RESEÑA

Technologies of Liberation: Rethinking Technology from an Ontological and Decolonizing Perspective

Tecnologías de la liberación: repensar lo tecnológico desde una mirada ontológica y descolonizadora

■ Gómez Cruz, Edgar (2022) *Tecnologías vitales. Pensar las culturas digitales desde Latinoamérica*. Puertabierta editores ■

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Over the past three decades, Internet studies have evolved from conceiving online identity and activities as phenomena separate from offline life —akin to operating system windows that can be opened and closed at will (Turkle, 1995)— to recognizing that digital life constitutes an essential and inseparable dimension of our everyday ethos. Today, it is practically unthinkable to navigate daily life without relying on digital platforms: from ordering a taxi through Uber, requesting food delivery via Rappi, purchasing a book on Amazon, holding meetings on Zoom, enjoying series on Netflix, or staying informed about global news and the activities of our contacts on social networks such as X, TikTok, Facebook, or Instagram. Similarly, apps like SkyScanner, Expedia, or Airbnb have become indispensable when planning a vacation. In this context, the boundary between being connected or disconnected ceased to exist some time ago, marking a radical transformation in how we inhabit the world.

Contemporary cultural practices are deeply intertwined with the technological devices we use to acquire goods and services, and they are profoundly mediated by algorithmic dynamics that shape how we interact, behave, and reinterpret the meanings that emerge from these interactions. These processes do not occur neutrally: executives and developers of major digital corporations recalibrate the platforms' usability based on our behaviors and browsing histories. This perpetual adjustment operates under the logic of surveillance capitalism, which is fundamentally driven by extractivism of our personal data and digital or human rights (Zuboff, 2020).

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In this alienating cycle of constant input and output generation, a crucial question emerges: What happens with the emerging technological practices created by individuals in marginalized environments of the Global South, those that rebel against the preprogrammed destiny imposed by the transnational oligopolies that shape our ways of being and thinking? Furthermore, what is the responsibility of Latin American researchers not only to analyze these behaviors but also to foster new forms of technological appropriation that respond to our realities and promote social responsibility? These questions constitute the leitmotif of the book *Tecnologías vitales. Pensar las culturas digitales desde Latinoamérica* (Gómez, 2022), one of the most recent contributions and a central concern in the work of digital ethnographer Édgar Gómez Cruz, a professor and researcher at the University of Texas.

The significance of *Tecnologías vitales* lies in the author's ability to transcend traditional studies on the digital, offering a deeply enriching personal and epistemological journey. With a fluid narrative, Gómez Cruz guides us from his life experiences to a philosophical and ontological analysis of technologies. He warns us that to fully understand their impact, we must adopt a comprehensive perspective that acknowledges them not merely as external tools but as intrinsic elements of our existence. Without them, he asserts, the everyday unfolding of our lives becomes, to varying degrees, inconceivable.

"Technologies are vital because life is increasingly constituted by and through them," emphasizes Édgar. "I propose, therefore, that technologies have managed to acquire a status of life, as life-generating, as ways of living, and, consequently, they must be understood as belonging to life" (Gómez, 2022: 34). Through a structure of five sections, Gómez Cruz lays out the main points of this conceptual proposal.

The book begins with a reflection on the need to transcend old dichotomies —online/offline, social/technological, local/global— to understand how technologies not only articulate but also constitute and form an intrinsic part of particular ways of being and existing in the world. In this sense, the author proposes moving beyond perspectives focused on technological adoption, use, or appropriation to situate the analysis on a broader plane, allowing us to understand how these technologies shape diverse forms of acting and living. Gómez Cruz argues that focusing the study on vitality rather than technologies themselves highlights the misalignment between life and the techno-capitalist project, which directs our existence through computational infrastructures designed and controlled by profit-driven corporations.

To analyze technology in the second decade of the 21st century, the author identifies three key transformations:

1) *The transition from cyberspace*: the initial idea of cyberspace as an alternative, free, and opportunity-filled realm —where disconnection was simple— has been abandoned. Instead, an algorithmic culture of surveillance and control has emerged, built on a capitalist foundation that centralizes power within a few com-

mercial platforms encompassing every aspect of daily life.

2) *The consolidation of capitalism as the dominant mode of utilizing vital technologies:* "reality" —as opposed to the "virtual"— has become an inescapable space. Algorithms structure our existence according to quantitative parameters that perpetuate accumulation models based on growth, measurement, and success.

3) *The normalization of technologies*: everyday experience is redefined in terms of advertising, surveillance, and corporatism. This phenomenon has transformed the Internet into a space where social connections have been replaced by metrics such as likes, and virtual communities have been substituted by micro-celebrities. In this context, platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp no longer serve merely as means of connection but as mechanisms demanding constant attention through recommendations that facilitate control, exploitation, and inequality patterns.

Within this framework, Édgar Gómez Cruz proposes five dimensions to address the everyday use of technologies:

a) *Historical dimension*: contextualizes technologies within specific moments to understand the narratives that shape notions of their use and appropriation. This allows us to differentiate, for example, the digital culture phase —characterized by greater agency in cultural construction through computational processes— from the algorithmic culture phase, where human interactions are conditioned by mathematical functions designed for data extraction.

b) *Cultural dimension*: recognizes that technologies designed in the Global North face tensions when applied in Global South contexts, generating significant cultural clashes.

c) *Economic-political dimension*: understands technologies as generators of practices and values aligned with the interests of capitalist oligopolies, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities.

d) *Socio-technical dimension*: focuses on technologies as complex assemblages that integrate practices, people, and technological artifacts.

e) *Phenomenological dimension*: Centers not only on technologies themselves but also on how they are perceived, experienced, and lived by individuals. This dimension explores how practices and experiences are structured around technologies, avoiding the socio-technical imaginaries promoted by Silicon Valley's hegemonic narrative.

The third chapter proposes three fundamental tools to analyze technologies from their broader implications. First, it suggests adopting a critical perspective to understand how technologies relate to our vitality within specific temporal and spatial contexts. Second, it emphasizes the importance of empirical studies to observe how individuals construct practices, discourses, and

meanings through technologies, avoiding futuristic predictions, clichés, or technological mythologies. Finally, it advocates for multidisciplinary approaches integrating strategies based on knowledge, imagination, collectivity, and resistance.

Resistance, as a central component, must also confront the epistemological rigidity that characterizes many current studies on large volumes of data, commonly referred to as big data. These datasets are often presented as transparent and objective representations of reality, ignoring the fact that they are, in reality, biased interpretations constructed by algorithms based on the habits and interactions of a limited sector of the population with access to the Internet and digital platforms.

The final chapter underscores the need for a decolonizing agenda around vital technologies. This approach seeks to reposition, resist, and resignify technologies for purposes different from those for which they were originally conceived. From a Latin American perspective, the author advocates for counter-hegemonic forms of adoption that respond to the specific needs of vulnerable sectors in the region. This analysis considers the multiple technological reappropriations carried out by these groups in contrast to the dominant narratives of the Global North.

In the epilogue, the author highlights the negative environmental impact of extracting materials necessary to produce devices, accessories, and batteries. This calls for rethinking the relationship between technology and sustainability, promoting a "technology of liberation" that fosters imagination and independence, prioritizing collective well-being over extractivist and market-driven logic.

Tecnologías vitales emerges as a consolidated work that synthesizes more than two decades of research by Édgar Gómez Cruz, who has developed his academic career at institutions such as the University of Leeds, the University of Melbourne, and the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. Despite his trajectory in the Global North, the author maintains a deeply rooted critical and decolonial perspective shaped by his Mexican origins. This text, which the author claims will be his final work on technologies, is a reflective and committed conclusion to contemporary debates on digital cultures.

However, certain aspects of the text may spark debate. For instance, at the beginning, the author suggests avoiding metaphors in theoretical construction while later encouraging researchers to develop their own concepts freely and creatively. Likewise, the categorical dismissal of approaches such as Richard Rogers' (2012) digital methods could be interpreted as an oversight of useful tools in certain analytical contexts. Nevertheless, these positions seem aimed at preventing researchers from falling into simplistic or neopositivist analyses that prioritize quantifiable aspects over social semiosis and critical thinking.

According to Gómez Cruz, it is essential not to be dazzled by trendy technologies but rather to focus on the meta-narratives and broader dynamics they generate. This reflection is particularly relevant at a time when enthusiasm for the blogosphere and the Twitter-sphere has shifted to an uncritical fascination with artificial intelligence. The latter is presented as a Promethean entelechy

that perpetuates the myth of linear bourgeois progress—a narrative capitalism has promoted since its inception yet has never fully realized. In this regard, the author revisits Vincent Mosco's (2011) concept of the *digital sublime* to describe the contemporary idealization of computing as the promise of a utopian future. It is within this framework that Gómez Cruz (2022) underscores:

> Vitality is not found in devices; it is in the marketplace, the streets, the neighborhood, the memes, the Piolín messages that aunts send, making family relationships visible; in solidarity messages seeking blood donors or missing persons; and even in conspiracy messages. We must study it in spaces like these, in both hegemonic and peripheral uses. (Cruz, 2022: 191)

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