Hans Köchler

THE TRIVIALIZATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Cultural-Anthropological Reflections on the Digital Age

A Lecture

INTERNATIONAL PROGRESS ORGANIZATION

PARTIALLY SUMMARIZED ENGLISH VERSION, REVISED BY THE AUTHOR, OF THE ORIGINAL GERMAN TEXT:

DIE TRIVIALISIERUNG DES ÖFFENTLICHEN

Kulturanthropologische Überlegungen zum Digitalzeitalter

Ein Vortrag

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Overview of the Document Structure

Personal Preface (*Persönliche Vorbemerkung*)**:** Reflects on 50 years of academic experience. Notes that early tech-optimism (like the "emancipatory" promise of social media during the Arab Spring) has proven to be an illusion.

I. Anthropology of Technology (*Anthropologie der Technik*): Discusses how humans use technology to compensate for biological vulnerabilities, but notes that technology alters human perception and creates massive global systemic dependencies.

II. The Relief Paradox (*Das Entlastungsparadox*): *Core Concept.* Historically, technology relieved humans of physical labor. Digital technology now relieves us of *mental and intellectual exertion*, which Köchler argues is causing a regression or atrophy of human cognitive capabilities.

III. Loss of Reality (*Realitätsverlust*): Evaluates how "infotainment," virtual reality, gaming, and generative AI blend fiction and reality, weakening our capacity for critical abstraction and self-awareness.

IV. Consequences for the *Res Publica*: The Trivialization of the Public Sphere (*Folgen für die res publica: Die Trivialisierung des Öffentlichen*): Analyzes the degradation of language, the "copy & paste" culture in academia, and political dangers—specifically deepfakes, AI-driven mass hysteria, and autonomous AI weaponry ("the barbarism of technology").

V. Conclusion: The Irreducibility of Consciousness (*Die Irreduzibilität des Bewusstseins*): Argues that despite advanced algorithmic processing, machines can never achieve genuine self-consciousness or ethical accountability. Human consciousness remains an irreducible anthropological anchor.

Sources

Appendix: Hans Köchler – Selected Texts on the Digital Age

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PERSONAL PREFACE
(*Persönliche Vorbemerkung*)

I will attempt to approach this topic in the form of a "phenomenology of everyday life"—an everyday life that spans more than half a century of academic teaching. In doing so, I will compare what *is* with what *was*. I hope this approach is legitimate, as it does not stem from mere book-learning or "second-hand" information, but from direct experience.

This comparison may yield new insights into the structural transformation of our "cultural self-comprehension." Specifically, it addresses the impacts of technical restructuring upon ourselves—upon us as the human species. In a different context, the Swiss anthropologist Michael Landmann alluded to this by pointing out the dual role of the human being as both the creator and the creature of culture.

The original catalyst for these reflections—now more than ten years ago—was the euphoria surrounding the allegedly emancipatory role of the "New Social Media" during the so-called Arab Spring, alongside requests from the Arab world for me to provide a philosophical clarification. That vision of a "digitally engineered" emancipation has since proven to be an illusion. Later on, a request came from Germany to contribute a critical-philosophical perspective regarding the conceptualization of a new "Digital University". Here, too, vision was followed by disillusionment: an ambitious educational-political objective was sacrificed to economic interests—that is, to the demands of the day. Consequently, what I call "self-determined action in the digital age" had to yield to "digital competence" in the purely functional sense desired by the OECD. A research and teaching concept originally inspired by a holistic-humanistic vision was transformed into a sort of service program for the economy.

This makes it all the more important to critically question the structural impacts of digital technology on our understanding of the world and ourselves, and ultimately on the state and society. We must do this by drawing upon our own experience, rather than submitting to the official terminology dictated by the interests tied to current technical trends. This is what I mean by a "phenomenology of everyday life."* It is a method capable of challenging what Roland Barthes described as "Mythologies of Everyday Life" in their new digital manifestations. For example, it helps us analyze the vision of the so-

* As undertaken, e.g., by Roland Barthes in his collection of essays under the French title "*Mythologies*."

called "Singularity" and understand why, within the environment of the "digital revolution," myth so quickly mutated into prophecy. This includes the notion of a humanity emancipating itself from nature—an idea suggested to us, at least during the founding phase of "Singularity University," by Ray Kurzweil and others, which will be discussed later.

CHAPTER I

ANTHROPOLOGY OF TECHNOLOGY
(*Anthropologie der Technik*)

First, however, a few reflections on the anthropology of technology are appropriate so that we can better contextualize the effects of transitioning to digital technology and its paradigm of "virtual worlds" (virtual reality).

We are not dealing here with the commonplace notion of consciousness as the definitive criterion distinguishing humans from animals—a notion that is nonetheless philosophically questionable. Nor are we dealing with the historical shaping of human self-understanding through religion and philosophy, as Landmann outlined in an impressive synthesis. If we wish to understand the digital age, what matters above all else is the relationship between humans and nature. This is an interdependence—a reciprocal relationship—that may undergo a radical transformation due to the further evolution of technology. To analyze this, it is crucial to apply insights from biological anthropology to the interpretation of human technical action.

Arnold Gehlen characterized the human being as a (biological) "deficient being" (*Mängelwesen*), as the "undetermined animal." Because of this deficiency—this lack of adaptation to a specific environment—the human being is forced to adapt to entirely diverse conditions in order to survive. Humans must actively reshape external conditions to serve life, and they possess the unique capacity to view their own world from an outside perspective . Helmuth Plessner (whom I had the honor of welcoming to Innsbruck for a lecture in the summer of 1973) spoke of the human being's "eccentric positionality" (*exzentrische Positionalität*), in contrast to the animal, which rests, so to speak, within its own center. This, one could say, is where the "existential" dimension of technology resides.

Similarly, the Swiss biologist Adolf Portmann described the human being as a "biological premature birth." Because the human is born "unfinished"—Portmann refers to the "early extrauterine year" (*extrauterines Früh-jahr*)—it develops its capacity for survival only within a social environment, gradually "learning" to adjust to varying environmental conditions. One could also employ Alfred Adler's psychological concept of "compensation" here, albeit in a different context. Anthropologically speaking, technology represents the compensation for physical weakness through intellectual

achievement (though this says nothing yet about the metaphysical dimension or origin of the intellect). Just as in psychology, one could extend this thought to identify a problem of "overcompensation" in technical action. This happens when the drive for power, nourished by the will to survive and manifested in technology, becomes an end in itself—a quasi-metaphysical fetish, much like Heidegger described in his epochal lecture on technology as *Ge-stell* (Enframing).

In practical terms, technical action reshapes our "lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*) in two ways. On one hand, the "external" world is designed to serve life, which, through medical technology, includes our own bodies—extending all the way to genetic interventions (though I am not addressing the ethical dilemmas here). On the other hand, these interventions trigger a feedback loop, altering our perception and how we experience the world. What Gadamer defines as the "lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*) is subject to constant change. In this regard, we can also speak of the “globality” of technology: it knows no spatial (geographical) boundaries and potentially encompasses all dimensions of human existence, namely the perception and interpretation of the world. The synergy of so-called "machine technology" (*Maschinentechnik*) (in our context: modern information technology) and "social technologies" (*Sozialtechnik*) has attained an entirely new quality with the rise of the Internet.

An unintended consequence—one that is usually overlooked or suppressed—is the inevitable decline of our (physical) vital capacity. This is caused on one hand by the "switching off" of natural selection through technical interventions in both the environment and the human body, and on the other hand, by the unfathomable complexity of our technical infrastructure, which holds us in a state of perpetual dependence. Should the energy supply suddenly fail due to war or another catastrophic event, the existence of massive urban conglomerates would be threatened in an instant. This danger can be described as the "tragedy" of modern technology, which increasingly reshapes all spheres of life—specifically in terms of its inescapability.

There is also a connection here to globalization, whose driving engine is technology evolving into IT (Information Technology). It irreversibly and progressively absorbs all lifeworlds across all historical variations. Thus far, humanity has been able to offer little resistance to the pull of cultural uniformity. Just as the cultural survival of indigenous peoples is threatened by the expansion of the technical lifestyle, the ever-deepening technical penetration and shaping of all spheres of life across all cultures poses a threat

to the physical survival chances of humanity. Metaphorically speaking, it introduces the risk of a relapse to a "Stone Age level" in the event of a collapse of our increasingly fragile and complex technical infrastructure—a collapse that can never be fundamentally ruled out.

CHAPTER II

THE RELIEF PARADOX
(*Das Entlastungsparadox*)

The relationship between humans and technology is traditionally understood as a process of "relief" (*Entlastung*). By utilizing technical tools, humans compensate for their organic deficiencies, thereby expanding their scope of action and ensuring their survival. Historically, this relief primarily targeted physical functions. Mechanical tools, automation, and later motorization relieved humans of arduous physical labor. However, this relief has always carried a hidden cost: the atrophy of the very organs or capacities that were bypassed. If a physical function is no longer exercised because a machine performs it, the corresponding biological apparatus undergoes regression.

With the advent of digital technology, this principle has shifted into the cognitive realm, creating what I term the **"Relief Paradox."**

Digital information technology and generative artificial intelligence do not merely relieve humans of physical labor; they relieve them of *intellectual and mental exertion*. Algorithms now take over tasks involving calculation, data analysis, text composition, decision-making, and even artistic creation. According to the law of biological and psychological regression, the systemic outsourcing of mental effort inevitably leads to the atrophy of human cognitive capabilities.

The paradox lies in the fact that the tools designed to demonstrate the supreme height of human intelligence simultaneously trigger the intellectual degradation of the user. The more sophisticated the algorithmic environment becomes, the less the individual user is required to think critically, memorize information, or engage in complex abstraction.

This creates a state of profound dependence. As human cognitive faculties decline through disuse, society becomes entirely reliant on the very digital infrastructure that caused the regression. The capacity for autonomous, self-determined thought is gradually replaced by a passive consumption of algorithmically generated outputs.

CHAPTER III

LOSS OF REALITY
(*Realitätsverlust*)

The cognitive regression induced by the processes underlying the Relief Paradox manifests acutely as a systemic "loss of reality". Digital technology constructs a simulated environment—a "virtual reality"—that increasingly detaches itself from the physical and social world, eventually replacing it in human consciousness.

This loss of reality occurs across several interconnected dimensions:

- **The Dissolution of Objectivity:** Generative AI, deepfakes, and synthetic media blur the line between truth and fabrication. When any text, image, or video can be algorithmically manufactured to look flawless, the objective criteria for verifying reality disintegrate. Trust in empirical evidence is eroded.
- **The Infotainment Filter:** Information is no longer processed based on its truth-value or structural importance, but rather on its entertainment value and capacity to generate engagement. The public sphere is saturated with fragmented, sensationalized content that prioritizes emotional stimulation over intellectual comprehension.
- **The Atrophy of Abstraction:** True understanding requires cognitive effort, abstraction, and the patience to navigate complexity. The digital environment, conversely, conditions the human brain to expect immediate gratification through simplified, visual, and highly curated stimuli. The capacity to engage with long-form texts, complex philosophical arguments, or nuanced historical contexts is progressively lost.
- **The Substitution of Experience:** Virtual interactions and simulated experiences are substituted for direct, physical engagement with the world and other human beings. This creates a closed epistemic loop: humans no longer interact with objective reality, but with a digitized, algorithmic mirror of reality designed to conform to their existing biases and desires.

Ultimately, this loss of reality weakens the human capacity for critical self-awareness. When individuals can no longer distinguish between the simulated and the real, they

lose the foundational grounding required to act as autonomous, responsible agents in both their private lives and the wider democratic public sphere.

CHAPTER IV

CONSEQUENCES FOR THE *RES PUBLICA*: THE TRIVIALIZATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE (*Konsequenzen für die res publica: Die Trivialisierung des Öffentlichen*)

The structural shift outlined in the preceding chapters—the atrophy of cognitive capacities combined with a profound loss of reality—culminates in a fundamental transformation of the political architecture. It threatens the *res publica* (the public affair/the commonwealth) in its core substance.

When the capacity for critical abstraction and autonomous thought erodes, the public sphere is stripped of its intellectual depth. It undergoes a process of profound trivialization. This transformation manifests across several key domains of political and social life:

1. The Degradation of Language and Discourse

Language is the foundational medium of the public sphere and the vehicle of human reason. However, the digital environment forces a radical simplification of expression. Nuanced argumentation is replaced by slogans, emotionalized headlines, and fragmented bits of communication designed to trigger immediate neurological reactions (likes, shares, clicks).

As generative AI tools are increasingly deployed to draft public statements, political positions, and media articles, language becomes standardized, formulaic, and decoupled from genuine human intent. Discourse is reduced to a superficial "copy & paste" culture, where the primary objective is no longer to seek truth or build consensus through debate, but to populate information channels with algorithmic consistency.

2. The Mechanics of Mass Suggestion and Hysteria

The architecture of digital networks facilitates the instant, global dissemination of information without any contextual or qualitative filters. This creates an unprecedented vulnerability to mass suggestion.

Because the digital user is unaccustomed to intellectual resistance or empirical verification, algorithmically amplified narratives can trigger waves of collective hysteria. In this environment, deepfakes and highly sophisticated disinformation campaigns do not merely deceive individuals; they rewrite the shared public reality. The democratic

ideal of an informed citizenry engaging in rational debate is replaced by polarized, hyper-emotionalized groups trapped inside synthetic information silos.

3. The Erosion of Democratic Legitimacy

Democracy relies on the assumption of autonomous, self-determined citizens capable of making rational electoral choices. When the public sphere is trivialized, political decision-making degenerates into a spectacle driven by emotional manipulation and predictive algorithms.

Surveillance capitalism and big-data analytics allow political actors to profile, target, and manipulate the psychological vulnerabilities of voters on an industrialized scale. Consequently, the democratic process is hollowed out. While the outward rituals of voting and elections remain, the underlying substance—autonomous public will-formation—is systematically engineered by automated systems.

4. The Autonomous State* and the Barbarism of Technology

The ultimate and most dangerous consequence of this development is the total delegation of existential human responsibilities to automated systems. Köchler warns of a future where state administration, judicial assessments, and even military decisions are handed over to AI algorithms under the guise of efficiency and optimization.

This trend is most starkly evident in the development of autonomous weapon systems (AWS) and AI-driven military command networks. By removing human judgment from the application of lethal force, the state enters a condition of technical barbarism. Decisions over life and death are reduced to probabilistic data calculations executed by machines. This represents the absolute abdication of human ethical responsibility and the complete subjugation of the *res publica* to the logic of the apparatus.

* I.e., autonomous state of technology.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION:
THE IRREDUCIBILITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS
(*Die Irreduzibilität des Bewusstseins*)

In the concluding chapter, Köchler seeks a philosophical anchor to resist this total technical absorption of human existence. He challenges the techno-deterministic prophecy of the "Singularity"—the claim that artificial intelligence will eventually surpass human consciousness and render humanity obsolete.

Against this view, he establishes the thesis of the **irreducibility of human consciousness**:

- **Processing vs. Understanding:** A machine, no matter how advanced its neural network or computational power, operates entirely within the realm of syntax and data processing. It manipulates symbols according to programmed parameters. It possesses no semantic comprehension; it does not "know" what it is doing, nor does it experience the reality it models.
- **The Impossibility of Machine Ethics:** Because a machine lacks self-awareness, intentionality, and a mortal, biological existence, it cannot possess genuine conscience or ethical accountability. Responsibility is an exclusively human attribute that requires a self-conscious subject capable of reflecting upon its own actions and experiencing the weight of moral choices. To speak of "responsible AI" is a dangerous category mistake.
- **The Anthropological Anchor:** Human consciousness remains an irreducible reality that cannot be fully digitized, replicated, or replaced. Our biological vulnerabilities—the very deficiencies that drove us to invent technology in the first place—are intrinsically linked to our capacity for empathy, meaning, and self-awareness.

Final Thesis: The digital revolution confronts humanity with its greatest civilizational test. If we continue to passively surrender our cognitive, linguistic, and political autonomy to the digital apparatus, the trivialization of the public sphere will result in the dismantling of human culture itself.

To avert this crisis, we must reassert the primacy of human consciousness over the machine. We must treat technology as a subordinate tool to assist human life, rather than allowing it to become an autonomous framework (*Ge-stell*) that dictates, flattens, and ultimately erases human agency and the dignity of the public sphere.

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APPENDIX

Hans Köchler

SELECTED TEXTS ON THE DIGITAL AGE

- **"Reality as Artifact — Annotations on the Anthropology of Technology. Or: Philosophical Reflections on the Problem of 'Globalization'"** (*Realität als Artefakt – Annotationen zur Anthropologie der Technik. Oder: Philosophische Überlegungen zum Problem der "Globalisierung"*) In: J. Rupitz, E. Schönberger, C. Zehetner (Eds.), *Achtung vor Anthropologie. Interdisziplinäre Studien zum philosophischen Empirismus und zur transzendentalen Anthropologie*. Festschrift for Michael Benedikt on the occasion of his 70th birthday. Vienna: Turia + Kant, 1998, pp. 225–232.
- **"The Meaning and Challenges of Education in the 21st Century"** Lecture, UNESCO, Paris, November 9, 2010 / Nomura Center for Lifelong Integrated Education (ed.), *Lifelong Integrated Education as a Creator of the Future: Human Restoration of the 21st Century.* (Collection of Records of the 10th Commemorative International Forum on Lifelong Integrated Education.) Tokyo: Ichiyosha, 2013, pp. 283–289. *Link:* http://hanskoechler.com/Koechler-Education-NCLIE-UNESCO-Paris-Nov2010-V2.pdf
- **"The New Social Media and the Reshaping of Communication in the 21st Century: Chance or Challenge for Dialogue?"** Lectures in Doha, Qatar, October 25, 2011 / Yerevan, Armenia, April 15, 2012 / Rhodes, Greece, October 6, 2012 / Istanbul, Türkiye, June 7, 2014 / Poprad, Slovakia, April 23, 2015 / *Journal of Globalization for the Common Good*, Fall 2011. *Online versions* at: http://lass.calumet.purdue.edu/cca/jgcg/2011/jgcg-2011-kochler.htm http://hanskoechler.com/Koechler-New_Social_Media-Oct2012-V5.pdf
- **"Idea and Politics of Communication in the Global Age"** Lecture in Berlin, July 18, 2015 / Mike Friedrichsen, Yahya Kamalipour (Eds.), *Digital Transformation in Journalism and News Media: Media Management, Media Convergence and Globalization.* Cham (Switzerland): Springer International Publishing, 2017, pp. 7–15. *Link:* https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-27786-8_2
- **"Information Technology in the Global Age: Anthropological and Human Rights Implications"** Lecture held in Yokohama, Japan, November 9, 2018 / Keynote Speech, 12th International Forum on Lifelong Integrated Education. Yokohama, Japan, November 9, 2018. I.P.O. Online Publications. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2018. *Link:* http://i-p-o.org/Koechler-Information_Technology-Global_Age-IPO-OP-2018.htm
- **"Self-Determined Action in the Digital Age — Philosophical and Anthropological Reflections"** (*Selbstbestimmtes Handeln im Digitalzeitalter – Philosophische und anthropologische Überlegungen*) Mike Friedrichsen and Wulf Wersig (Eds.), *Digitale Kompetenz: Herausforderungen für Wissenschaft, Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft und Politik.* (Conference Proceedings, UDS University of Digital Science Berlin.) Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler, 2020, pp. 37–43. *Link:* http://hanskoechler.com/Koechler-Selbstbestimmtes-Handeln-im-Digitalzeitalter-2019-PREPRINT.pdf

- **"Philosophy and Modern Technology"** (*Philosophie und moderne Technik*) Lecture in Rabat, Morocco, June 1, 2022 / Publications of the Working Group for Science and Politics (*Veröffentlichungen der Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Wissenschaft und Politik*). Vienna: AWP, 2022. *Link:* http://hanskoechler.com/Koechler-PHILOSOPHIE-UND-MODERNE-TECHNIK-Rabat-01-VI-2022-AWP.pdf