomenological and post-humanist research in digital geography. Yet this casting aside of post-phenomenology and post-humanism is perhaps unfortunate, not least because these geographies similarly problematise the exorbitant power of the sovereign subject whose normative gravity too often continues to overdetermine the way digital mediation and relations become rationalised and understood (Williams et al., 2019). In what follows, I thus strike a different tone by considering how a reading of digital technology that decentres the pre-eminence of the human subject in thought might contribute to this reading of the digital involuntary – first by turning to Bernard Stiegler's writing on freedom and the technological constitution of humanity, and second by returning to the question of what freedoms a subject can change for itself in light of the involuntary operations of technological things.

Stiegler and freedom

In *Acting Out* Stiegler (2009) develops the question of what it means to live freely with technologies in two distinct ways. On the one hand, reflecting on his

incarceration for armed robbery Stiegler (2009: 17–19) considers how being imprisoned and excluded from the exterior world offered a means of enriching an *interior* milieu through the act of pursuing philosophy. Prison was a limitation on freedom for Stiegler, but also a condition that allowed a certain care for an interior milieu of thought. Here, reading and writing philosophy was not merely about an exegesis of key concepts, but a 'trial of a cloistered asceticism' (2009: 21) demanding a more careful re-constitution of how a subject thinks. On the other hand, Stiegler also develops freedom in another sense through a brief reflection on the diary of Richard Durn who committed a mass shooting and murder of nine people in a suburb of Paris in 2002. Durn's diary is notable for Stiegler precisely because it evokes how 'acting out' – be it through robbery or murderous acts – is in certain ways linked to how a subject understands themselves in relation to technological things. As Stiegler notes (2009: 39), Durn committed the shooting in part because of an experience of feeling like he did not exist. This feeling of not existing, for Stiegler (2009: 39), is linked to what he terms a 'loss of primordial narcissism' or a self-love that is *necessary* in order for a subject to care for other beings. Stiegler links a loss of primordial narcissism to certain media technologies wherein mass synchronisation of secondary retention supports – such as the way global television events and mass social media cause millions of people to view the exact same images at the same time – can lead to a destruction of free individual thought, as well as the loss of forms of desire that are singular and unique, rather than mass produced. The synchronisation of desire and attention through technologies is, for Stiegler, of the utmost importance because it helps explain the emergence of processes of disaffection and dissociation within the human subject. Taking both strands together, for Stiegler a subject comes to lose its interiority and ability to care for other subjects precisely when a sense of free thinking becomes eradicated. It is for this reason Stiegler (2009: 74), thinking with Nietzsche, warns against contemporary 'conformist' societies defined not in terms of individualistic behaviour, but in terms of herd mentalities leading to an obliteration of a subject's own desire and freedom for thinking.

Freedom as a liberty to think

It is here that I want to chart a number of connections between Stiegler's notion of freedom, premised on human-technology ontological entwinement, and Whitehead and Hannah's development of Ricœurian freedom in digital society. The first is that I want to stress I agree there is something profound about the identification of certain involuntary 'digital automations' that do not belong to the subject (Whitehead and Hannah, 2025). These automations often operate akin to disembodied forms of habit, such as doomscrolling, and thus demand specific concepts explaining the way technologies intermittently modify how the human is able to act and decide amongst digital technologies. After Stiegler, I would extend this line of thought to say that not only are these digital automations not the property of a human subject, but that they do not even need to bypass the embodied experience of the human in order to shape possibilities of acting freely in digital society. Hence, when biological rhythms of sleep are figured as a 'realm of respite from digital surveillance and predictions' (Whitehead and Hannah, 2025), this belies the way smart phone sleep tracking technologies, whilst operating without the subject's conscious recognition, have become widespread, offering subtle forms of involuntary surveillance and the generation of surplus capital. Stiegler and Gilbert Simondon are instructive here insofar as they begin with the position that there is no easy way to parse out human freedom from the actions of technologies, since the human is constituted by technologies from the start (albeit they develop this 'techno-genetic' line of thought in quite different ways, see Keating, 2024).

For Stiegler (2009: 55) being free in digital societies is directly about a 'liberty to think' wherein freedom is not gauged in a subject's ability to negotiate in and out of pre-existing forms of digital consent, but about the processes that determine possibilities for thought. It is 'infantile psychic systems' (Stiegler, 2013: 55) produced through digital technology that destroy free thinking and break transindividual circuits of desire necessary for fathoming a sense of a future worth living in. Stiegler is thus helpful in his argument that freedom worthy of its name must take the question of the *freedom to think differently*

as its primary criteria. We were never voluntary, for Stiegler, because voluntary action is always premised on a technicity of human-technology evolution that sweeps up a subject and fuses it with certain capacities to think, choose, and decide.

The second concerns how best to understand the notion 'needs' or desire in light of Ricœurian freedom in digital society, which Whitehead and Hannah qualify as being increasingly open to prediction by digital technologies – a state of affairs that makes way for the 'predictive paradox' (Whitehead and Hannah, 2025). My view is that it is only when applying a very restrictive notion of 'needs' as pre-existing and contained with a stable notion of subject that this is possible to think. Who today would argue that a person's needs are confined to the boundaries of the individual subject? Deleuze (1992: 6) was careful to assert that it is not the individual that is a locus of desire within control societies, but 'coded figures' of capitalist desiring production acting dividually. As Burdon (2023: 553) develops in the context of the enveloping technologies of ambient music, after Deleuze the human would not be understood 'as an individual who exercises their decision-making capacities freely and outside of all conditioning, nor as an ideologically 'duped' consumer, but as a functional node-point in a much broader 'desiring-machine' that works by forging new conjunctions, new investments of desire, across the social field'. The point being that needs and desires, from a Deleuzian perspective, are far more emergent and contingent than embodied phenomenology would have it. Needs are not the property of the human subject but emerge from an outside force of the world, thus making them at times inflected with self-destructive tendencies and cruel optimisms.

The third, and by way of brief conclusion, concerns the agency of digital technologies given this development of the digital involuntary. Returning again to the Ricœurian refrain 'I change it for myself since I cannot change it in itself' (Ricœur, 2007: 344), perhaps here we might also ask: how does one know when changing it for oneself was good enough? What are the ethical stakes implied by becoming increasingly aware and attuned to the operations of the digital involuntary? I leave these questions open to the authors. Implied by this ethical line of questioning is not just activity and awareness at the level of the embodied individual, but the role of the collective subjects and processes of subjectivation. How does increased attention to the digital involuntary by an individual subject amount to another way of collectively valuing freedom in digital societies and fashioning alternative ways of imagining futures worth living in?

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