

# The Invisible Side of Technology in Public Space and the Shadowing of Democracy. The Role of the Church in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

By Makis Andronopoulos\*

## Introduction

I am here among the speakers of the Conference, because the director of the journal *Θεολογία/Theologia*, Mr. Alexandros Katsiaras, has noticed my book: *Sapiens 3 κόντρα στον Μετάνθρωπο – Έγχειρίδιο μετάβασης στην «Άλλη Έποχή»*<sup>1</sup>, a book that attempts to critically record the crucial problems of our time under the prism of technoscience and technology.

A windmill is one thing, a wind turbine is another... No, I'm not technophobic; I'm anthropophobic, in the sense that I'm suspicious of those who order technology and for what reasons, and of those who use it improperly. In the introduction of the book, where I understand technology as an accelerator of history that now produces an organic and functional unification of international events, so that we are experiencing a momentary history on a global scale, I also point out that technology has become the dominant ideology of progress, and that the basis of this ideology is death and the comforting idea of its temporal repulsion and – why not?– its transcendence...

My topic is: “The Invisible side of technology in the public sphere and the shadowing of democracy – The role of the Church in the age of

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1. M. Andronopoulos, *Sapiens 3 κόντρα στον Μετάνθρωπο – Έγχειρίδιο μετάβασης στην «Άλλη Έποχή»*, Hellinoekdotiki Publications, Athens 2022.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)". The time allotted to me is insufficient to delve into this complex issue. Therefore, my approach will be impressionistic, so as to highlight some critical aspects of the new technology.

The abrupt invasion of the internet on the 30.10.2022 by the large multimodal language model ChatGPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer) has marked the beginning of a new era of radical changes in the organization and functioning of the economy, society, politics and science itself. This OpenAI machine has been upgraded to a *deep learning machine*, while competitors have launched Bing and Bard. At the same time, such specialized AI machines have been developed, taking law and medical degrees, winning photography competitions, writing poetry and generally occupying, in addition to critical professional fields, the creative fields of human beings.

Google is laying off engineers and commissioning AI to build new software and algorithms. And this is where the following realistic scenario begins: the AI produces software and, at some point, it will produce it for its own sake; it improves itself and expands its power. What does man do? He pulls the plug... But an AI guru countered this solution with the following scenario: Through the deep web, AI comes into contact with a private military organization, such as the American company Academi (formerly Blackwater) or the Russian Wagner –there are hundreds of other small and powerful ones–, and assigns it to guard the servers and data centers against those attempting to pull the plug, i.e. attempting to cut the power supply.

According to experts, the autonomy of AI and the self-production of software will lead by 2045 to the emergence of *singularity*, i.e. the existence of an artificial super-genius whose thoughts and actions will be incomprehensible to –and uncontrollable by– man; it will be another mental/intellectual horizon.

These introductory remarks are necessary to understand where we stand. The internet has transformed the way economies and societies are functioning in a thirty-year period. AI and augmented reality, the metaverse and other related cutting-edge technologies will radically change everything at a faster pace.

## The Instrumentalization of Technology in the Public Sphere

There is no point in telling you now, about the invasion of technology in the public space, about cameras, smart cities, autonomous cars, the smart garbage can that two years ago “ate” a homeless who was looking for lemon squares, or the two Boeing 737 MAX, which fell because of bad software.

But I will speak about how the so-called *Woke Culture*, the culture of awakening, which *deregulates* the societies, has spread through the internet. This culture, which was born in American universities by mainly African-American academics alongside the empowering of the Black Lives Matter movement, focuses on issues of racial and social justice with the aim of dismantling systems of oppression and inequality, such as the nuclear family, gender norms, religion and capitalism. It has been the spearhead of rights activism for colorful minorities, but above all it claims the substitution of collective and historical identity, even that of gender, for the individual one.

By now, it has taken on threatening dimensions through the multiplier we call the internet, where all the mechanisms of propaganda and manipulation meet under the cloak of sociability.

The culture of awakening and rightism has been transformed into *cancel culture*, effectively abolishing history. It's not just the tearing down of statues of historical figures, or the rewriting of history; it's the “reality” of black aristocrats in Netflix “historical” series, with black dukes and black marquises. It is the forfeiture of freedom and its transmutation to the level of rights.

This absolute distortion of everything is favored by the western system of power: on the one hand, it smooths out the guilt of the wretchedness of the slave trade and colonialism; on the other, it appeals to sections of society, which by their objective position would be hostile to it. The problem with the Woke Culture, the culture of awakening, is that it is aggressively reproduced in social networks through AI machines, creating social polarization and confusion.

I understand the concept of civilization as a continuously evolving effort of humans for peaceful and creative coexistence. Under this prism, the

human civilization's supreme achievement is democracy – as a conception and as an act. It is the capstone of civilization; despite its problems and distortions, it is probably the best system of human coexistence and protection of human rights we have in our disposal.

We Westerners know how lucky we are to live in liberal countries where there is freedom of speech, parliamentarianism, the rule of law - regardless of the fact that the cases of corruption / arbitrariness / police violence / injustice are multiplying exponentially, along with the rapid decline of the welfare state, the swift rise of inequalities, hypocrisy and the lies of the politicians.

I think, therefore, that, more or less, everyone in the West knows that in our democracies there exists corruption, intertwining of financial and political interests, tax havens, physically organized crime, and many other evils, in the way that the establishment and the shadowy big players set the rules of the game. We also know about the techniques of manipulating public opinion, e.g., Cambridge Analytica<sup>2</sup>. We know about the attachments, the predator, the interceptions that upset us... But what can the citizen do in the face of all this? I'm afraid, probably little, very little.

The manipulation is now taking place through the social networks and major international news platforms. There is software such as AIMS (Advanced Impact Media Solutions), which controls tens of thousands of fake mechanical profiles, or Internet bots, which carry out automated tasks, but which retain a profile on many networks, making it difficult to identify them as bots, as they even have credit cards. They appear with fake photos and pasts as real people. These bots are activated during elections by spreading “fake news” and smearing. It is possible for an orchestrated misleading marketing or PR or political campaign to be set up under the pretext of unsolicited comments from public members with fake Twitter accounts (now X), which can likewise carry out astroturfing. Astroturfing is the phenomenon whereby information on the internet is not presented by an official source of information (e.g. a company, a politician, even a

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2. See N. Confessore, “Cambridge Analytica and Facebook: The Scandal and the Fallout So Far”, *The New York Times*, 4.4.2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-scandal-fallout.html> [30.9.2023].

conspiracy theorist), but appears to come from the “base” of social media users, as if it represents a common, established opinion. In other words, it is a practice of covert appearance of the supporters of a message or an organization (politicians, advertising, religious or public relations)<sup>3</sup>.

What really worries me personally, apart from deepfakes, are the fake images that someone can create with the programs MidJourney and DALL-E – he or she gives the description of an image and they produce the result (text-to-image). There is also Semafor that creates deepfake videos. We all saw the fake video showing Trump handcuffed in prison. The image is the presumption of truth for the public opinion. Therein lies the future of the emotional and political manipulation.

Obviously, the technology itself is not undemocratic. The political problem is who controls it. The Israeli historian and writer Yuval Noah Harari –with whom I disagree on many points that are not of interest here– has formulated the problem with the notorious Harari Equation<sup>4</sup>, which refers to the dominance of a digital dictatorship in the 21st century:

$$B \times C \times D = AHH,$$

where B (biological knowledge) multiplied by C (computing power) multiplied by D (data) equals A (ability) H (to hack) H (humans).

What is the problem with this equation? The problem is the equals (=), i.e. who controls the equation. The scientists? The researchers? The managers? The financiers? The anonymous stock market capital? The deep power system? The state and the secret services? The military-industrial complex? The independent authorities? The parliaments? The judiciary?

The European Union has passed a democratic and human-centered piece of legislation, which attempts to safeguard both fundamental human and civil rights and the unhindered pursuit of innovation, so as not to hamper technological development. The legislation approaches the whole AI issue

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3. See *Wikipedia*, entry “Astroturfing”: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astroturfing> [8.10.2023].

4. World Economic Forum, Davos 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2020/01/yuval-hararis-warning-davos-speech-future-predications/> [10.10.2023].

through three parameters: security, privacy and system performance, which are weighed against four levels of risk: unacceptable risk, high risk, limited risk and minimal or zero risk. “Cognitive behavioral manipulation of individuals or specific vulnerable groups, social scoring, preventive/preemptive policing (minority report) and real-time and remote biometric identification systems, such as facial recognition, fall under the first category and are prohibited”.

Although I am a hardcore Europeanist, I personally cannot imagine the Commission controlling the problem of the AI development in time and in a substantial manner.

Does the Church have a role in all this? Of course it does. It is concerned with these developments, both at the level of doctrine and especially in practice, as far as the ontological side of the developments is concerned. I have nothing to say about the doctrinal aspect. I’m not particularly knowledgeable of it. As far as the ontological aspect is concerned, I think that the Church can intervene dynamically, not by supporting obscurantist concepts, but by putting to the State the questions that intellectuals and politicians do not ask, because they mostly –to put it politely– have sponsors with ulterior motives.

The blessed Bishop Kallistos Ware of Diokleia writes in his small book *The Orthodox Theology in the 21st century*:

Undoubtedly, in the 21st century Ecclesiology will continue to be of concern for us. It is my conviction, however, that there will be a shift in the central focus of theological research from Ecclesiology to Anthropology; indeed, there are many signs that such a shift has already begun. The key question will not only be: “*What is Church?*”, but also more fundamentally: “*What is man?*” What does it mean, more specifically, to be an in-relation person in the image of the triune God [...] for only within the Church are human persons authentically realized<sup>5</sup>.

Ware highlights the cancellation of personal otherness in globalization through homogenization, as well as the strong tendency towards

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5. Kallistos Ware, Bishop of Diokleia, *Ἡ Ὀρθόδοξη Θεολογία στὸν 21ο αἰῶνα*, transl. N. Ntontos, Anastasia Vasileiadou, Indiktos Publications, Athens 2005, p. 25.

alienation through machines and computers. He sees this turn in the field of apophatic anthropology as rather necessary. He writes:

We do not know what are the hitherto hidden potentialities of the human personality, what are the ultimate limits of the person, what is the true fullness of being a person [...]. The person remains unlimited; its reality cannot simply be deconstructed and reduced to the data of the appropriate sciences<sup>6</sup>.

In my book with SAPIENS 3, I walk along, if not in line, with Kallistos Ware's reflections. I think that the church discourse must approach the current reality –social, political, technological– by adopting a new vocabulary. I have the feeling that it needs a new language that speaks to young people, transcending doctrines and rituals. This new discourse must be addressed mainly to the State, with which the Church has an ontological link. It is in this relationship that much will be decided.

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6. Kallistos Ware, *Ἡ Ὁρθόδοξη Θεολογία στὸν 21ο αἰῶνα*, *op.cit.*, pp. 35-36.