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HUMAN FREEDOM IN A TECHNOLOGICALLY MEDIATED WORLD***

Summary: *Human freedom has long served as one of the central inquiries across disciplines, interrogating the nature, limits, and possibilities of self-determination. In the modern era, as technology permeates nearly every sphere of life—from professional and personal realms to healthcare, education, communication, and leisure—the question of freedom assumes new dimensions and dilemmas. This paper offers a comprehensive, multidisciplinary exploration of human freedom, tracing its evolution from historical and philosophical conceptions to its present-day reinterpretations in a digital age. The introductory section reviews centuries of thought on freedom through philosophical, psychological, anthropological, social, and cultural lenses. The main body of the paper is divided into two focal areas. The first, “Promethean Price and Technologically Mediated Living,” examines how rapid technological evolution has reconfigured daily life, reshaping the structures and practices that define modern existence while influencing individual agency and collective social dynamics. The second, “Conceptual Golden Cage or Mind-forged Manacles,” draws on philosophical, social, psychological, and anthropological analyses—invoking the insights of Marshall McLuhan and the poetic imagery of William Blake—to explore how the integration of technology into every facet of human existence might simultaneously empower and constrain. By comparing the liberatory potential of technological advances with their capacity to condition thought, behavior, and even values, the paper highlights the dual-edged nature of modern innovation. The concluding section reflects on human freedom as an ultimate philosophical concern, proposing that without critical engagement and conscious control over technological integration, the very concept of freedom risks being undermined. In doing so, this paper contributes to ongoing debates about technology’s role in shaping human agency and the future of freedom.*

Keywords: *Human freedom, technology, digital society, privacy, technological conditioning*

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1. INTRODUCTION: TRACING THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN FREEDOM

Throughout the history of human thought, freedom has occupied a pivotal position in philosophical, psychological, anthropological, social, and cultural discourse. From the classical antiquity of Socratic questioning to the Enlightenment ideals of individual autonomy, freedom has been variably interpreted as both an intrinsic human quality and a socially constructed ideal. As early modern thinkers such as Kant (1785/1998) and Rousseau (1762/2004) debated the nature of free will and the social contract, later developments in psychology, sociology, and anthropology have expanded the discussion to include the internal and external conditions that enable or restrict individual agency. In contemporary times, the pervasive presence of technology has further complicated this discourse, presenting both unprecedented opportunities for self-expression and significant challenges to the unbounded exercise of freedom. Historically, philosophical inquiries into freedom were dominated by debates on determinism versus free will. Early empiricists and rationalists laid the groundwork for understanding freedom as the capacity for rational choice, while later existentialist and phenomenological approaches—exemplified by Sartre (1943/2007) and Merleau-Ponty (1962/2013)—placed emphasis on lived experience and the existential weight of choice. Psychological theories of personality and motivation, from Freud's (1923/1991) deterministic structures of the unconscious to Bandura's (1977/1986) social learning theories, have also contributed nuanced perspectives regarding the interplay between internal drives and external constraints. Anthropological and sociocultural studies have enriched this debate by exploring how cultural narratives, rituals, and social institutions mediate expressions of freedom. For instance, Geertz (1973/2006) and Lévi-Strauss (1962/2008) underscored the role of symbolic systems in constituting individual identities, while contemporary studies have investigated how digital cultures redefine community and agency (van Dijck, 2013). In the realm of social theory, scholars such as Giddens (1991) and Bauman (2000) have critiqued modernity's promise of liberation by highlighting the uncertainties and anxieties that emerge in a rapidly changing world. As technology has become an inseparable element of modern society, it has introduced both novel avenues for freedom and new forms of constraint. The digital revolution has reconfigured traditional modes of communication, education, healthcare, and even leisure, creating an interconnected ecosystem in which information is both empowering and, paradoxically, potentially domineering. This paper endeavors to explore these dynamics by examining how technological mediation affects the human condition, particularly regarding freedom. The discussion is organized into two major sections. First, the interdisciplinary overview of technologically mediated living is presented, detailing

how rapid technological evolution has transformed our daily practices and social structures. Second, a critical analysis is offered on the costs of such integration, drawing on the metaphor of a “golden cage” or “mind-forged manacles” to illustrate the subtle yet pervasive forms of technological conditioning that may curtail authentic freedom. The final section synthesizes these insights, reaffirming that human freedom remains an ultimate philosophical and practical question in the age of digital saturation.

2. MAIN CONSIDERATIONS

2.1 Promethean Price and Technologically Mediated Living

The transformation of human life through technology is as pervasive as it is profound. The rapid evolution of digital devices, communication networks, and data-processing technologies has ushered in an era where every aspect of life is mediated by technological interfaces. This section presents an interdisciplinary analysis of the manifold ways in which technology has reshaped the professional, personal, healthcare, educational, communicational, and leisure spheres of life—and the consequent implications for human freedom.

In the professional arena, the integration of technology has redefined the nature of work. The digital revolution has led to the emergence of remote working, telecommuting, and flexible organizational structures, which have reconfigured traditional hierarchies and blurred the boundaries between personal and professional life. As Castells (2001) observes, the network society has enabled a “time-space compression” that transforms how labor is organized and experienced. With digital tools facilitating instantaneous communication and collaboration, the traditional constraints of time and geography are gradually being eroded (Castells, 2001; Floridi, 2014). However, this transformation comes at a cost. The blurring of work-life boundaries often results in what has been termed “always-on” culture, where the expectation of constant availability encroaches upon personal time and privacy (Turkle, 2011). The incessant connectivity, while fostering productivity and innovation, also imposes a form of digital discipline, subtly conditioning individuals to conform to new standards of efficiency and responsiveness. This phenomenon can be seen as a modern analogue to Foucault’s (1977) concept of disciplinary society, where surveillance and control are internalized by workers. The digital workplace, therefore, offers both enhanced opportunities for creativity and collaboration, while simultaneously subjecting workers to novel forms of control and self-regulation that impinge upon their freedom. In the context of personal life, technology has revolutionized the manner in which individuals

interact, form relationships, and construct their identities. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have redefined communication, offering unprecedented opportunities for self-expression and community building (van Dijck, 2013). Yet, these platforms also impose certain constraints. The curated nature of online interactions, along with algorithmic mediation, can lead to echo chambers and the reinforcement of existing biases (Boyd, 2014). In many ways, the digital realm presents a paradox: it expands the sphere of individual expression while simultaneously imposing new norms that shape behavior and attitudes. This dual nature of digital connectivity is evident in studies that reveal both the empowering and alienating aspects of social media. For instance, while these platforms contribute to democratic capacity in some aspects, like providing space for marginalized voices to be heard and foster global solidarity, at the same time they engender feelings of isolation, anxiety, and inadequacy as some less privileged users compare their everyday lives with the highly edited portrayals of others (Turkle, 2011; Papacharissi, 2010). The consequence is a dynamic where freedom of expression is both celebrated and curtailed by the invisible architectures of digital platforms that determine what is visible, valuable, or acceptable. In healthcare, the advent of telemedicine, electronic health records, and wearable health-monitoring devices has redefined patient care and medical research. Digital health technologies have democratized access to health information and services, enabling patients to monitor their well-being and participate more actively in their healthcare decisions (Floridi, 2014). However, the digitization of health data also raises significant concerns about privacy and autonomy. The aggregation and analysis of personal health data by large corporations and state agencies can lead to intrusive surveillance practices, thereby challenging the traditional notion of medical confidentiality and patient autonomy (Solove, 2007; Nissenbaum, 2010). Similarly, education has experienced a paradigm shift with the integration of technology. E-learning platforms, digital classrooms, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) have expanded access to knowledge, facilitating lifelong learning and bridging geographical divides (Castells, 2001). Yet, the mechanization and algorithmic personalization of education may inadvertently restrict critical thinking and creativity by channeling learners into pre-determined pathways, thus constraining the development of independent thought (Carr, 2010; Manovich, 2001). The digitization of education, while democratizing access to knowledge, also poses risks related to the standardization of learning and the reduction of the educational experience. Technology's impact extends to leisure and recreational activities. The rise of digital entertainment—encompassing video games, streaming services, and virtual reality experiences—has transformed traditional notions of leisure and social interaction. Digital entertainment offers immersive

experiences that can foster creativity and community among enthusiasts; however, it also raises questions about the commodification of attention and the passive consumption of content (Rheingold, 1993). As individuals increasingly spend time in digital environments, the experiential quality of leisure may be redefined by technological interfaces that both enable and constrain user agency. In the realm of communication, the proliferation of digital devices has fundamentally altered public discourse. The immediacy and ubiquity of information have empowered citizens to engage in political activism and social movements, as evidenced by digital mobilizations around global issues (van Dijck, 2013). Yet, this empowerment is counterbalanced by the risks of misinformation, digital manipulation, and the erosion of critical public debate. The interplay between digital communication and freedom is further complicated by the ways in which technological mediation shapes public opinion and political participation (Andrejevic, 2013).

The transformative influence of technology on daily life creates a paradoxical landscape where empowerment and constraint coexist. On the positive side, technology offers enhanced access to information, opportunities for self-expression, and a platform for the democratization of various spheres of life. However, the very same technology introduces novel forms of control, surveillance, and standardization that may impinge upon the very freedoms it purports to expand. As Floridi (2014) argues, the digital revolution has not only reshaped the infrastructure of society but has also reconfigured the symbolic and experiential dimensions of freedom. In many respects, the evolution of technologically mediated living invites us to revisit classical debates about autonomy and determinism. The digital age presents a scenario reminiscent of the Promethean myth, wherein the gift of technology carries an inherent price. While digital tools have unleashed unprecedented creative potential, they also demand a high degree of self-regulation and adaptation to rapidly changing environments. In the words of Castells (2001), the network society is characterized by both the liberation of information and the disciplining effects of digital infrastructures. The challenge, therefore, lies in harnessing the benefits of technological progress while mitigating its constraining effects on human freedom.

2.2 Conceptual Golden Cage or „Mind-forged Manacles“

In juxtaposition to the liberatory promises of technological advancement lies a more ominous prospect: the emergence of a “golden cage” or “mind-forged manacles” that subtly, yet profoundly, restrict human freedom. Drawing inspiration from William Blake’s evocative imagery and informed by the critical perspectives of Marshall McLuhan, authors aspire to address the philosophical, social, psychological, and anthropological dimensions of technology’s conditioning effects. The

metaphor of the “golden cage” finds its resonance in philosophical critiques of modernity. Early modern philosophers celebrated technology as a means to achieve progress and liberation; however, as technology became increasingly pervasive, its emancipatory potential was called into question. Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) seminal observation that “the medium is the message” suggests that technology not only transmits information but also shapes the cognitive and perceptual frameworks through which individuals engage with the world. In this context, technology acts as an omnipresent conditioning force that influences how reality is experienced and understood.

William Blake’s poetic imagery, particularly his reference to “mind-forged manacles,” underscores the paradoxical nature of progress. The allure of technological innovation, much like the mythical wings of Icarus, carries with it the risk of hubris and self-imposed confinement (Blake, 1794/1995). In other words, the very instruments that enable human advancement can also become the shackles that limit critical thinking, individual creativity, and the capacity for authentic self-determination. The philosophical challenge, then, is to recognize and resist the subtle coercion embedded within technological mediation—a challenge that requires a reinvigoration of the human capacity for reflection, critique, and self-governance. On a social level, the integration of technology into everyday life has led to profound changes in the dynamics of power and control. The mass collection of personal data, the ubiquity of surveillance, and the algorithmic governance of online behavior have raised urgent questions about privacy and autonomy. As Zuboff (2019) argues in her analysis of surveillance capitalism, the commodification of personal data transforms individuals into objects of manipulation, subjecting them to continuous forms of digital discipline. This transformation creates a social order in which the parameters of freedom are increasingly defined by technological infrastructures rather than by human values or democratic principles.

The erosion of privacy, in particular, stands as a stark example of how technological mediation can function as a “golden cage.” On one hand, the benefits of personalized services, targeted information, and enhanced connectivity are undeniable; on the other, these same services often come at the cost of deep incursions into individual privacy (Nissenbaum, 2010; Solove, 2007). The social contract, reconfigured in the digital age, appears to demand a silent consent to pervasive surveillance in exchange for convenience and connectivity. Yet, this trade-off undermines the very foundation of freedom, as individuals become increasingly conditioned to accept limitations on their autonomy as normative aspects of modern life.

Culturally, the integration of technology has precipitated shifts in values and social norms. The digital environment promotes certain forms of communication

and interaction—often characterized by brevity, immediacy, and superficial engagement—that may diminish the capacity for sustained reflection and deep critical thought (Carr, 2010). As social media platforms and digital interfaces increasingly structure everyday interactions, there is a growing risk that the qualitative dimensions of human freedom—such as the ability to engage in meaningful, reflective discourse—may be compromised by the quantitative imperatives of data analytics and algorithmic curation (Turkle, 2011).

2.2.1 Psychological Dimensions: Cognitive Conditioning and the Decline of Critical Thinking

The psychological ramifications of an all-pervasive technological environment are equally significant. A growing body of research indicates that digital media and constant connectivity can affect cognitive processes, including attention, memory, and critical thinking. Sparrow, Liu, and Wegner's (2011) study on the "Google effect" illustrates how the ready availability of information can lead to a form of cognitive offloading, where individuals are less inclined to retain information in memory. This reliance on external digital resources, while adaptive in many respects, may also diminish the capacity for deep, critical thought and introspection.

Similarly, the constant bombardment of notifications, updates, and digital stimuli has been linked to diminished attention spans and a fragmented mode of thinking (Carr, 2010). The psychological conditioning that results from continuous exposure to digital interfaces can be conceptualized as a form of "mind-forged manacles"—a condition in which the cognitive apparatus is trained to operate within the narrow confines dictated by technological imperatives rather than by independent critical judgment. This transformation has far-reaching implications for democratic engagement and individual empowerment, as the capacity for reflective, autonomous thought is essential for both personal freedom and active citizenship (Turkle, 2011; Manovich, 2001).

2.2.2 Anthropological Perspectives: Technology, Ritual, and the Transformation of Identity

From an anthropological standpoint, technology not only alters individual cognition and social relations but also reshapes cultural practices and identity formation. Traditional societies have long relied on ritual, myth, and communal practices to negotiate the boundaries of freedom and authority. In the digital age, analogous rituals are emerging in the form of online communities, digital festivals, and virtual spaces that serve as new arenas for the negotiation of identity and social belonging (van Dijck, 2013).

However, the integration of technology into cultural life also brings about a form of homogenization and standardization that can erode the diversity of cultural expressions. The algorithms that govern content curation on social media platforms, for instance, tend to favor popular and widely accepted narratives, thereby marginalizing dissenting voices and alternative forms of cultural expression (Andrejevic, 2013). This process contributes to what can be termed a “conceptual golden cage,” wherein individuals are subtly coerced into adopting standardized modes of thought and behavior that limit the scope of authentic self-expression. The anthropological implication is clear: as technology increasingly mediates cultural production and reproduction, the dynamic interplay between individual freedom and collective identity becomes ever more complex and fraught with tension.

2.2.3 The Icarus Analogy:

Wings of Technological Progress and the Risk of Hubris

The myth of Icarus—whose waxen wings melted as he soared too close to the sun—serves as a potent metaphor for the current state of technological integration. The ambition to transcend human limitations through technology is noble and, in many respects, has yielded remarkable achievements. Yet, as Icarus’s tragic fall reminds us, unchecked ambition without critical oversight can lead to self-destruction. In the context of human freedom, the wings of technological progress offer both the promise of liberation and the peril of profound loss. Without vigilant self-regulation and a critical examination of the ways in which technology conditions our thoughts and behaviors, the very tools that have expanded our capacities may ultimately undermine the fundamental freedom that underpins human dignity (Blake, 1794/1995; McLuhan, 1964).

The challenge is therefore twofold. First, society must harness the potential of technology to enhance human freedom—through measures that promote transparency, protect privacy, and encourage democratic participation. Second, there must be a conscious effort to resist the seductive allure of uncritical technological integration. This entails cultivating an educational and cultural environment that values reflective thought, creativity, and the capacity to question established norms. Only by synchronizing the emancipatory promise of technology with a critical awareness of its constraints, can we hope to avert the fate of Icarus and preserve the future of human freedom.

3. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: FREEDOM AS THE ULTIMATE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPERATIVE

Human freedom has always been, and continues to be, one of the most profound and contested philosophical questions in human history. The evolution of freedom—from the early debates on determinism and the nature of the self to the contemporary struggles against digital surveillance and algorithmic governance—reveals a continuous tension between the desire for liberation and the forces that seek to contain or direct that liberation. In our technologically mediated world, this tension has assumed new urgency. The analysis presented in this paper highlights the dual character of technology as both an enabler and a constrainer of freedom. Technological advances that have transformed professional, personal, health-care, educational, communicational, and leisure domains offer opportunities for empowerment, connectivity, and democratization. However, we must also keep in mind that the pervasive nature of digital technology imposes subtle forms of control—what this paper has termed the “Promethean price” and the “conceptual golden cage”—which condition human thought, behavior, and cultural expression.

In reflection on the historical context of freedom as an evolving concept, philosophers such as Kant, Rousseau, and Sartre, as well as contemporary scholars like Giddens and Bauman, have all grappled with the paradox of freedom in an increasingly complex world. Their work underscores that freedom is not a static or monolithic entity but a dynamic process that must be continually negotiated and reimagined, and even more so in modern times, in the face of changing social, technological, and cultural conditions. The insights offered by Marshall McLuhan and the poetic warnings of William Blake remind us that the very media and technologies that enable our progress also have the potential to condition us. As we navigate the intricacies of a digital age marked by rapid innovation and pervasive connectivity, it is crucial that scholars, policymakers, and citizens alike foster a critical engagement with technology. This includes implementing robust safeguards for privacy, promoting digital literacy, and nurturing environments that encourage independent and reflective thought.

Ultimately, the struggle for human freedom in a technologically mediated world is an integral part of a broader quest for self-determination and meaning. The challenges posed by digital technologies are not insurmountable; rather, they call for a renewed commitment to the values of autonomy, creativity, and critical inquiry. As we are facing the complexities of modern life, we must resist the temptation to accept the constraints imposed by uncritical technological adoption. Instead, we should strive to cultivate a vision of freedom that is both adaptive and resilient—one that embraces the potential of technology while remaining ever-vigilant against its inherent and somewhat subversive limitations.

In conclusion, human freedom remains the ultimate philosophical imperative—a question that lies at the heart of our individual and collective existence. The interplay between technological innovation and human agency is not predetermined; it is a space of contestation and possibility. By recognizing the dualistic nature of technological progress and by cultivating the critical capacities necessary to question and reshape our digital environments, we can work towards a future in which freedom is not restricted by technological conditioning but is rather enriched by conscious and reflective engagement. Such a future, while not guaranteed, is essential for preserving the dignity, creativity, and autonomy that define the human spirit.

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LJUDSKA SLOBODA U TEHNOLOŠKI POSREDOVANOM SVETU

Sažetak: *Ljudska sloboda dugo je služila kao jedno od centralnih pitanja u svim disciplinama, preispitujući prirodu, granice i mogućnosti samoopredeljenja. U modernoj eri, pošto tehnologija prožima skoro svaku sferu života – od profesionalne i lične oblasti do zdravstvene zaštite, obrazovanja, komunikacije i slobodnog vremena – pitanje slobode poprima nove dimenzije i dileme. Ovaj rad nudi sveobuhvatno, multidisciplinarno istraživanje ljudske slobode, prateći njenu evoluciju od istorijskih i filozofskih koncepcija do njenih današnjih reinterpretacija u digitalnom dobu. Uvodni odeljak daje pregled vekova razmišljanja o slobodi kroz filozofske, psihološke, antropološke, društvene i kulturne perspektive. Glavni deo rada podeljen je na dve fokusne oblasti. Prvi, „Prometejska cena i tehnološki posredovani život“, ispituje kako je brza tehnološka evolucija rekonfigurisala svakodnevni život, preoblikujući strukture i prakse koje definišu moderno postojanje, istovremeno utičući na individualnu aktivnost i kolektivnu društvenu dinamiku. Drugi, „Konceptualni zlatni kavez ili okovi iskovani umom“, zasniva se na filozofskim, društvenim, psihološkim i antropološkim analizama – pozivajući se na uvide Maršala Mekluana i poetske slike Vilijama Blejka – da bi se istražilo kako bi integracija tehnologije u svaki aspekt ljudskog postojanja mogla istovremeno da deluje i trenira. Upoređujući oslobodilački potencijal tehnološkog napretka sa njihovom sposobnošću da uslovljavaju mišljenje, ponašanje, pa čak i vrednosti, ovaj rad naglašava dvostruku prirodu moderne inovacije. Završni odeljak razmatra ljudsku slobodu kao krajnju filozofsku brigu, predlažući da bez kritičkog angažovanja i svesne kontrole nad tehnološkom integracijom, rizikuje potkopavanje samog koncepta slobode. Na taj način, ovaj rad doprinosi tekućim debatama o ulozi tehnologije u oblikovanju ljudske aktivnosti i budućnosti slobode.*

Ključne reči: *ljudska sloboda, tehnologija, digitalno društvo, privatnost, tehnološka uslovljenost*