Accommodating Ourselves to Death: Covid and the Threat of Technological Solutions to Human Crises

Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology
Special Section on Technology & Pandemic

Nolen Gertz
University of Twente

Abstract: Covid-19 has created new opportunities for tech companies to supply the world with technological solutions intended to help individuals, communities, and nations maintain normalcy in the midst of disease, death, and destruction. Technologies include virtual meeting software, coronavirus monitoring apps, and air filtration systems. But what if the ability to technologically maintain everyday life during a pandemic is not a solution to our crisis, but is itself a crisis that we need to resolve? What if our technological resiliency is not only helping us to maintain life as it was before, but preventing us from asking whether we should maintain life as it was before? By comparing Sartre’s analysis of what it was like to live during the Nazi occupation of Paris to current attempts to live during the pandemic, this article investigates how the technological solutions that maintain ordinary life in the midst of catastrophe should lead us to question the catastrophic nature of what we take to be ordinary life.

Keywords: Covid-19; pandemic; technological resiliency; Jean-Paul Sartre

1. Introduction

Millions of people across the globe have died because of the coronavirus, and millions more have gotten seriously ill (WHO 2021). And yet the ensuing lockdown and quarantine caused by the pandemic did not become a time to stop everything so that we could assess and reflect on the global tragedy. Rather, the pandemic has been, for many, a time to use technologies to continue on as if nothing happened, to live as best as possible during, and as insulated as possible from, global tragedy.

But is the ability to technologically approximate and maintain everyday life during a pandemic a solution to our crisis, or is maintaining normalcy in the midst of a crisis itself a crisis that we have yet to recognize? Is our technological resiliency helping us to adapt to having to live during a time of death and devastation, or is it merely helping to distract us from having to face the death and devastation and thus preventing us from acting to stop it?

To try to answer these questions this paper turns to Sartre’s “Paris under the Occupation” (2005) in order to compare and contrast his descriptions of trying to live during a time of crisis with our present day attempts to live during a time of crisis.
Sartre’s essay we find an analysis of the horror of discovering the ability to live through horror, which provides an important perspective for understanding the similarities and differences between the role technologies played in maintaining everyday life during the occupation and during the pandemic. These comparisons point toward the conclusion that, while technologies have helped us to stay healthy during the pandemic, such technological resiliency is itself unhealthy.

2. Death and distraction

In order to investigate the role technologies have played in our current attempts to live normal lives during abnormal times, we should first investigate a similar such attempt, an attempt that occurred before tech companies roamed the Earth. I turn to an essay the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wrote after having lived in Paris throughout the Nazi occupation of France during the Second World War: “Paris under the Occupation.” In this paper, he tries to explain the horror of being able to get used to living during a time of horror.

Before I begin, I should address the concern that it may seem inappropriate to compare the tragedy of the Nazi occupation of Paris to the tragedy of the coronavirus pandemic. While I hope that the parallels between these two situations become clear during my analysis, it should also be noted that Sartre himself compares living under the Nazi occupation to living with a disease. Sartre compares the Nazis to parasites “living in symbiosis with us” (Sartre 2005, p. 150) since they were able to feed off of the life of their Parisian hosts. Consequently for the Parisians during the occupation it was unclear, much like it is unclear for us today during the pandemic, whether it was better to work or not to work.

Like many of us, Parisians did choose to keep working in the midst of a crisis. It was this choice that, according to Sartre, led the rest of the world to misjudge the Parisian experience of the occupation. It was the belief that Parisians had not truly suffered because of having been able to continue going about their daily lives during the occupation that Sartre was responding to in this essay (Sartre 2005, p. 137). Though the presence of Nazi soldiers anywhere and everywhere pervaded Paris with an atmosphere of terror, Sartre wanted readers to understand that “the occupation was a day-to-day thing” (2005, p. 139). Streets were emptied, windows were shuddered, and people were disappearing daily, but nevertheless life continued.

Parisians learned to live through the occupation and alongside their occupiers because, according to Sartre, there was no other choice. Sartre uses language like “biological accommodation” (Sartre 2005, p. 139) to describe how he and his fellow Parisians could not help but become accustomed to life during the occupation – as though the ability to adapt to any situation, even a military occupation, was a previously unknown, unused part of human life. As Sartre makes clear, distraction was an important element of their ability to have “lived” during the “horror” because it afforded them the opportunity of “becoming involved” in something else (Sartre 2005, p. 142). But because they were only able to distract themselves “for moments at a time” they would “always return” to themselves and to the “trauma” of the occupation.
3. Accommodation and technology

Whereas such technologies may not have existed in Sartre’s time, there are certainly numerous technologies that exist today to enable people to distractedly keep living their daily lives even in the midst of a crisis. With streaming services, video games, videoconferencing programs, and home delivery apps, it has been not only possible to stay distracted during the pandemic, it is seemingly the most normal thing to do. And thanks to these technologies such distraction could be achieved without ever having to leave one’s home. Consequently, though Sartre described the Parisians’ ability to become habituated to the occupation as “biological accommodation” (Sartre 2005, p. 139), it would perhaps be more accurate to describe our current ability to become habituated to the pandemic as technological accommodation.

This is not meant to suggest however that technologies did not play a role in the accommodation that Sartre described. Though Sartre did not explicitly reflect on the meaning of the role of technologies in the occupation, he did mention the radio and the train, and made clear that they played an important part in enabling Parisians to continue their daily lives during the occupation. The radio allowed Parisians to continue to be informed about, and stay connected to, the outside world. The train allowed Parisians to continue to get necessary supplies and to travel around France.

It is thus tempting to see parallels between the roles of the radio and of the train during the occupation to the roles of Twitter and of Amazon during the pandemic. Accordingly we should look at Sartre’s descriptions of the roles of the radio and the train in order to see whether technologically-mediated distraction during the occupation was indeed similar to technologically-mediated distraction during the pandemic. For perhaps what Sartre saw as “biological accommodation” was in fact more technological than he realized.

According to Sartre, during the occupation the radio served as a conduit for both “faith” and “indignation” (Sartre 2005, p. 147). The presence of the Nazis in France meant that it was impossible for the French to learn through the radio about impending attacks on the Nazis without at the same time learning through the radio about impending attacks on themselves (Sartre 2005, p. 147). News reports of bombings of the Nazis strengthened the bond between Parisians and their Allied saviors with whom they shared an enemy. But this could not be achieved without the radio at the same time creating a bond between Parisians and their Nazi occupiers with whom they shared a target.

The train helped to keep life going during the occupation, but also possibly helped to keep the occupation itself going. The trains served the purposes of Parisians, but also served the purposes of the Nazis, and it was thus impossible for “the railway workers, engineers, and mechanics” (Sartre 2005, p. 150) to know if their actions were helpful or harmful. It was for this reason that Sartre saw the ambiguity of the trains as symbolic of the ambiguity felt by Parisians during the occupation.

As we can see in these descriptions, the occupation gave the radio and the train new meaning by turning the use of both of these technologies into a mixed blessing. The
radio was a source of hope but was also a source of dread, making it unclear whether it was better to listen or not to listen. The train gave Parisians what they needed to survive the occupation, but it also gave the Nazis what they needed to maintain the occupation, making it unclear whether it was better for workers to keep the trains running or try to stop the trains from running.

This perhaps explains why Sartre did not see their “accommodation” as technological rather than as biological, since the technologies that could have served to distract them from the horrors of the occupation were themselves inextricably implicated in the horrors of the occupation. While using a radio or working on a train would have been done without hesitation before the occupation, during the occupation the “ambiguity” surrounding these technologies made it unclear how to act around them, hence they reflected rather than refracted the ambiguity the Parisians felt about all of their actions during the occupation. In other words, the ability of the Parisians to adapt themselves to the occupation was not helped by using these technologies. Rather, being able to continue using these technologies was one more aspect of the occupation to which the Parisians were forced to accommodate themselves.

4. Ambiguity and technology

The question that arises here then is whether the pandemic has similarly given new meaning to the technologies we use in our daily lives by similarly making the benefits and costs of their use ambiguous. There are parallels to be found, for example, between the hope/dread combination Sartre described with regards to the experience of the radio during the occupation and the experience of Facebook and Twitter during the pandemic. People turned to social media for information early in the pandemic when such information was not found often enough or fast enough through more traditional media sources like the radio or television.

Yet unlike Sartre’s unquestioned trust in radio broadcasts during the occupation, people turning to social media during the pandemic were forced to try to distinguish information from misinformation. Whereas Sartre experienced a combination of hope and dread while listening to the radio, people turning to social media were more likely to experience a further combination of ambiguous experiences such as that of being simultaneously helped and harmed by turning to Facebook (Mozes 2021) and to Twitter (Rosenberg, Syed & Rezaie 2020).

However, experiencing hope and dread, or even help and harm, while using Facebook or Twitter could be said to be an experience inherent to using either social media network (Gertz 2018) as having to distinguish information from misinformation and even from disinformation (Southwell, Thorson & Sheble 2017) is a persistent struggle for social media users that has existed long before the pandemic (Chou, Oh & Klein 2018). Thus while ambiguities concerning the benefits of using either social network were definitely made more apparent during the pandemic, these ambiguities were not created during the pandemic as they were during the occupation.

Similar to the train during the occupation, the use of Amazon during the pandemic
was fraught with ambiguities. On the one hand, it was safer to shop from home than in stores during the pandemic. On the other hand, shopping from home required putting the lives of Amazon workers in danger by making them leave the safety of their homes (Matsakis 2020). Yet, like Facebook and Twitter, ambiguities surrounded the use of Amazon since long before the pandemic. The pandemic put the lives of Amazon workers in more danger than before (Harris 2020), but to benefit from using Amazon has always come at the cost of the health and safety of Amazon’s workers.

Yet the use of technologies like Netflix and Zoom was arguably made ambiguous by the pandemic in ways that are more similar to how the radio and the train were made ambiguous by the occupation. To spend one’s time in front of a screen during the pandemic—whether by watching videos for pleasure or for work—was to spend one’s time at home rather than risk spreading the coronavirus by going outside and being with other people. But this raised the question of what it meant to be able to keep on entertaining oneself or to keep on working inside the safety of one’s home while others were not so fortunate and were instead suffering. This is indeed the very question that haunted Sartre.

The ability to continue life during the occupation as they had before created the illusion that Sartre was trying to dispel with his essay, the illusion that Parisians did not find the occupation to be so terrible. During the pandemic there has persisted a similar illusion that the coronavirus was not as deadly as first believed (Sorkin 2020; Yong 2020), an illusion which thus contributed to the prolongation of the pandemic by helping people to not take the pandemic seriously enough to follow safety measures like wearing masks or getting vaccinated (Robson 2021). As we have already seen, social media networks helped to spread this illusion. Arguably, this illusion was aided by new work arrangements where even those actively infected with covid-19 continued to work from home thanks to Zoom, giving the impression that the coronavirus was more an inconvenience than a plague.

Sartre argues that Parisians felt shame from having been able to distractedly continue going about their daily lives during the occupation. As Sartre (2005, p. 149), writes, “Thus we lived, in the poorest disarray, miserable without daring to admit it, ashamed of ourselves and disgusted by our shame.” But has such shame actually been experienced during the pandemic? Spending one’s time in a pandemic sitting passively in front of a screen could have made people feel ashamed for not doing more, especially while so many others were either suffering or were actively trying to help stop the suffering.

Of course, being able to spend one’s time staring at a screen while others less fortunate suffer was not an experience new to the pandemic. Being able to use technologies to insulate oneself from the realities of the outside world has been a privilege since well before the pandemic. It is for this reason that to complain about spending one’s time using such technologies has long been mocked as “first world problems” (Moore 2020). Hence, as was the case with Facebook, Twitter, and Amazon, it is possible here too that the pandemic caused people to feel more shame about using Netflix and Zoom, but the pandemic, unlike the occupation, was likely not the original source of such shame.
5. Conclusion

That the pandemic did not create but instead only exacerbated existing ambiguities surrounding the use of technologies in our daily lives suggests an important difference between the occupation and the pandemic. The occupation was a shock, a shock that Parisians were capable of surviving, but not without being traumatized by both the occupation and the discovery that they were capable of surviving it. Accordingly, Sartre (2005, p. 151) concludes with the plea: “Above all, we ask you to understand that the occupation was often more terrible than the war. Because in war, everyone can do his job with integrity while, in that ambiguous situation in which we found ourselves, we could neither act nor think.” In other words, Sartre wants the reader to understand that while everyone knows that “War is Hell” (Gertz 2014), for Parisians, having been able to “accommodate” themselves to the occupation and distractedly continue their daily lives during it was Purgatory.

Yet while the pandemic too was a shock in many ways, what was particularly not shocking about it was our ability to “accommodate” ourselves to it. In his aptly titled article “You Already Live in Quarantine” published at the very start of the pandemic, Ian Bogost (2020) argues that “for years, contemporary society has been bracing, and even longing, for quarantine” since, “in a way, ‘quarantine’ is just a raw, surprising name for the condition that computer technologies have brought about over the last two decades: making almost everything possible from the quiet isolation of a desk or a chair illuminated by an internet-connected laptop or tablet.” In other words, to stay at home as much as possible, to avoid contact with other people as much as possible, and to stare at screens as much as possible, were all activities being engaged in and being normalized well before the pandemic began.

We can now see that asking what it means that we have been able to technologically accommodate ourselves to the pandemic is to mistakenly treat the pandemic as something to which we had to technologically accommodate ourselves. As we have discovered, and as Bogost (2020) helps to make clear, we were already in quarantine before we were in quarantine. The pandemic was an opportunity to test and to expand our already existing technological resiliency rather than a crisis like the occupation which would have caused us to discover such resiliency.

But this conclusion still does not answer the vital question of whether technological resiliency, even if it helped us to stay healthy during the pandemic, is itself healthy. If we understand health to be concerned with more than bare survival, to be concerned with the quality of life as well as the quantity of life, then it would seem that technological resiliency is not only unhealthy but is a threat to our health. Hannah Arendt (2005), for example, argued that though psychology could help people to feel better and thus contribute to their mental health, psychology could also be helping to create the very conditions that threaten mental health by leading us to focus more on ourselves and less on the world. Arendt feared that psychology was contributing to the “worldlessness” that she saw spreading due to the rise of individualism that led us to replace political concerns with psychological concerns and to try to “accommodate” ourselves to the world rather than try to change it (Gertz 2019).
What should concern us here then about the pandemic is not, as was the case with the occupation, the collective horror of being able to live through a collective horror. Rather what should concern us is our lack of collective horror. For it seems that what would truly shock us today is not the threat of millions losing their lives, but the threat of any one of us losing our internet connection. Technological resiliency certainly helped to save lives by allowing so many of us to not have to risk putting our lives in danger, but if we were already so well prepared for the pandemic because we had already moved so much of our lives indoors and online, then we need to question the nature of the “life” that such technological resiliency enables and perpetuates.

References


