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Mediascape, antropotechnics, culture of presence, and the flight from God

Erick Felinto

Erick Felinto is a professor for media theory at the State University of Rio de Janeiro and author of several books and articles on cyberculture, media theory and cinema. He was actively involved in the production of the *Flusseriana* (a dictionary of Vilém Flusser's concepts, edited and published by the ZKM and the University of the Arts, Berlin), as a collaborator and translator and is currently working on a book on the notion of 'Philosophical Fiction' in Vilém Flusser. He is the organizer of the conference series *The Secret Life of Objects* which explores the transformation within the Humanities and the ecology of media.

Erick Felinto addresses the growing digital illiteracy compared to times before graphical user interface and calls, with Vilém Flusser, the hacker the actual educational ideal of our time. He discusses the enthusiasm and misconceptions in early net culture discourse, sees 'speculative futurism' and 'theoretical fictions' as the discursive strategy of tomorrow, considers technology as

an ‘uncanny form of life’ and inevitable correction to the dictate of nature, explains the different concepts of posthumanism, and questions that (human) life is necessarily the ultimate goal of the cosmos. He explores the dialectic of silence and phatic communication in new media in the context of a general shift from the ‘culture of meaning’ to a ‘culture of presence’ and the exhaustion of the interpretative paradigm in the Humanities.

Prelude

Roberto Simanowski: What is your favored neologism of digital media culture and why?

Erick Felinto: I’m not a big fan of neologisms, but if I had to choose one it would probably be “mediascape”. I like the term for two reasons. First, it translates our complex and intricate media scenario as just one large structure of interconnected technologies, notwithstanding the specific differences between each medium and its audiences. And if there’s some truth to Friedrich Kittler’s dictum that ‘the general digitization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media,’ then this neologism is more relevant and useful now than ever before. Second, I find the convergence between the notions of media and landscape very interesting, because it characterizes our current situation in terms of a specific “mood” or “ambiance”. It’s impossible to live “outside” of media, because media is everywhere and endows every event of our daily lives with a specific mediatic quality. For me, the metaphor of an electronic or digital landscape conveys the singular feeling of living in a time where social relations and even the culture are constantly being filtered through the lenses of several media devices. A Brazilian theoretician, Muniz Sodré, talks about a fourth “bios”, or mode of existence, following the previous three coined by Aristotle. Now we experience the “mediatic bios” as a new form of life complementing (and overpowering) the other ones: *bios theotikos* (contemplative life), *bios politikos* (political life) and *bios apolautikos* (sensual life). I think this kind of approach is also interesting because it collapses the radical separation between nature

and culture or nature and technology that modernity strived to establish.

RS: What comes to mind if you hear “Digital Media Studies”?

EF: I don’t like the expression very much, because it suggests that we should study digital media apart from other kinds of media. The field of digital studies suffers from memory loss, treating the past as if it were only a preamble to the marvels of the digital world. Yes, there are several particularities to digital media that need to be taken into account, however, I believe we can better understand these particularities by comparing them with previous technological paradigms. That’s why I prefer the term “media studies” as a more inclusive label, which also doesn’t imply a radical break with the past or any kind of special status granted to the present situation. That’s also the reason why I believe the rise of media archaeology (the works of Wolfgang Ernst, Knut Ebeling and Jussi Parikka, for instance, come to mind) represents one of the most exciting events in the recent history of media theory. According to Parikka, media archaeology ‘sees media culture as sedimented and layered, a fold of time and materiality where the past might be suddenly discovered anew, and the new technologies grow obsolete increasingly fast.’ In that sense, I specially like Siegfried Zielinski’s idea of seeking the new in the old instead of the other way around. A critical appraisal of our current mediascape demands an examination of the past in order to ascertain which interesting paths and potentialities have been left underdeveloped or abandoned.

RS: If you were a minister of education, what would you do about media literacy?

EF: I’d certainly do everything in my power to make media literacy mandatory at the level of high school education, with a special focus on programming languages. Two of my favorite media theorists, Friedrich Kittler and Vilém Flusser, strongly believed in the importance of computer literacy for future generations.

Politics and Government

RS: Today, web activists are calling for the government and governmental institutions such as the European Union to pass laws to protect privacy and net neutrality, while in earlier times Internet pioneers such as John Perry Barlow declared the independence of Cyberspace from the governments of the old world. Do those governments that 'do not know our culture, our ethics, or the unwritten codes that already provide our society more order than could be obtained by any of your impositions' as Barlow stated turn out to be our last hope in the battle for the rights of the individual and the freedom of the Internet?

EF: Yes, there seems to be a significant shift regarding the role of government within digital culture. It's not so much that activists now see governments as allies in their fight for Internet freedom, but rather the idea that it's preferable to side with (some) governments rather than with large private corporations such as Google. However, the situation might be slightly different for every country. The Brazilian case is very interesting, since our Congress is now working precisely on a special draft bill (Marco Civil da Internet) intended to guarantee civil rights in the use of the Internet and regulate the behavior of service providers. The bill states that Internet access is a prerequisite for the exercise of civic rights. It was developed collaboratively by means of public consultation and its main goal is to assure the principle of net neutrality. Some people even say that the bill represents a chance for Brazil to take international leadership in the fight for a freer net, by adopting a political position that is directly oppositional to conservative initiatives such as ACTA (the Anti-Counterfeit Trade Agreement, which was rejected by the European Parliament in 2012).

RS: This sounds as if the Brazilian parliament is much more prepared to discuss the political and cultural implications of digital media than politicians in other countries who mostly have no clear concept about the matter of new media and leave it to journalists, academics and net-activists. Who is behind the discussion in Brazil?

EF: Well, not really. Several specialists in digital technology and Internet culture participated in the process. Debates and public hearings around specific issues (for instance, on the privacy rights of internet users) were organized and people from different sectors and walks of life had the opportunity to voice their concerns and offer suggestions. However, as democratic and comprehensive as this process may sound, the results so far have been somewhat disappointing. Some of the main problems have to do with the definitions of intellectual property and fair use, which are still fairly conservative. Sérgio Amadeu Silveira, a professor and Internet researcher who participated in the elaboration of the bill, believes that the most conservative aspects of the draft are a result of the powerful lobby exerted by the telecommunication and copyright industries. The bill was passed in April, 2014, but many people believe it still needs some improvements. There's a very heated and fruitful debate going on in Brazil regarding topics such as open software and copyright. Some academics are still working together with the government (or at least some of its more progressive sectors) in order to pass new legislation that proves to be adequate and relevant for the context of digital culture.

It's interesting to note that Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff had requested the Congress to prioritize the bill's vote right after the allegations of espionage by the NSA came to light. The government believes that the creation of data centers for companies like Google or Facebook in Brazil can prevent the transmission of private information to foreign agencies, so they tried to include this provision in the bill, I'm not sure if they succeeded, since I still didn't have the time to read its whole text. In any case, I don't think this is realistic and I doubt it would be enough to stop the NSA (or any other foreign agency, for that matter) from spying on us. The situation is highly complex today because there seems to be a mixed perception about the role of government in digital culture. On the one hand, it can embody the "dark side of the digital" (to evoke the title of a symposium organized by Richard Grusin at the UWM in May 2013) when it monitors social networks in order to prevent the organization of protests

- as has been recently happening in Brazil - and control people's access to information. On the other hand, it can be an ally in the fight for a better Internet when it regulates the obligations of service providers to its customers and tries to guarantee net neutrality, which is supposedly one of the main principles of the above mentioned "Marco Civil".

But there might also be another factor at work in this shift in the perception of the government. More and more people have access to the Internet, but are digitally illiterate. In fact, most people don't want to go through the trouble of learning code or software languages and we don't have special programs to teach them that. Back in the heroic times of the Internet, when we still didn't have perfected GUIs (graphical user interface), one needed to have at least some minimal training in digital literacy. Hackers were the main "dwellers" of the digital territories. As Gabriela Coleman states in her 2013 book *Coding Freedom*, while the Internet's architecture in the 1980's was open, practically speaking it 'operated under a lock' with the keys available only to a select number of hackers and engineers. Today the situation is quite different and the development of effective GUIs is partly to blame for this. People just want to punch keys and see things happening. Perhaps we should pay more heed to Kittler's arguments in essays such as *There is no Software*. Interfaces can be a way of shielding us from the complexity of the hardware and the creative unpredictability of noise. Trial and noise have been all but abolished in the extremely closed and copyrighted software systems that we use in our machines. Hackers still experiment, code and break things, but regular people ask for guidance. As the big companies become increasingly untrustworthy, there is no alternative but to turn to the government (the lesser of two evils).

RS: What you describe - punching keys with no idea about code - points to a central aspect of nowadays cultural habits: people want immediate gratification and they want it with as little effort as possible. This is true not only for our interaction with technology but also for our relationship to knowledge given that we

hardly read through books or essays any longer until we understand but rather ask the search machine to give us the answer right away. We will come back to the issue of complexity and thinking later. For here we may note the rule of thumb that effort and understanding relate to each other in inverse proportion. In this perspective and in regard to understanding new media the hacker - in the broader sense of the term - seems to be the actual educational ideal of our time.

EF: I believe so. Hackers display some traits that are fundamental for a creative and active participation in digital culture. They're often self-taught and always question the stability of systems or the arbitrariness of protocols. Of course, most governments have gone to great lengths to make sure that hackers appear as irresponsible and dangerous in the eyes of the general public. However, there are some situations where activists and governments can be allies. Our most progressive former minister of culture, Gilberto Gil, once said: 'I'm a hacker, a minister-hacker' (something that would be unthinkable, say, in the United States). In a time when big corporations are increasingly colonizing cyberspace, we need to imbue people with the hacker ethics of freedom, creativity and experimentation. In a short article published in Switzerland in 1990, Vilém Flusser drew an interesting argument concerning the reunification of Germany. For him, more interesting than the process of *Wiedervereinigung* (reunification), which would ultimately serve the purpose of establishing other frontiers (Germans and non-Germans), was the digital revolution being set in motion at the time by hackers all over the world. According to him, hackers were the living proof of the foolishness of setting borders and the creative power of the gray zones. Flusser was a very radical critic of fixed identities, of rigid frontiers, of authorship and ownership. Yes, this may sound romantic and unrealistic, but I think it's precisely this kind of romanticism that we need in an age when the market seems to be invading every living space.

RS: Let me pick up Flusser's romanticism and his critic of fixed identity in the context of digital media. In contrast to more

pessimistic media theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio, Flusser predicted a telematic utopia of unrestricted and democratic global communication. And indeed, the early Internet seemed to meet Flusser's advocacy of noise and fluid identity developed in his autobiography *Bodenlos* (Groundless, 1992) and his book *Von der Freiheit des Migranten* (The Freedom of the Migrant, 1994; English 2003). However, with the critical turn in Digital Media Studies in the last 10 years, the notion of the Internet as an "identity workshop", as Sherry Turkle described it, or the new public sphere for free political discourse has been widely abandoned (cf. Morosov's *Net Dellusion*, Turkle's *Alone Together*, Lovink's *Networks Without a Cause*, Pariser's *Filter Bubble*). Do you see a place for Flusser's optimism today?

EF: It is true that Flusser was at times excessively optimistic about the potentialities of the "telematic society" (the term with which he named the socio-cultural formation we used to define as "cyberculture" until recently). However, this enthusiasm was not uncommon in the theoretical discourses on net culture in the early 1980s and 1990s. He was also somewhat simplistic when he confronted mass culture with digital culture, although always in a very poetic manner. He liked animal metaphors and compared the public in the mass media environment to a worm (*ein riesiger Wurm*), which kept digesting, excreting and consuming the same content again and again while believing it was receiving new information. For him, the opposition between mass media and digital media was very clear. The first represented a societal model composed of apathetic, passive people, incapable of creating anything new, while the second stood for interactivity and a playful engagement with the culture. For Flusser, freedom was synonym with the capacity to play with our technological apparatuses and try to find ways to circumvent their inscribed programs.

RS: Playing with the technological apparatuses reinforces the idea of the hacker. The passive/active opposition, however, that was also used and mis-conceptualized in the hypertext discourse of the 1990s, certainly needs to be revisited in light of more and

more hyperactive readers less and less able to absorb complex information.

EF: Nowadays we understand that mass media and digital media can't be so neatly separated and the theological-utopic faith in the liberating powers of the digital sounds a bit naïve (except maybe for a handful of authors such as Pierre Lévy). However, none of these traits disqualifies Flusser as an extraordinary thinker and a precursor to contemporary media theory. I strongly believe that Flusser can be aligned, at least partially, with the research program that has been termed recently as "German media theory". His cybernetic vision of the culture, the centrality of media (and, most importantly, of the *materiality* of media) in his worldview and his archaeological approach to the pair society/technology situate him in an epistemological space that is not very distant from the speculations of a Friedrich Kittler or a Siegfried Zielinski. In fact, Kittler was an admirer of Flusser and invited him for a professorship in Bochum a few months before his death in 1991. In the preface to *Kommunikologie weiter denken*, the book that transcribes Flusser's lectures in Bochum, Kittler dubs him a "prophet" and a "founder hero" of contemporary media theory.

RS: A "prophet" and "founder hero" of media theory similar to Marshal McLuhan? And similar "non-academic", "metaphoric" and "sloppy" as McLuhan has been criticized in German introductions to media theory?

EF: The trope of the prophet, also ascribed to thinkers such as McLuhan (a major influence on Flusser's thought), lead to the very peculiar situation of a scholar who was frequently mentioned, often described as a pioneer, but very scarcely studied in depth. For many people, Flusser was someone who wrote about important topics and stated some interesting things, but was ultimately a dilettante, lacking the seriousness of a full-fledged university professor. In Germany, he was often compared to McLuhan, although not always in a good way. I also believe he tackled with several aspects of the contemporary discussion on posthumanism (another trademark of "German media theory"),

notwithstanding the fact that he was, in many ways, a traditional humanist at heart – but this kind of contradiction may likewise be found in Norbert Wiener, the father of Cybernetics. His obsession with animal metaphors and tropes is evocative of the contemporary wave of media studies that dissolve the borders between biology and technology or nature and culture, such as Jussi Parikka’s *Insect Media* (2010) or Sebastian Vehlken’s *Zootechnologien* (2012).

For instance, Flusser’s *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* (2011), recently translated into English (there’s actually translations of the versions Flusser wrote in Portuguese and German), is an extraordinary philosophical essay on our technological condition. But what strikes me as extremely original is how he approaches the problem by means of a very peculiar allegory. He defines his essay as a “philosophical fiction”, where the main character is the strange marine creature (an octopus) named in the book’s title. The character works as a sort of twisted mirror-image of man, while at the same time offering Flusser the opportunity to relativize categories that are traditionally referred exclusively to man, such as “art” and “culture”. *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* is a speculation on the possible future outcomes of the technological revolution, and, albeit essentially optimistic, Flusser does not exclude the possibility that these new technologies end up promoting new forms of totalitarianism and control.

RS: What form of totalitarianism?

EF: Well, if the *Vampyroteuthis* indeed works as an allegory of technology and the foundational relationship between man and technics, then it should always be structured between the poles of reason and emotion, calculation and imagination. When Flusser discusses the emergence of this strange octopus, he claims that we can only have a meaningful encounter with it by balancing the cold gaze of science and technology with poetry and intuition (this refers to the Portuguese manuscript, the German version is a bit different, which makes things more interesting and complex). *Vampyroteuthis* is a scientific entity – in fact, an actually existing being, assigned by Biology to the class of the

cephalopoda –, but also the stuff of legend and imagination. This kind of dualism lies at the core of Flusser's thinking and is never solved. It can be translated into more philosophical terms in the central conflicting forces of Cybernetics and Heideggerian phenomenology, both powerful sources of Flusser's reasoning. As Flusser himself puts it, in order to be effective, his fable of the wondrous marine creature has to be "fictitious science", that is, the overcoming of scientific objectivity in the service of a concretely human knowledge'.

RS: This reminds me of Hans Jonas who in his 1979 book *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation* (The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age) demands an 'imaginative casuistic' about the possible consequences of current developments. In 2012, Geert Lovink in his book *Networks Without A Cause: A Critique of Social Media* proposed a similar method for Internet Studies coining it 'speculative futurism'.

EF: I think Lovink's proposition is indeed very close to the heart of Flusser's project. When Lovink writes that 'Humanities should do more than describe the times we're living in' and defends the need 'to celebrate singular modes of expression,' he is summoning cultural theorists to speculate about the present and the future with the full extent of their imagination. This move requires expressive strategies that appropriate the possibilities of non-academic modes of discourse, such as fiction and poetry. To be sure, Flusser was not the first advocate of this intellectual strategy, which has some respectable historical antecedents, neither the last thinker who resorted to it. In fact, I believe theoretical fictions of this kind will become increasingly popular as a discursive device in the years to come. Let's compare, for instance, the flusserian technique of the "philosophical fiction" with the strategy adopted by Manuel de Landa in his *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (1991), published only four years after the *Vampyreuthis* (1987). De Landa performs an extraordinary *de-centering* of the human gaze by placing an intelligent war-machine as the narrator of his book. What would a work of

history look like if a robot instead of a human being had written it? In such a work, human beings would be nothing more than ‘pieces of a larger military-industrial machine: a war machine’, in other words, only part of a larger (organic-mechanic) assemblage. De Landa’s book is equivalent to a philosophical fiction – or an exercise in “speculative futurism”, if you will – that narrates the past from the point of view of a future sentient, non-human being. His robot historian is a machinic version of the organic Vampyroteuthis: they represent the position of an imagined “other” through which we can acquire an innovative perspective on ourselves. In *Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials*, without ever mentioning Flusser, Peter Szendy terms the use of radical imagination in philosophical discourses as “philosofiction” and quotes Derrida’s statement that ‘all philosopher’s have made fiction a keystone of their discourse’. For Szendy (and also for Flusser), filosofiction is a discursive strategy that works ‘as both an opening and a limit – as an imaginary access to the other, but without experience of the other’.

We’re now simply taking this idea to its farthest consequences. It’s interesting that Lovink talks so much about “speculation” in his book, because I’d go so far as to suggest that we’ve been experiencing a “speculative renaissance” in the last twenty years or so, not only in philosophy (the young philosophical movement called “speculative realism” comes to mind), but in all fields of the Humanities. Steven Shaviro, in his book *Connected, or what it means to live in the network society* (2003), has stated that it is only by writing cultural theory as science fiction that one can hope to be ‘as radical as reality itself’. In Flusser, however, imaginative speculation is to be a trademark not only of theoretical writing, but also of all our dealings with technology. Science and technology that are not associated with imagination and intuition can easily turn into the complete rationalization of life. Therefore, the apocalyptic vision of an administered society is a very real possibility for Flusser, with technologies being used for the control of populations and the suppression of all attempts to disrupt the status quo (and nothing can be more disruptive than imagination).

There's a beautiful passage in *Kommunikologie weiter denken* where Flusser frames the dilemma between order and freedom in theological terms. Like Walter Benjamin, Flusser appropriates and secularizes theological notions in order to discuss profane topics, such as art and technology. Freedom is only possible because the world has holes (*Löcher*) in it. The fact that God is an imperfect designer (or "programmer", as Flusser puts it), like the demiurge of the gnostics, allows for the existence of extraordinary events. Flusser plays here with the double meaning of the German word *Wunder*: "wonder" and "miracle" at the same time. Freedom is connected to wonder, our capacity to marvel and engage in an imaginative relationship with the world. This engagement is itself a source of wonder and miracles. There are holes we can exploit, and the decision to exploit them is tantamount to committing a "sin" (*Sünde*). Then comes the most striking statement, when Flusser explicitly affirms that freedom is technology, in fact, *the "real freedom" (die eigentliche Freiheit)*, and he criticizes the disdain of most French and German intellectuals for technology (especially Heidegger). What technology offers us, when dully combined with imagination and art, is a way of predicting and preempting the future. Technics is thus the possibility of driving the outcome of a situation into a direction other than that dictated by nature. Therefore, the real danger lies not in technology itself, but rather in its isolation from the realms of art and creativity.

RS: To me, the opposite seems to be the case once we look closer and in a more specific manner at the issue: Freedom is not enhanced but reduced by information technology for it fills all the holes that allow extraordinary or uncontrolled events. For example, if Big Data mining produces reliable information about all kinds of if-then-correlations, it doesn't require much imagination to see the government, the health department, insurance companies and credit institutes asking people to refrain from behavior with unwanted *then*-consequences. Such demand is unlikely as long as the consequences of certain *ifs* are not discovered or certain. However, knowledge obliges. The flipside of

conducting measuring is taking measures - its looming concepts are *predictive analytics* and *algorithmic regulation*. Hence, don't we, in the context of the information and control society, face the paradoxical equation that knowledge and freedom relate to each other in inverse proportion?

EF: Well, Flusser understands the technological gesture as an act of freedom against the determinations of nature. When man starts altering his natural habitat - for instance, by transforming a branch into a stick -, he is already engaged in the technological enterprise. Flusser was well aware of Heidegger's criticism of (modern) technology as a form of "enframing" (*Gestell*) and calculation of the world. He certainly sees the danger in a use of technology that seeks only to control and predict. And I know this sounds paradoxical, since I used precisely words like "predict" and "preempt" in my previous answer, but I think that Flusser had a very particular idea regarding these "preemptive" powers of technology. For him, it is not so much about controlling our fate or becoming, as it is about the opening up of new possibilities not already programmed in our natural state. Although he used words like "preempt" (*vorwegnehmen*), his expression of choice was "suppose" (*annehmen*). In fact, in a book that bears precisely this verb as its title, *Angenommen* (2000) ("suppose that...") he contrasts his way of thinking with that of the futurologist, since he is interested in improbabilities rather than in probabilities, the latter being the subject matter of the futurologist - and this is precisely why his imaginative scenarios and suppositions never cease to acknowledge the fundamental role of otherness. This relationship to the "other" - understood both as our fellow human being and as the emblem of an ever-open field of possibilities - is central to Flusser's thought.

I see some interesting connections between Flusser's proposals and R.L. Rutsky's notion of *high techné* (coined through a very interesting dialogue with Heidegger) as a form of relationship to technology that is not external to man, but rather constitutive of the human being in his entwinement with art, technique and otherness. As Rutsky himself puts it, the change we need to effect in

our dealings with technology must be a 'mutational process that cannot be rationally predicted or controlled; it can only be imagined, figured, through a techno-cultural process that is at once science-fictional and aesthetic'. Technology is thus characterized as endowed with agency, as if it were an uncanny form of life that continually unsettles and challenges (in an "aesthetic" manner) the position of the human subject. The future envisioned by this change is, again, essentially *posthuman*, not of course in the sense of securing the boundaries of the subject through the use of prostheses or a cyborg body, but rather of destabilizing it, of acknowledging the 'otherness that is part of us', as Rutsky put it. This sounds very Flusserian to me.

RS: If, with Flusser, we understand technology as an act of freedom against the determinations of nature and if, with Rutsky and many others, we look at human relationship to technology as constitutive of their beings, allowing them, as you say, to go in a direction other than that dictated by nature, we may also remember Immanuel Kant's notion about the 'purpose in nature' as discusses in his 1784 essay *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*. Kant considers the 'purpose in nature' that man go 'beyond the mechanical ordering of his animal existence' and gain happiness from the perfection of skills. The means to do so is to constantly develop the utmost human capacity of reason, from generation to generation, bestowing each with ever more refined technology: hammer, steam-engine, electric motor, computer, artificial intelligence. To Kant this endeavor will be a walk 'from barbarism to culture' and finally, despite all conflicts and contradictions on the way, make the world a better place, as the slogan reads today. Needless to say, that Kant's idealism has been rejected, especially in light of the fact that the advance of human intelligence has brought many powerful means to life that can end or suppress human life: from nuclear weapon to self-learning artificial intelligence.

In this context I find the analogy of technology as art very interesting if applied to Kant's 'philosophical chiasm'. Can we think of technology as something challenging and unsettling the

common view, including the view on technological progress, in the way we expect from art? Does technology propose a different perspective in a rather ambiguous way, as we experience with art, or does it rather establish, unambiguously and eventually inevitably, a new way of seeing and doing things? In my view there is a central difference between art and technology: while the message of art eventually is the difference of being, the message of technology is “just” a different way of being – a ‘change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs’ as McLuhan describes the “message” of any medium or technology’. This inevitable, rather than possible, change is what I have in mind when I asked to what extent the statistical perspectives Big Data mining enforces limits the freedom of being different. I guess we will have to wait and see how the “governmental data mining” and “governmental predictions”, as portrayed for example in Tal Zarsky’s publications or in *Changing Behaviours: On the Rise of the Psychological State* (2013) by Rhys Jones, Jessica Pykett and Mark Whitehead, eventually affect human behavior.

EF: It’s interesting to note, since I repeatedly mentioned Flusser’s romanticism, that Kant’s notion of ‘natural purpose’ served as an inspiration for the romantic organic concept of nature. So Kant and the romantics are not as distant as they might appear initially. For Flusser, however, technology should offer us a bridge between the powers of reason and the capabilities of imagination. We must engage with technologies that make us dream (about the future, for instance). He was not interested in a form of knowledge devoted to the regulation of life (as in predictive analytics or algorithmic regulation), but sought instead to promote a creative, artistic relationship to technology as a very peculiar form of knowledge, which approaches truth and reality through their opposing side (*Gegenseite*), as it were, via art and philosophical fictions. Of course, we can always ask whether this creative, libertarian form of relationship with technology will prevail over its uses as an instrument for the measurement (and control) of the world. Perhaps Flusser let his romantic vision of new media get the best of him.

Anyway, to properly answer the initial question on Flusser's optimism, unlike Agamben, for whom technology is part of the mechanisms that keeps us under control and incapable of achieving a more authentically human (and animal and posthuman) condition, Flusser believes in the libertarian potentialities of the technical image and the artistic and playful nature of new media. To be sure, Flusser's vision is utopian (and messianic, like Agamben's), but it's a utopia we should always strive to materialize. In any case, I believe his optimism is better than the brand of technological pessimism that is characteristic, for instance, of much French theory produced in the last 40 years.

RS: We already discussed Flusser's belief in the libertarian potentialities of new media with respect to Big Data Mining. Now you point out his optimism and utopianism regarding technology and the posthuman. Let me press you on this a bit more. In his book *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt. Menschwerdung* (From Subject to Project. Becoming Human, 1994), Flusser moves his idea of the constant reinvention of the Self and the steady departure from what is home and custom (in German *Wohnung* and *Gewohnheit*) from the context of migration to the framework of technology. However, one of the pejorative keywords about new media - not only since Eli Pariser's *Filter Bubble* or Cass Sunstein's *Republic.com* but already in Andrew Shapiro's *Control Revolution* (1999) - has been "daily me" or "you-loop" signifying the customization and personalization of what one encounters on the Internet. This personalization, which many people more or less approve of and even desire, has been addressed as the preclusion of the unfamiliar, the removal of diversity and of what we are not (yet). If the statistical logic of the algorithm so easily and powerful overrides the cultural concept of otherness, what role will technology play in the project of posthumanism?

EF: There are several ways of understanding the term and the concept of "posthumanism". For instance, in his *The Souls of Cyberfolk* (2005), Thomas Foster discusses what he considers to be two radically different forms of posthumanism. On the one hand, there's the brand of posthumanism that was developed in

cyberpunk literature, which was essentially progressive and libertarian. Cyberpunk didn't see technology as something external, but rather as pervasive and intimate. It also dismissed or at least complicated the reductionism of dualities like utopian/dystopian and male/female. On the other hand, there's also a kind of posthumanism that can serve politically conservative agendas. Movements like the World Transhumanist Association or Extropianism, according to Foster, align themselves with an ideal of "self-realization" that is pro-market and individualistic. Also, it's always possible to discuss posthumanism in concrete, down to earth and shortsighted terms or choose to approach it in a more abstract, philosophical manner. While the first option treats posthumanism mostly as an effect of material technologies (particularly digital and genetic technologies) on the traditional makeup of the human body and mind, the second one takes a more complex instance, treating contemporary technologies as just one specific and visible manifestation of a much older and often invisible force.

The latter is Argentine philosopher Fabián Ludueña's perspective in his brilliant work *La Comunidad de los Espectros* (2010). Ludueña employs the term "antropotechnics" to define 'all the techniques by means of which the communities of the human species and the individuals that compose them act upon their own animal nature with the intent to guide, expand, modify or domesticate their biological substrate, aiming at what philosophy at first and later the biological sciences have grown accustomed to call "man".' Religion is, of course, one of our most fundamental forms of antropotechnics, one devoted to the *spectralization* of man (what really matters is the spirit, not the body). In that sense, the contemporary biotechnological revolution would be nothing more than a radical secularization of the ancient Christian eschatology. While several thinkers now claim the need of a reckoning with the animality that all antropotechnics tried to expel from the human sphere, Ludueña, in his book *Para além do princípio antrópico: por uma filosofia do outside* (2012) attempts to go even further. For him, we should get rid of the last anthropic principle, which is life itself. It is incumbent

upon us to develop a philosophy capable of thinking or speculating about the objectivity of the universe without a human observer. Life is not necessarily the ultimate goal of a cosmos that is composed mostly of inorganic matter, no less than man is the final step in the development of life. In other words, why busy ourselves with a phenomenon that is so marginal and exceptional as life, 'if not because man still conserves in life a desire to explain himself?' Ludueña's project is closely related to some other interesting contemporary philosophical enterprises that tackle with issues of posthumanism, such as Eugene Thacker's *In The Dust of this Planet* (2011).

In this context, to embrace the posthuman means to develop new ways of philosophizing - for instance, by elaborating a 'philosophy of the outside, of death and the specter,' as Ludueña proposes. Perhaps it's possible to reframe the question by resorting to three different kinds (or degrees) of posthumanism. The first kind corresponds roughly to the one Foster attributes to movements such as Extropianism. Rather than being an authentic posthumanism, it's a sort of super-humanism, since its main goal is to extend the dominion of the human race to the whole cosmos and augment certain human traits by means of technology (life-expectancy, powers of reasoning etc.). The second kind invites us to reconnect with the animal and deconstruct the anthropocentric principle that has guided western thought since its inception (but which, according to Ludueña, still clings to the "anthropic principle"). Finally, there is a kind of extreme or radical posthumanism, in which not only man, but also the very idea of life, as a privileged entity, needs to be overcome. All this philosophical preamble seemed necessary, because although posthumanism may strike us as a very recent problem, it can also be framed as a millennia-old topic that underscored the whole history of philosophy and that's still fundamental for all coming philosophy.

Now, which kind of posthumanism should we ascribe to Flusser? With his fascination for animals and his criticism of anthropocentrism, he was probably closer to the second type, but with the particularity of a belief in technology as the tool for tapping into the unrealized potentialities of the animal. In the

German version of the *Vampyroteuthis*, Flusser not only speculates about how the telematic society shall be able to modify our psychic structure, dissolving the boundaries of the “I-capsule” (*Ich-Kapsel*), but also hints at a possible posthuman future when man will be able to modify his genetic composition in order to realize all possibilities dormant in the primordial cells. We can certainly question the accuracy of Flusser’s first prediction, since new media and social networks have not accomplished the desired openness to the other, the disintegration of the “I-capsule”, as you mentioned in the question (at least not yet...).

However, the second speculation remains open to debate. This speculation is further developed in “Arte Viva” (*Living Art*), an unpublished text written in Portuguese in which Flusser approaches what he considers to be two major concurrent and also converging technocultural revolutions: Telematics and Biotechnology. For him, the latter represents the possibility of recuperating the ancient notion of “ars vivendi” (*the art of living*). Whereas the revolution of telematics promises the programmability of our lives, the other one (Biotechnology) promises the programmability *of all life*. Why should we be stuck in our current biological configuration? Why, for instance, can’t we design brains that are completely spherical (like the octopus’) instead of semi-spherical? What kind of new thoughts and forms of action could emerge from such a reconfiguration of the brain and the body? Genetic manipulation will be the ultimate form of art, since it will operate on our own bodies rather than on any external objects. In the future, if we manage to combine the organic with the inorganic, we will create ‘organisms that will replace the inanimate machines with ‘living’ artificial intelligences (no longer composed of silica, but rather of nerve fibers).’ In order to be “transcendentally creative” – in other words, in order to introduce novelty and noise into a system – Biotechnology will need to insert new materials (like silica) in the genetic code of living beings. The hybrid beings originating from these processes will then give rise to new forms of thought that we are currently incapable of contemplating. In sum, the issue of posthumanism (in Flusser or in general) is so complex and multifaceted that we’ve

just begun to scratch its surface, and the place of technology within this topic still needs to be more thoroughly investigated.

Media Literacy

RS: In his 1948 book *Die Welt des Schweigens* (The World of Silence), Swiss cultural philosopher Max Picard portrays silence not as absence of noise but as the context of consciousness. In the silence of nature, man is confronted with the before creation/after finitude and consequently his own mortality. Today with the ubiquity of mobile technology we escape silence even in the remotest corners of the earth. Against the background of Picard and others who called for moments of contemplation in a life increasingly accelerated by new media (think of Kracauer's essays *Those Who Wait* and *Boredom*), how do you see the philosophical implications of digital technology?

EF: I didn't expect to see Max Picard's name mentioned in an interview about digital media, but it's an interesting question. He was a very accomplished writer in his lifetime, having been praised by personalities like Rainer Maria Rilke and Herman Hesse. Today, however, he is all but forgotten and any mention of traditionalist thinkers like Picard may sound old-fashioned, although I believe there are some interesting similarities between his philosophy of language and Walter Benjamin's. *Die Welt des Schweigens* is a very beautiful essay on man's original relationship to silence, which for Picard is also the realm of divine transcendence. The fact that we now live in a world of noise and babbling is a symptom of our metaphysical and cultural decay, according to Picard. Chief among the causes for this decay is technology, especially media technology. I think we need to read Picard in the context of the *Kulturkritik* (cultural critique) that was a distinctive trait, in the early and mid-20th century, of the literature devoted to the analysis of the social changes brought about by the modernization of life - mainly in the German-speaking world.

The main problem for Picard was the acceleration of time, which lead mankind to a continual state of flight, ultimately, a

flight from God (*Die Flucht vor Gott* is another essay by Picard). To be sure, the flight from God is not something particular to our age, but the problem now is that there's no longer an objective world of faith. Whereas in the past man could individually make the decision of fleeing from the world of faith, we now experience the opposite situation: it is necessary that each individual continually decide to embrace the world of faith and stop fleeing. Therefore, this state of flight became the existential trademark of our times. Of course, modern media are definitely to blame for this change. Picard believed that cinema, for instance, was the perfect medium to effect the flight from God (and from ourselves). For me, Picard is a thinker who had brilliant intuitions, but who must be taken with a grain of salt, to say the least. It must be said, however, that Picard was not in favor of a simple Luddite solution. Destroying the technologies that now extend all around the globe would only make the situation worse. Nonetheless, I believe that we could in fact use a little bit more of silence and contemplation in the midst of our always technologically agitated and busy lives.

RS: I bring up Picard because I consider his take on silence and God essential in order to understand certain aspects of new media. Let me elaborate on this. Picard notes in his book that there is more silence in a human being than she can spend in a life time. This rather poetic utterance, that Rilke certainly would have subscribed to, seems to conflict Blaise Pascal's famous statement: 'all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber.' Alone, Pascal believes, man 'feels his nothingness, his forlornness, his insufficiency, his dependence, his weakness, his emptiness.' His being prone to death, Pascal explains, haunts every human, 'so that if he be without what is called diversion, he is unhappy.' However, for Pascal the solution was not escaping the quiet chamber, i.e. silence, but listening to God. This is the link to Picard: the flight from God prompts the flight from silence. The link to new media is what Picard calls noise (*Wortgeräusch*): the constant sound of words that do not originate from silence and do not return to silence but exist in their own right without

the urge to mean anything. The linguistic term for this is *phatic communication* the popular definition *small talk* - its field of practice are networks and applications such as *Facebook* or *WhatsApp*. Despite Picard's appeal, permanent communication for communication's sake has become the ruling principle of contemporary culture, a kind of placebo conversation referring to nothing other than itself. The aim of this kind of conversation is to avoid the moment that, like Pascal's quiet chamber or Picard's silence, would leave one alone with oneself. What may sound like cultural pessimism - and certainly would to Pascal and Picard - can also be seen as a way to ensure the continuation of the project of modernity. Because the return to God - or any other Grand Narrative that give our life transcendental asylum - would only confirm what Nietzsche once suspected: that the greatness of our deed, to have killed God, is too great for us. Accordingly, Gianni Vattimo notes in his book *Religion* (1996), edited together with Jacques Derrida: 'To react to the problematic and chaotic character of the late-modern world with a return to God as the metaphysical foundation means, in Nietzsche's terms, to refuse the challenge of the over(hu)man(ity).' In this perspective, the *phatic communication* - the noise Picard despises - prevents us from seceding the project of modernity by celebrating an eternal recurrence of the same in the constant worship of steadfast presence. Hence, *Facebook*, *WhatsApp*, *Instagram*, *Snapchat* and similar places keeping the carousel of communication alive allow us to feel happy without the danger of silence and the answers silence may offer. New media is - as metaphysics of aimlessness - not the problem but the solution of modern life.

EF: This is a very intelligent way of framing Picard's question within the context of new media. I believe we are experiencing a major social and cultural transformation that is intimately connected to the way we use communication media. Instead of focusing on the production of information and meaning, we're moving towards a culture of entertainment. We want to experience sensations, to have fun, to be excited. If silence is becoming impossible, meaning also seems to be in short supply these

days. Perhaps your question can be reframed in these terms: small talk is an expression of our need to be continuously entertained and avoid the need of serious talk. This shift can also be expressed, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht suggests in his book *Production of Presence* (2004), in the transition from a “culture of meaning” to a “culture of presence”. In other words, the cultural practices connected with the body, materiality and sensation are given precedence over the ones connected with (immaterial) meaning and interpretation. Of course, from the point of view of a cultural pessimist, this is certainly disastrous. The Frankfurtian philosopher Christoph Türcke, for example, defines our contemporary need for excitation as an addiction in his book *The Excited Society* (*Erregte Gesellschaft*, 2002). Evidently, since God is no longer a viable intellectual solution, we need to replace him with something else. Türcke incites us to step on the break and fight the endless procession of audiovisual excitation with a focus on moments of sedimentation and tranquility. We have to create social “islands” of concentration and art should be our most important weapon in this battle. But I don’t think we need to isolate ourselves from the surrounding media environment in order to do that. Sometimes, as Gumbrecht argues, this is possible precisely through media (a film, for instance). In this sense, Gumbrecht’s idea of being “quiet for a moment” amidst the noise of our technological engagements sounds very compelling to me.

RS: Interesting that you bring in Gumbrecht’s “culture of presence” that indeed can be understood as the philosophical supplement or rather precursor of the technological development we are experiencing. In my interview with David Golumbia I considered Gumbrecht’s aesthetics of presence as an affirmation of the “That” without the question for the “Why”. His desire to be in sync with the “things of the world” also relieves us from the obligation to better ourselves and the world around us - which Gumbrecht considers the obsession of the Frankfurt School and the *Kulturkritik* it represents. It is obvious how far this perspective has moved art from its role as estrangement and negation

of the status quo as Adorno, Türrcke's reference point, conceptualized art.

EF: My problem with the present situation is not so much the rise of entertainment or the decay of meaning. After all, we have been interpreting phenomena for at least the last two millennia. It's about time we started experiencing more intense relationships with our bodies and the materiality of our surroundings. The problem is the colonization of all domains of life by entertainment. It's almost like we had the obligation to be entertained (and worse, to be "happy"). Well, I want the right to be sad, I want to be able to find more spaces of silence within the torrent of images and excitation the media continually offers. In his study on Picard, Christian Fink asks whether thinkers like him can still be relevant, especially in the context of the so-called "medial turn" and new paradigms of research such as the "materialities of communication", which compels us to focus on the non-significant and material aspects of the communication processes rather than on its meaningful contents. I'd say "yes", I believe that *Kulturkritik* can still play an important role in the current situation. If nothing else, at least to keep at bay the sometimes excessive hype surrounding new media.

On the other hand, I understand how Gumbrecht's idea of being in sync with the things of the world might be read as an abandonment of the critical enterprise (as it traditionally implies a form of distancing towards the world). However, one must not forget that Gumbrecht's goal was never simply to dismiss the importance of the hermeneutic tradition and its achievements. He makes it clear, time and again, that his project runs parallel to this enterprise and strives to counterbalance the overpowering force of interpretation in the Humanities. Additionally, although I still find valuable lessons in the tradition of critical thinking, I agree with Gumbrecht's diagnostic about the loss of belief in a "world-reference" and the epistemic crisis we've been facing since the nineteenth century. This crisis makes the traditional position of the critic as a distanced observer untenable nowadays. My interest in recent philosophical movements like

“Object-Oriented Philosophy” or theoretical paradigms such as the “New Materialisms” comes from a belief that they reflect a certain *Zeitgeist* that is proper of our current experience of the world. Yes, after having said so much about the world – to the point that no linguistic reference to reality still seems viable – we need to go back to the things themselves (but certainly not in the Husserlian sense of this expression!).

Gumbrecht himself acknowledges the possible accusations directed at a theoretical program that has no ‘immediate ethical or even “political” orientation,’ but he remains convinced that the main task of theory and teaching today is to point to instances of complexity rather than prescribing how they should be understood. By means of this attitude, he also notes how close some of our academic endeavors can be to actual artistic practices – and I like this idea very much. I still believe in the powers of criticism, but we’ve been doing it for a long time and there seems to be a sense of exhaustion in the Humanities regarding interpretative practices. Art is another way of bettering ourselves and the world around us (or so I believe it). Being in sync with the world – which can’t, by no means, be a permanent situation – doesn’t mean necessarily to be in harmony with it and doesn’t preclude me from engaging with critical activity from time to time.

RS: I am on Gumbrecht’s side to the extent that the hermeneutic approach to art or any artifact of culture should not impoverish and deplete what we experience ‘in order to set up a shadow world of “meanings”’, as Susan Sontag notes in her essay *Against Interpretation* to which Gumbrecht alludes in his essay *A Farewell to Interpretation*. Sontag’s essay addresses the ‘hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability’ as an escape from the challenging and unsettling nature of art we discussed above. She famously ends her essay with the notion: ‘In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.’ Gumbrecht’s embrace of reality seems to be the realisation of such erotics. However, in the afterword *Thirty Years Later* to the anniversary issue of her essay collection *Against Interpretation* (2001), Sontag distances herself from her original attack on

interpretation given the ongoing shift from symbolic concerns to intensities of direct sensual stimulation in contemporary culture. At the end of the century, giving up the search for meaning has turned out to be a much more efficient and popular strategy for escaping the experience of crisis – that she expects art to present – than the fixation of meaning. This is especially the case if interpretation does not aim at stabilizing meaning but is attributed with the ‘nihilistic vocation’ to ‘reveal the world as a conflict of interpretations’ as Gianni Vattimo states in *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy* (1994). Contemporary theory conceptualizes the hermeneutic endeavour as conveying complexity and different, conflicting perspectives rather than a prescription of how to understand things. I wonder how practical Gumbrecht’s “culture of presence” is to archive this aim, if the encounter of different perspectives onto the things of the world is replaced by the idea of being in sync with them. This may reflect a certain *Zeitgeist* – as does the intention of Object-Oriented Philosophy to overcome the Kantian and postmodern ‘correlationism’ – but this *Zeitgeist* strikes me as an escape from the epistemic aporia that (post) modernity has passed on to us. Hence, I agree that the ‘epistemic crisis,’ as you put, makes ‘the traditional position of the critic as a distanced observer untenable,’ however, I hold that it makes the position of a critical critic even more indispensable. And I agree with Gumbrecht to the extent that his project of a “culture of presence” is indeed meant as a supplement but not replacement of the “culture of meaning”.

To come back to the first part of your statement, I also agree that the problem is not the occasional shift from the paradigm of meaning to the intensity of the moment but the ideal of idle hyperactivity. In this respect, Sherry Turkle, in her book *Alone Together* (2012), regrets that we flee from every possible “downtime” into the business of our “can’t wait” online conversations and states: ‘But if we are always on, we may deny ourselves the rewards of solitude.’ Such sentence hardly makes sense to younger people today if William Deresiewicz is right with his observation in his Chronicle of Higher Education essay *The End*

of *Solitude* (2009): 'Young people today seem to have no desire for solitude, have never heard of it, can't imagine why it would be worth having.' Deresiewicz's conclusion is alarming: 'But no real excellence, personal or social, artistic, philosophical, scientific or moral, can arise without solitude.' In the same tone of culture pessimism Nicholas Carr, in his 2008 article *Is Google making us stupid?* and later in his 2011 book *The Shallows - What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, discusses the consequences of online media for literacy. From Carr's perspective, multitasking and power browsing make people unlearn deep reading and consequently deep thinking. The shift from deep attention to hyper attention has been announced and bemoaned by many intellectuals of whom Cristoph Türcke with his *Erregte Gesellschaft* is one example of them in the tradition of the Frankfurt School. Another is the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler who speaks of a threat to social and cultural development caused by the destruction of young people's ability to develop deep and critical attention to the world around them. Is there a real threat or is this just another reiteration of a well-known lamentation about the terrifying ramifications of all new media?

EF: I try to steer clear of this kind of assessment, because even the titles of these books operate according to the same logic they supposedly criticize. *Is Google making us stupid?* or Andrew Keen's *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing our Culture* (2007) sound to me like rather sensational and biased titles. It's precisely the kind of titles that are fashioned in order to sell books and generate hype. The analyses are often simplistic and one-sided. Stiegler is, of course, much more sophisticated, but I think we have to read him with a caveat. With works such as his or philosopher Barbara Cassin's book *Google-moi* (2007), we usually have the impression of hearing, over and over, the traditional complaints of the old European intellectuals against the ill effects of the (mainly US-dominated) media culture. Perhaps the main problem is the historical tendency to the monopolization of the human senses by one particular form of media in detriment of others. The insistent myth of progress sees history as

a linear development, in which new media are destined to inevitably replace and banish old technologies. In the current market-driven system, the past is a place we never should wish to return to. In other words, why can't we play with the possibilities of new media, while at the same time navigating through several other (more traditional) forms of cultural experience, such as literature, for instance? That's why Siegfried Zielinski's plea for the heterogeneity of the arts and media sounds so relevant nowadays. We need to keep moving forward, but always with an eye in the past, in order to escape the historical prison of technological progress.

RS: Change of subject to a somehow related issue: Digital Humanities seem to be the new buzzword in the Humanities. What do you think about it and how do you see its relationship to Digital Media Studies?

EF: I'm all for the development of new investigative strategies in the Humanities, as well as for the promotion of productive dialogues between hard and soft sciences. However (and perhaps because I don't like buzzwords), I'm not so enthusiastic about Digital Humanities. It's not that I see anything intrinsically wrong about it. It's rather a question of taste and affinity. It's just something I am not so interested in pursuing, specially when there are so many other interesting things going on in the Humanities right now. My only fear regarding Digital Humanities is that it becomes a new form of methodological totalitarianism. I'm a little concerned with the grandiose rhetoric that can be found in some books on Digital Humanities. It's surprising that only a handful of people in Brazil have heard about Digital Humanities, because it perfectly fits the philosophy and guiding principles of the governmental agencies that fund research. It's supposed to be collaborative and it apparently can give the Humanities a more scientific outlook. A few years ago I remember hearing the constant criticism from funding agencies that researchers were writing too many "essays" in Brazil. What they meant is that we needed to do more grounded research and incorporate more empirical data in our assessments. Although I acknowledge

the importance of all these precepts, including the notion of collaborative research, I fear they might become the only socially sanctioned guidelines for research in the Humanities. If we manage to avoid privileging research paradigms and methods on the basis of *how scientific they look*, then there's nothing to fear. On the contrary, Digital Humanities can become a valuable asset in the theoretical toolbox of the Human Sciences, although some concern has been raised, for example, about its disregard for issues of race and gender.

As for its relationship to Digital Media Studies, I like the idea of inclusive and diverse fields of research - and that's why I prefer the term "media studies" over "digital media studies", like I stated in a previous answer. Depending on how we use Digital Humanities it can even help bridging the gap between the analogical and the digital worlds. What we need is the multiplication of possibilities, not their reduction to one or two dominating paradigms. I think that the best works in Digital Humanities are aware of the dangers I mentioned here and are ready to react to them. A good example would be the volume *Digital Humanities* by Anne Burdick, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp (2012), which acknowledges the need of diversity by stating from the start that this new research program should be 'an extension of traditional knowledge skills and methods, not a replacement for them.'