

Shaping Ethical Horizons in the Digital Age: Reflections from Evelyne A. Tauchnitz's presentation '*Ethics of Digital Transformation in Times of Peace and War*'

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On the 29th of September 2023, the Graduate School of Global Studies at Doshisha University was happy to receive a lecture from the visiting researcher Evelyne A. Tauchnitz, senior fellow at the Institute of Social Ethics at the University of Lucerne, Switzerland. The primary objective of the conference, the 69th instance of the Global Justice Conference, centered on exploring how digital technologies can be harnessed to construct new avenues for the development and maintenance of peace. As Tauchnitz stated at the beginning of her presentation, the key take-away she wanted to give to participants was to provide a positive message as a counter point to the seemingly omnipresent warnings of technology run amok. In this paper we will be providing an overview as well as some of our own views on the ongoing work of Tauchnitz based on our understanding and the fruitful ensuing discussion which followed her visit to Kyoto.

The concept of peace exhibits remarkable adaptability, assuming diverse interpretations across varying communities, societies, and historical epochs, its nuances intricately entwined with the political and historical contexts specific to each case. At all times, technology emerges as a formidable force of amplification, affording us the capacity to extend our influence on the world and our fellow inhabitants, irrespective of whether our aims lean toward peaceful or conflict-oriented objectives. The considerable disruptive potential of technology underscores its role in reshaping our societal impact. Yet, discerning between the benevolent and malevolent applications of technology remains a complex task, deeply rooted in our individual conceptions of peace and the fundamental values we hold as indispensable cornerstones for its establishment, values such as freedom and human dignity. In this context, human dignity formed the cornerstone of Tauchnitz's presentation, outlining it as the key component in how technological development should move forward.

During the discussion, critics of this view highlighted the reality of technological development within the context of the arms industry. Ultimately it was Nazi Germany's V2 ballistic missile, a weapon of terror used on the innocent inhabitants of various European cities, which gave humanity its first photograph of our home world taken from space. In this sense, peaceful and conflict-oriented technological development can be difficult to separate, as exemplified in the career of noted rocket scientist Wernher von Braun and the role of the Space Race in US-Soviet relations.

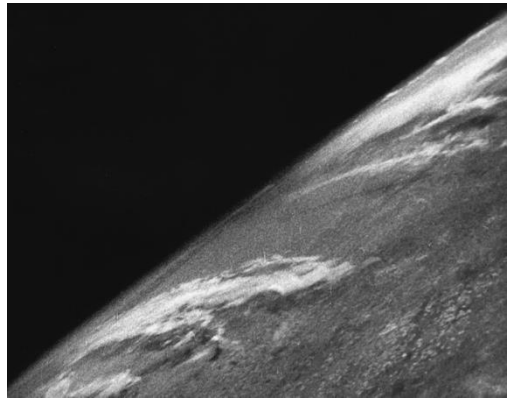


Figure 1, Among the first photos taken from space via a camera on a V2 ballistic rocket. (Wikimedia Commons 2015. Public Domain.)

Furthermore, we should consider the inherently radical nature of the notion of technology itself. Taking the current issues in digitization as part of the ever-evolving landscape of communications technology, the advent of the internet has been the one of the greatest upsets to established power structures. This new mode of communication as created fresh channels to foster inclusivity and provide a platform for a multitude of voices which otherwise would be excluded due to a wide range of factors, from structural factors ranging from socio-economic and cultural factors to simple geographic factors limiting their interaction with the wider world. In this sense, the digital transformation has liberated large swaths of the world's population from oppressive isolation. However, the destruction of established power structures remains in as much as the word implies a destructive process, where the pendulum of social progress can move in either direction. For instance, a warehouse worker might be more able to organize collective action through social media tools, but at the same time automatization can make the worker obsolete.

Tauchnitz (2023) is aware of some of these risks, highlighting several examples. Increased efficiency in communication not only paves the way for novel forms of protests but also lays the groundwork for political repressive measures against such demonstrations, with examples including the pervasive use of surveillance and systems of political control, notably social scoring mechanisms (With the latter being something the author would also like to underscore as it is the focus of his own research). Looking at communication abstractly, this dichotomy is understandable as emergence of new avenues of violent mobilization and associated threats, exemplified for instance by the proliferation of hate speech, are an abstraction of the physical

world. Recent events in the Israel-Palestine conflict of 2023 showcase this, with a significant uptake in both antisemitic and Islamophobic rhetoric across the internet. On the whole, the destruction established power structures does not mean that what replaces it will necessarily be more equal, peaceful, or humanistic. Technology may merely allow for the manifestation of new forms of oppression.

Role of Ethics

According to Tauchnitz (2023) this is where ethics come into play, by proactively searching for ways in which potential technologies can be used to promote peace while also mitigating the dangers and controlling the advancement and utilization of technologies for harmful purposes. Specifically, by using the three types of ethical philosophy, namely virtue, deontology, and consequentialism, as a structured way to apply ethics to technological progress. Within Virtue Ethics, the significance of technological development and its applications lies in the underlying intentions and objectives. It is crucial to emphasize the importance of raising awareness and providing education to deter the misuse of technology for violent purposes. Equally important is the practice of critical self-reflection regarding one's own motivations and objectives when engaged in tech-related endeavors. Within this context the aforementioned example of technology developed ostensibly for military purposes, such as the V2 rocket, can be considered unvirtuous.

Deontological Ethics emphasize the significance of duty, norms, and rules, underscoring the importance of ensuring that technology is created and employed in alignment with ethical standards and obligations aimed at preserving peace and the welfare of humanity. This includes adherence to principles such as international humanitarian and human rights law, encompassing the protection of fundamental rights such as the right to privacy. While the Ethics of Consequentialism prioritizes the outcomes arising from the development and utilization of technology, emphasizing the need to maximize the advantages of technology for peaceful purposes while simultaneously minimizing the potential for its misuse in violent contexts. Additionally, it underscores the importance of proactively preventing risks for which no one can be held accountable. An example of vague accountability which is becoming an increasing issue within modern society can be seen surrounding self-driving cars. With whom does the ultimate responsibility rest in case of an accident? The driver or the software developer?

A significant portion of the presentation was spent providing further details on the type of peace which technology should be striving for. Here Tauchnitz used the work of Johan Galtung (1969), arguing that the absence of overt conflict does not inherently guarantee peace. Galtung's notion of peace incorporates not only the resolution of visible conflicts, also called Negative Peace and encompassing the notion of physical violence, but also the eradication of structural violence and underlying inequalities, which he referred to as Positive Peace. In short, Galtung believes that genuine peace can only be achieved when societies address the root causes of violence and work towards social, economic, and political structures that promote harmony and well-being for all, making it a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to peace. Applied to the development of technology, it is important that its development meets these standards. Again, recent developments of for instance generative AI models which have been trained on biased data and therefore perpetuate biased standards provide a prime example where Galtung's Positive Peace has not been considered.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the above model Tauchnitz (2023) proposes that technology should be “grounded on freedom and human dignity”. To ensure this she proposes several governance strategies: Advance the use of technologies for peaceful purposes while prohibiting the use of technologies for military purposes, while overseeing the equivocal or uncertain applications of technology through various methods. This is to be achieved through industry self-regulation, the implementation of best practices and social responsibility standards, as well as economic and financial incentives like subsidies and taxes. Additionally, she proposes employing nudging techniques, which involve modifying the environment to encourage a specific choice or result, in order to help guide technology use in the desired direction. And lastly, exploring the establishment of legally binding standards, whether through the creation of new norms or the application of existing ones. Fierce criticism was leveled on this position by several attendees from states where their government is not necessarily acting in good faith, such as for instance the adoption of digital technologies by the Taliban regime of Afghanistan.

In conclusion, Tauchnitz (2023) states that efforts to foster peace should be rooted in a foundation of human rights ethics, recognizing that while human rights are essential, they may not alone guarantee peace. When pressed on the problem of a lack of universal agreement as

to the nature of human rights, again using the example of Afghanistan, Tauchnitz argued that even the Taliban would understand the immorality of a particular legislation if it would be applied universally. In essence Tauchnitz appealed to the Kantian categorical imperative. This Kantian approach is deontological, as per the above grouping, and therefore does not consider religious or divine ethics, in the way a theocratic government such as the Taliban would. Because for such a government divine ethics supersedes all worldly concerns, appeals to universality cannot trump faith in divine law.

However, considering governments acting in good faith and according to universal maxims, policy should address concerns related to social equity, the equitable allocation of political and social authority, and the elimination of discrimination. The advent of digital technologies has introduced fresh possibilities and potential threats to human rights, it is imperative that fundamental human rights are upheld universally and without exception, involving all stakeholders, including civil society, technology companies, and governments. This necessitates the implementation of efficient governance mechanisms.

References

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