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The Philosophical Aspect of Contemporary Technology: Ellulian Technique and Infinite Scroll within Social Media

MILVYDAS KNYZELIS
Department of Contemporary Communication, LCC International University, 36 Kretingos Street, 92307 Klaipėda, Lithuania
Email: mknyzelis@lcc.lt

Infinite scroll as a digital technology feature was introduced in 2006 and instantly gained momentum in a variety of platforms. The efficient and engaging technology experience brought by infinite scroll aligns well with the French sociologist Jacques Ellul's concept of *technique*. Ellul does not perceive technique as technology, instead, he views it as a phenomenon of efficiency, permeating the societal, political and economic fields of human activity. By applying the characteristics of Ellul's technique to the infinite scroll feature within social media, this paper uncovers insights into how it aligns with Ellul's concept. In such a way, the Ellulian perspective allows an understanding of infinite scroll as part of a broader sociotechnical phenomenon. The article does not aim to spread a negative approach towards technology but rather to provide another perspective upon which digital technology might be analysed.

Keywords: infinite scroll, Jacques Ellul, technique, technology

INTRODUCTION

Infinite scroll was introduced in 2006 and quickly became a popular design feature in various digital platforms, such as social media feeds, news websites and online shopping sites. The implementation of infinite scroll allows a browsing experience where the new content loads continuously as the user scrolls down (Campbell et al., 2013). This feature has vastly changed user experience on the internet, promoting frictionless and immersive scrolling (Sharma, Murano 2020).

As it was brought up by different scholars, frictionlessness became a dominant paradigm of digital interface design (Cox et al. 2016; Ericson 2022; Mejtoft et al. 2019; Seymour 2020). Such pursuit for a maximum level of efficiency in the interaction aligns with French sociologist Jacque Ellul's concept of *technique*. Technique in Ellul's perspective does not refer only to technology or tools but rather encompasses a broader understanding of the process through which the human condition is shaped and transformed by technical practices. The concept of technique was extensively discussed in Ellul's books 'The Technological Society' (originally

published in 1954), 'The Technological System' (1980) and 'The Technological Bluff' (1988). According to Ellul (1964), technique prioritises efficiency and rationality, aiming to maximise the desired outcomes of a given task or process. Thus, the implementation of the infinite scroll is studied from an Ellulian perspective to better understand how it aligns with Ellul's concept of technique.

The following section introduces the overview of existing literature on the concepts of scrolling behaviour, infinite scroll and Ellul's characteristics of technique, providing a foundation for the analysis. The subsequent section describes how characteristics of the technique were uncovered within the implementation of an infinite scroll on social media platforms. The final section discusses the implications of looking into the infinite scroll and other technologies from the Ellulian perspective.

In 1954, French sociologist Jacques Ellul published a seminal work titled *La Technique ou l'Enjeu du siècle* (published in English as 'Technological Society' in 1964) where he introduced his perspective on the impact that technology has in the modern world. Ellul continued to explore the influence of technology on society in subsequent works, including 'Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes' (originally published in 1965) and 'The Political Illusion' (1967). However, the most relevant Ellul's works, besides the initial book 'Technological Society', to draw from in the context of technology and society are 'The Technological System' (1980) and 'The Technological Bluff' (1988). This article will be mostly building on the book 'Technological Society' as the seminal work, which introduced Ellul's concept of technique, together with its seven characteristics: rationality, artificiality, automatism of technical choice, self-augmentation, monism, universality and autonomy.

Before examining infinite scroll within social media from the perspective of Ellul's technique, it is important to understand what is meant by the term technique. In 'Technological Society', the technique is defined as 'the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity' (Ellul, 1964: xxv). As per Ellul (1964), the technique is the process allowing maximisation of efficiency. However, the biggest misunderstanding of Ellul's ideas is considering technique as technology, or machinery. The assimilation of technique and technology is a common misconception, that could be in a way due to the translation from French to English (Alexander 2020). As Ellul (1964: xxv) puts it, 'technique … does not mean machines, technology or this or that procedure for attaining an end'. However, it is worthwhile to state right away that what Ellul refers to as Technique with a capital 'T', or a technical phenomenon, must be distinguished from multiple techniques as its elements.

No matter the fact that technique is not synonymous with technology, machines in a broad sense are part of technique's definition, 'without the machine the world of technique would not exist'; however, in Ellul's terms technique is far more reaching than the physical machine, 'technique has now become almost completely independent of the machine' (Ellul 1964: 3–4). The technique is far more reaching because as Ellul (1964) puts it, it has been adapted to the world outside of the industrial machinery. Ellul (1964) argues that the pursuit of efficiency as the defining factor of technique moved outside of industrial life into the social, economic and political realms of the modern world.

Having in mind that technique does not equal technology, it would seem that there is no sense in studying the implementation of infinite scroll in digital interfaces solely from the perspective of Ellul's technique. Thus, the following sections will provide a more detailed context on an infinite scroll and how it could be understood through the seven characteristics of technique.

Scrolling as a content consumption process has received increased attention in recent years, particularly with the widespread entrenched position of mobile devices. Though scrolling was possible even before the invention of touchscreens, it has become more prevalent and user-friendly with the advent of smartphones and tablets (Çizmeci 2017). Throughout time scrolling became such an intuitive and easy-to-use method of navigating and consuming digital content that scientists started seeing addiction-like features in scrolling behaviour (D'Arienzo et al. 2019; Holmgren, Coyne 2017; Hou et al. 2019).

Since we have been living with touchscreens for nearly twenty years, the analysis of scrolling behaviour has already emerged not only within scientific scholarly literature but also in philosophical discussions. Marek (2023) makes an argument that scrolling responds to a human need for existential distractedness, though it cannot be compared to typical forms of distraction (such as art, books, movies, and similar) in the sense that scrolling makes users accustomed to the reductive experience of life. Lupinacci (2021) discusses the connection between scrolling on social media and the concept of 'liveness', which makes users hooked to ongoing streams of content, constantly seeking the next update or new information. Jovicic (2020) makes a comparison between scrolling and strolling in the physical world, highlighting the meaningless nature of both activities.

Even if scrolling behaviour has received attention in the academic literature, there is limited research specifically focused on the philosophical aspects of infinite scroll and its implementation in digital interfaces. Infinite scroll is a popular design feature used in digital interfaces, particularly in websites and mobile applications, where content loads continuously as the user scrolls down (Campbell et al. 2013). It was developed by Aza Raskin in 2006 and has since been adopted by many websites and applications, mostly including social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest and X (formerly Twitter) (Juhasz 2020). The main idea of infinite scroll is to enhance user engagement by removing interruptions to browsing and providing an endless stream of content for users to consume (Rixen et al. 2023). In such a way, the infinite scroll method made the pagination of content obsolete, allowing users to keep scrolling infinitely without having to click on the next page or load more content manually (Bhargava 2023).

From a media and communication perspective, infinite scroll can be understood as a mechanic for more efficient information delivery. Infinite scroll is not a radio, TV, or magazine; it is not a medium in itself, but rather, it works as an enhancement of specific digital mediums. Though it can be implemented in a variety of digital platforms, involving various purpose mobile apps, websites, blogs and similar platforms, however, the news feed (or feed in general) of social media platforms is where the infinite scroll is very popular and often employed (Holmgren, Coyne 2017). Of course, it would be detrimental to perceive news feed as the most important aspect of social media; however, one could not disagree that it is a significant feature of the platform. Simply looking at the sheer amount of screen space the news feed occupies on social media platforms, it is evident that it holds a central role in the platform. Thus, as it is argued further in this paper, implementing the infinite scroll method into the social media feeds allowed infinite scroll to reach its full potential as a technique.

Let us examine the functioning of infinite scroll in more depth. We could see the pagination method as a predecessor of the infinite scroll (Campbell et al. 2013). Pagination, which is still often used throughout the digital interfaces, involves dividing content into separate pages, and users can then navigate through content by clicking on page numbers or next/previous buttons. However, the pagination method creates a frictional browsing experience,

since users need to make an effort to manually click and then wait for a certain period of time until the page refreshes and the content is loaded on the screen. Though the waiting time may seem insignificant, it is still an inefficient browsing experience, compared to infinite scroll, where content is loaded continuously as the user scrolls down the page. Another approach that could be considered an improvement in efficiency compared to the pagination method, would be a button, that would load more content on the page without the need for refreshing the page. This would cut off the time required for loading the content; however, it still would not be maximally efficient in terms that it requires a manual effort of clicking a button. One could argue that the very long feed, worthy of hours of scrolling time, that would be loaded once the user opens the platform would reach the same result as an infinite scroll. However, even if such a method would eliminate a clicking behaviour, it would still be inefficient in terms of loading time, since preloading content worthy of an hour of scrolling time, even with the modern content optimisation methods, would require a significant amount of internet bandwidth. Certainly, an even further enhancement to the infinite scroll could be scrolling using eye-tracking technology, which would eliminate hand movement, making it even more efficient (Menges et al. 2019). As Ellul (1964) puts it, technique is in a continuous seek for efficiency; once a more efficient method is found, it will be automatically implemented. However, since such eye-tracking technology is scarcely implemented, it does not concern the analysis of this paper.

Let us examine a little bit more the connection between social media feeds and infinite scroll. If infinite scroll ought to maximise engagement with the platform, then obviously the content provided through the infinite scroll has to be engaging and captivating (Trunfio, Rossi 2021). Thus, in such a way, the full potential is reached if the content is carefully curated and selected for each individual using the platform (Kim 2017). That is where the connection between current social media feeds and infinite scroll shines. Machine learning algorithms that are used in social media feeds enable the best matching content to be selected in real-time, as the user is scrolling down the feed, thus allowing an infinite frictionless scrolling experience through the content that is curated on demand to bring the maximum engagement with the platform (Swart 2021). Thus, further in this article, the infinite scroll will be considered in the context of how it is currently used on social media.

APPLYING CHARACTERISTICS OF TECHNIQUE TO INFINITE SCROLL

Having provided a mapping of Ellul's technique and the infinite scroll, it is important to further explain why it is relevant to analyse the implementation of infinite scroll in digital interfaces through the lens of technique. Since social media feeds and infinite scroll are closely linked together, it would be a valid argument to analyse the news feed rather than the mechanics of it. However, the key here is that social media feed is a medium, which, as argued in the earlier section, is brought to its enhanced version of efficiency and engagement, through the use of the infinite scroll feature. Therefore, by analysing the infinite scroll as it is used within social media, we could better understand the underpinnings of the development of modern-day technology that shapes our society.

As introduced earlier, Ellul (1964: 78–147) defines seven characteristics of technique: rationality, artificiality, automatism of technical choice, self-augmentation, monism, universality and autonomy. The subsequent sections focus on these seven characteristics and how they apply to the infinite scroll. The analysis of infinite scroll using the characteristics of technique reveals a more nuanced view of its implication to modern society.

Rationality. For Ellul (1964: 79), rationality of technique is the process of eliminating 'all that is spontaneous or irrational'. In the context of infinite scroll, rationality can be seen in the attempt to minimise randomness. With the presence of algorithms in the infinite scrolling feature, the content that is displayed to the user is not random but rather carefully selected and curated based on various factors such as user preferences, interests, and browsing behaviour (Kim 2017). Such rationality and personal tailouring are aimed at providing a customised and relevant browsing experience for the user, increasing their engagement with the platform (Swart 2021). Since the key goal of infinite scroll is to keep users continuously consuming content for prolonged periods of time, other dimensions, such as ethical considerations, for example, the creation of echo chambers, when users are only exposed to information that aligns with their existing beliefs, are often disregarded in pursuit of rationality and efficiency (Cinelli et al. 2021).

Artificiality. In Ellul's definition, artificiality is the second obvious characteristic of technique, which refers to the fact that technique is an artificial system opposite of nature. According to Ellul (1964: 79), technique and nature are two different worlds that 'obey different imperatives, different directives, and different laws which have nothing in common'. In the context of infinite scroll, artificiality manifests itself in the way that it creates an artificial environment for users to engage with content. The infinite scroll aligns with the characteristics of artificiality in a way that it would not occur naturally and would not be possible without the use of technology.

Automatism of technical choice. For Ellul (1964: 80), automatism of technical choice refers to the way in which the technique operates automatically without the need for human intervention: 'technique itself ... selects among the means to be employed. The human being is no longer in any sense the agent of choice'. In the context of infinite scroll, the automatism of technical choice is evident in two ways. First of all, infinite scroll from its mechanics determines when the new content should be shown on the screen. It does not require the presence of human agency, for instance, in the form of clicking a button to load more content, rather infinite scroll loads more content automatically. Secondly, the infinite scroll as it is currently employed in social media feeds automatically selects and displays the content based on algorithmic calculations, without users making a rational choice about the content they want to see.

Self-augmentation. In Ellul's (1964) framework, self-augmentation of the technique consists of two closely related aspects. Ellul does not imply that self-augmentation of technique equals the techno-dystopian scenario of technology birthing more technology on itself. Rather, self-augmentation manifests itself through a continuous incremental progress involving multiple individuals. As Ellul (1964: 85) puts it, 'modern men are so enthusiastic about technique ... everyone seeks to introduce technical improvement. Essentially, technique progresses as a result of this common effort.' In terms of infinite scroll, this is evident in the sense of how many engineers are working to improve and enhance the infinite scroll method even further. The simple Google search query for 'infinite scroll' will yield multiple results with different implementation methods in a variety of programming languages or different plugins for different web frameworks.

Another aspect that Ellul touches upon in terms of self-augmentation is the process of allowing a single technique to provide conditions for other techniques to develop. Ellul provides an exemplary case of the invention of an internal combustion engine, which allowed the further inventions of the automobile or submarine. When it comes to the infinite scroll

and how it expands across different platforms, one could study the auto-play feature of video streaming platforms. Similarly to the infinite scroll method, the Netflix streaming platform, auto-plays the next episode of the same TV series that the user is watching, without the need for any human intervention, allowing for binge-watching.

Monism. For Ellul (1964: 94), 'the technical phenomenon, embracing all the separate techniques, forms a whole'. Monism is likely the most complicated characteristic of the technique to grasp and apply to the infinite scroll. For Ellul monism refers to the fact that various techniques within the technological phenomenon are interconnected and unified. In the context of infinite scroll, monism can be observed in terms of how infinite scroll blends within the larger framework of algorithms and social media all of which are functioning alongside each other towards the same goal of an efficient and engaging technology experience.

Universality. When talking about the universality of technique Ellul refers to the fact that there are no geographical or environmental boundaries for a technique to spread. Ellul (1964: 117) argues that throughout history different regions and continents had different and distinct principles of existence; however, in the world of technique, 'everything tends to align itself on technical principles'. If looking at the infinite scroll in terms of its universality, it is evident that the infinite scroll has become a ubiquitous feature implemented in a variety of digital interfaces (Rixen et al. 2023). Even if different social media platforms or different websites have different technical characteristics and layouts, the employment of infinite scroll is a universal go-to method that is widely adopted across a variety of platforms.

Autonomy. For Ellul, the autonomy of technique refers to the fact that technique is a closed organism. It is free from any economic or political forces, rather, as Ellul points out, technique itself creates social, political and economic changes. Technique, similarly to money, though a human construct, extends beyond human control and exercises its power over different spheres of society: 'technique has become a reality in itself, self-sufficient, with its special laws and its own determinations' (Ellul 1964: 134). In terms of Ellul's (1964: 135) 'autonomy with respect to man', he foresees the advancement of a technique to a certain degree that the worker will no longer be needed to 'guide or move the machine', rather the worker will be a simple observer. In the same manner, once set in motion, infinite scroll can continue independently without a need for constant human intervention. On a different aspect, infinite scroll is exercised to provide users with an uninterrupted stream of content, for the sake of keeping them engaged with the platform and making revenue out of it (Center for Humane Technology 2021). In the realm of attention economy, where the competition for user attention is high, infinite scroll, as an attention-capturing feature, functions as an autonomous and decisive factor for technological progress.

As all of the characteristics of Ellul's technique have been applied to the feature of infinite scroll, it is evident that the implementation of infinite scroll in digital interfaces fulfills all of each seven characteristics. This study then provides the necessary evidence to argue that infinite scroll can be viewed and analysed through the lens of Ellul's technique. This is not to say that infinite scroll is a case study of 'Technique' with a capital 'T', but rather, it can be considered a part of Technique, as a technical phenomenon – 'more complex than a synthesis of characteristics common to individual techniques' (Ellul 1964: 19). Ellul argues that technique as a whole cannot be studied from the perspective of individual technique, but rather it must be examined as a sociotechnical phenomenon overarching across multiple domains of society. However, even if the technique cannot be fully understood by looking from the lens of infinite scroll, it does not mean that infinite scroll as a feature cannot be studied from

the perspective of technique. This then provides a new perspective looking into technology from the sociological and philosophical points of view.

From this point of view, infinite scroll as an individual technique can be perceived as part of, as Ellul (1964: 94) puts it, a 'technical phenomenon' incorporating several different techniques. The main idea of analysing infinite scroll as a technique is not to decipher it as a detached technological feature, but rather, as part of a larger context. In this way, the Ellulian perspective provides a framework for acknowledging social issues related to the infinite scroll implementation, for example, the addictive nature of this feature (Holmgren, Coyne 2017), shortened attention span (Zimmerman et al. 2023), compulsive behaviour (Mackay 2023), or information overload (Echauri 2023) not as technical flaws, but rather as an outcome of the broader sociotechnical milieu. As argued by Ellul (1964: 99), 'everything which is technique is necessarily used as soon as it is available, without distinction of good or evil'. In this way, the Ellulian perspective helps to locate individual techniques, such as infinite scroll, in the broader spectrum of the sociotechnical system, acknowledging their operation not as an 'isolated fact in society', but rather, as a phenomenon 'related to every factor in the life of a modern man' (Ellul 1964: xxvi). Looking from the Ellulian perspective, it is evident that social issues related to infinite scroll cannot be tackled by altering the mechanics of infinite scroll itself. If infinite scroll is perceived as technique, then addressing its social issues requires a comprehensive examination of the entire system and its underlying values, norms and structures.

Of course, Ellul's approach is not an only one available for researchers looking into technology from a broader sociotechnical perspective. At the same time, it is not the intention of this study to present Ellul's perspective as superior, but rather to acknowledge the Ellulian approach, which is quite underrepresented in the scholarly discourse, as a valuable framework for studying technical phenomena due to its ability to examine a broader context without a pro- or anti-technical perspective.

CONCLUSIONS

Jacques Ellul's concept of technique has been largely overlooked in the discourse surrounding digital technologies. Previous scholarship by Ellul helped to better understand the complexity of technique within the realm of modern-day digital technology, revealing technique as a complex and all-encompassing sociotechnical phenomenon seeking absolute efficiency. Ellul in his seminal work 'Technological Society' featured seven characteristics of technique: rationality, artificiality, automatism of technical choice, self-augmentation, monism, universality and autonomy. Each of these characteristics was applied to the infinite scroll within social media, in order to understand Ellul's concept applicability in the context of infinite scroll implementation within social media. The application of the technique's characteristics to the infinite scroll reveals this digital technology feature being an example of the technique, therefore providing a new perspective on such technology.

The Ellulian perspective offers a framework for critically examining the integration of technical phenomena within society, providing a lens through which individual techniques, like the infinite scroll, can be situated within a broader sociotechnical system. This perspective enables a more holistic understanding of the role of technology in modern society, emphasising its relationship to every aspect of the lives of individuals and the larger societal structures in which they exist. Though Jacques Ellul's perspective on technology may seem utterly deterministic and, in a way, pessimistic, for which he has been criticised, however,

as Ellul (1964: xxvii, xxxiii) puts it, his intentions are not to show that 'technique is bad', but rather 'to arouse the reader to an awareness of the technological necessity and what it means'. To the same extent, the goal of this article is not to spread the negative motion towards digital technology, but rather to bring yet another perspective on technology and its implications in the modern world.

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MILVYDAS KNYZELIS

Šiuolaikinės technologijos filosofiniu požiūriu: J. Ellulo technika ir begalinis slinkimas socialinėse medijose

Santrauka

Skaitmeninių technologijų funkcija „begalinis slinkimas" (*infinite scroll*) buvo sukurta 2006 metais ir akimirksniu išpopuliarėjo įvairiose platformose. Efektyvi ir įtraukianti technologijų patirtis, kurią suteikia begalinis slinkimas, atliepia prancūzų sociologo Jacqueso Ellulo technikos (*technique*) sampratą. J. Ellulas nesutapatina technikos su technologijomis, o labiau, su visapusiško efektyvumo siekiančiu reiškiniu, persmelkiančiu visuomenę, politiką ir ekonomiką. Analizuojant begalinio slinkimo funkcijos naudojimą socialinėse medijose per J. Ellulo technikos prizmę, šis straipsnis atskleidžia įžvalgas apie tai, kaip ši funkcija siejasi su J. Ellulo technikos samprata. J. Ellulo teorija leidžia suprasti begalinio slinkimo funkciją ne kaip izoliuotą technologinę funkciją, o kaip dalį platesnio sociotechninio reiškinio. Straipsnis nesiekia skleisti neigiamo požiūrio į technologijas, o tiesiog pateikia alternatyvų požiūrį, kuriuo būtų galima analizuoti skaitmenines technologijas.

Raktažodžiai: begalinis slinkimas, Jacquesas Ellulas, technika, technologijos