Understanding Freedom in the Age of Machines: What Does It Mean to Be Digitally Free?

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Abstract

The 21st century has ushered in a spate of disruptive digital technologies that are enabling us to exercise our freedoms in new ways. But with these new freedoms come new challenges, new ways in which these technologies are actually making us *unfree*, and we still don't have a full picture of what that means. So how are we to engage with these technologies in the meantime? I will not suggest that we get rid of them, but I will explore the idea that we can exercise our freedoms not only by using these technologies but also by choosing *not* to use them. But that in turn raises a new question, namely: What exactly is this negative freedom from digital technologies, and how plausibly can we exercise it? In exploring this question, I consider the language of rights that has been used to articulate this negative freedom—with a focus on the rights set forth in data-protection, labour, and administrative law—suggesting that while these rights are far from the perfect tool for exercising our freedom from digital technologies, they nonetheless can go a long way toward that end.

1. Introduction

Freedom, understood in the positive and negative sense of this "porous" term (Berlin 2002), is something that humans have always cherished, protected, and fought for. Freedom has always been understood in a variety of ways and has shifted its meaning depending on the historical, social, economic, or legal context and culture. However, we have long understood freedom to be essential to human dignity, autonomy, and free will, balancing it against the freedoms and rights of others and protecting it from encroachment by public authorities and regimes.

The 20th century saw the rise of broadcast technologies, such as the telephone, radio, and television, and the spread of information and communications technologies (ICTs), all of which are considered to be "technologies of freedom" (de Sola Pool 1983, 226), in that they enabled humanity to exercise many of its freedoms with greater ease and speed and in new ways. With ICTs in particular, our freedoms took a digital form, amplifying our ability to participate in our communities, express our ideas and thoughts, practice our religions, and receive and impart information—all freedoms brought to the parallel reality of the World Wide Web, where at the turn of the century social networks seized the digital space and gained a massive power to influence these freedoms and shape the ways in which they are perceived, understood, and practiced.

In the 21st century, we are seeing these freedom-shaping dynamics evolve in tandem with the advance of disruptive technologies that are giving rise to even newer and more disruptive versions of themselves. How these technologies will affect our freedoms is yet to be seen. But one thing is clear, which is that we exercise our freedoms not only by using these technologies—the internet and all the media platforms, social networks, and apps that depend on it—but also when we choose *not* to use them, or at least when we use them selectively rather than indiscriminately.

This paper is about such an understanding of freedom—a freedom from digital technologies and virtual environments and the internet as their backbone. And the question here is whether, and if

so to what extent, this freedom is real and feasible or whether, paraphrasing Dorrestijn (2012, 22), we are too dependent on digital technology to suppose we can do without it. We can break this question down into more specific questions: Are we free not to use a smartphone, or are these devices necessary, are they an extension of human body (Sup Park and Kaye 2018) that is inseparable from the human being? Are we free to ask for human intervention when subject to automated decision-making? Are we free not to join a social network? Can we exist without being connected to the internet and still enjoy all the rights and government entitlements we have as citizens or even as residents within a jurisdiction? Can we exist and access products and services without a smartphone?

Freedom from digital technologies is not science fiction. This freedom has been articulated in a variety of ways, not least through the language of rights. In this paper, I look at some of these rights and argue that embodied in them is a particular form of freedom from digital technologies—a freedom we are still willing to protect. I call this particular form a rights-based approach to freedom from digital technologies. The examples that illustrate this approach all come from public law: (a) privacy and personal data protection, (b) labour law, and (c) administrative law.

In what follows, I will outline the idea of freedom from digital technologies in greater detail and will then turn to the three case studies just mentioned, illustrating how freedom from digital technologies can be understood through the lens of these rights and whether this freedom exists in the first place. I conclude the paper with a few insights and further ideas for further research.

But before we begin, I should point out that is not a paper against digital freedoms or the use of digital technology. It is a discussion of human freedom understood in the broad sense as the freedom to choose how we want to live our lives and pursue our happiness without encroaching on the ability of others to do the same, where the question is at once factual and normative: We want to know whether this is still possible without relying on digital technologies and whether we should *want* to avoid these technologies, such as smartphones, as tools with which to go about the daily business of life and even to pursue our life's endeavours consistently with the right of others to do the same.

1. Freedom from Digital Technologies

Before looking at the specific rights codified in the law that support the claim that there exists a freedom from digital technologies, it is worth considering the very idea of that freedom: This is freedom in a *negative* sense, as distinguished from freedom in a *positive* sense, or, in the words of Isaiah Berlin (2002), a *freedom from* doing something, as opposed to a *freedom to* do something.

The negative sense—freedom from—is concerned with the question, "What is the area within which the subject—a person or group of persons—is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?" (Berlin 2002, 169). The positive sense—freedom to—is instead concerned with the question, "What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?" (ibid). In other words, we are free in the negative sense wherever we have a space within which we can act freely without interference, whether this inference comes from other people or from the government. But when we decide to actually do something within that space, then we are exercising our positive freedom, in which case we are the source of our own agency.

If we apply that distinction to the discussion at hand, we have it that our negative freedom from digital technologies is a freedom from the interference that these technologies can exert in limiting us in how we choose to exist or behave. So, taking our cue from Berlin, we ask: What is the space within which someone is free to be and exist without digital inference from others, be it the state, a business or corporate entity, or any other individual?

The answer to this question is that, while this space where digital interference is not allowed is a very small one, it nonetheless exists as a space we can be free from automated decision-making

(including profiling) that affects us individually; we can exercise a right not to be asked by employers, colleagues, or clients to work for them outside our working hours; and we can interface with the government without having to go through a digital channel. It is true that that is not much, but it is something and better than nothing at all.

In what follows, we will move into this space of freedom by introducing a rights-based approach to freedom from digital technologies. Indeed, rights are often the articulation or specification of certain freedoms, so much so that the two terms are often used interchangeably. So let us see how this freedom from digital technologies can be expressed by way of rights in different areas of public law.

2. A Rights-Based Approach to Freedom from Digital Technologies

On a rights-based approach to freedom from digital technologies, this freedom is articulated through a set of rights that explain different aspects of this freedom and also helps us to clarify what kind of freedom this is.

To be sure, these rights are a limited set, and we are removing them from their original context. But in giving them a new context, we can see them in a different light and extract from their applications and meanings that may not otherwise be considered.

The rights described in the following sections each give us a way to articulate freedom from digital technologies: In the case of privacy and personal data protection, this freedom is articulated through the lens of the right to object to decision-making (including profiling) that affects us as individuals; in the case of labour law, this freedom is articulated through the right to disconnect; and in the case of administrative law, we have a right to interact with the government without going through digital means—this too is a way to ensure freedom from digital technologies, and though it may be a weak and imperfect right, it nonetheless exists.

We can now go through each of these rights and consider what they mean for our freedom from digital technologies. But we will not go into too much detail, the point being to elucidate, for each of these rights, what their spirit or core meaning is and to use this as a basis for arguing that these rights, however imperfect they may be in this role, are fundamental to protecting this freedom in our digital, data-driven, and algorithmic societies.

2.1. Privacy and Personal Data Protection: The Right Not to Be Subject to Automated Decision-Making, Including Profiling

When it comes to privacy and personal data protection, the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) sets limits to the use of automation and profiling in making decisions that affect people individually (Art. 22 GDPR). It does so by giving the individuals concerned (the data subjects) the right to object to these decisions if they are based solely on automated processing that gives rise to legal effects or otherwise affects someone in any significant way.[1]

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[1]The full text reads as follows:
"1. The data subject shall have the right not to be subject to a decision based solely on automated processing, including profiling, which produces legal effects concerning him or her or similarly significantly affects him or her.
2. Paragraph 1 shall not apply if the decision:
(a) is necessary for entering into, or performance of, a contract between the data subject and a data controller;

In light of our freedom from digital technologies, then, this legal norm enables us to object to automated decision-making: It enables us to be free from being processed by algorithmic means that can have an impact on us as individuals. This right can accordingly be construed as giving us a freedom from nonhuman decision-making and a freedom from being data *objects* (objects of data processing) rather than data *subjects*— persons about whom data has been collected or can be collected, but in a way that is consistent with their ability to make their own decisions. That is to say, even if we exist online and have left digital traces of our existence, and even if there are digital records that public or private entities have about us, this doesn't mean that this data should therefore be used to make decisions about us that we may not be aware of and that may even be contrary to our interests. This also means that, as data subjects, we should be able to interact with others not just as digital entities but also as real persons engaging with other human beings, even if these other persons may be part of a system and may be accordingly biased.

In addition, this right also affords freedom from being passively processed by means that other persons or institutions may use in making decisions they may want to avoid making personally. This right to object is, therefore, a right to maintain an active role in decision-making, giving us the ability to safeguard our personal interests and not be reduced to datasets—to boxes of data that can be moved, opened, closed, discarded, or stored along with other data boxes for any future use.

In this sense, then, freedom from digital technologies empowers individuals and protects them from attempts to channel their behaviour and indeed, the course of their lives through digital means: It enables us to preserve our identity and maintain an awareness whenever decisions are made that have consequences on our lives.

However, this freedom from digital technologies exists only when the decision-making is automated, that is, only when no human being is directly involved in making these decisions about us, even if human decision-makers may use automated means in making these decisions, whether to expedite the decision-making process or because they are required to do so under the internal policies of the organization they are working for. So when our freedom from digital technologies is articulated through the right to object to automated decision-making, it does not free us from automated decision-making but simply applies some procedural "makeup" to mask the fact that even if we can stop automated-decision making, including profiling, that doesn't mean that human decision makers or supervisors will not resort to automated decision-making in making a human decision. In this sense the human supervisor can be seen as serving to legitimize automated decision-making without actually ensuring the right to object to such decision-making.

Even so, this critique should not detract from the fact that under the law it is one thing for decision-making affecting human lives to be *fully* automated and another for it to be done by *humans* using tools of automation. And even if it is only under the former scenario that we have a right to object to automated decision-making, this is still a right that gives us some form of human control over the processes that have consequences on the ways in which we can live our lives.

(b) is authorised by Union or Member State law to which the controller is subject and which also lays down suitable measures to safeguard the data subject's rights and freedoms and legitimate interests; or is based on the data subject's explicit consent.

3. In the cases referred to in points (a) and (c) of paragraph 2, the data controller shall implement suitable measures to safeguard the data subject's rights and freedoms and legitimate interests, at least the right to obtain human intervention on the part of the controller, to express his or her point of view and to contest the decision.

4. Decisions referred to in paragraph 2 shall not be based on special categories of personal data referred to in Article 9(1), unless point (a) or (g) of Article 9(2) applies and suitable measures to safeguard the data subject's rights and freedoms and legitimate interests are in place."

In the next section, we turn to another right that gives us freedom from digital technologies—a right that frees workers and employees from digital interference at the hands of employers and the workplace generally outside the frame of regular workday hours.

2.2. Labour Law: The Right to Disconnect

In labour law, freedom from digital technologies is embodied in the recently introduced right to disconnect, which the European Observatory of Working Rights defines as "a worker's right to be able to disengage from work and refrain from engaging in work-related electronic communications, such as emails or other messages, during non-work hours."[2]

Although there is no EU normative act under which this right is established, many Member States have codified it in their national labour law as a right that all employees enjoy regardless their position within the organization.[3] Indeed, this is a very important aspect of this new right: At least in Spain, it applies to anyone who belongs to a company or organization at any level, from the top executives down to the regular employee.

The idea behind this right—under which workers can request not to receive work-related communications outside regular or contractually agreed working hours—is to guarantee an environment in which a healthy work-life balance can be maintained.

Furthermore, the law also requires companies to adopt specific measures to make this a genuine right rather than one that is only good on paper. Indeed, different best practices are being developed and shared publicly. These include using templates for "out of office" emails, asking employees to only attend meetings where they will have an active role, and invite everyone to send work emails to colleagues only during working hours (and expecting a response the next day, rather than immediately, if the email is sent just before the end of the working day) (WRC 2018).

But this right can be interpreted in a broader sense, for it applies not just to email but to all means of digital communication that can be used for work (such as texting or any instant messaging, videoconferencing, or collaborative software). It, therefore, applies across the board, reframing the employment relationship by keeping it within the bounds of the working day, in effect saying that employees are entitled to a nonworking life that they a free to enjoy without intrusion and without having to fear reprisals from an employer, as by being demoted, for failing to be fully committed to the company.

Of course, this right raises a range of issues. For example, it does not apply to independent contractors and freelancers generally—which is a significant and increasing share of the working population. And even *within* the employment relationship narrowly defined, some employees are paid not by the number of hours clocked in *at* work or *for* work but on a performance basis, that is, on the basis of their productivity or the results they achieve. And when these results are measured by customer satisfaction, requiring employees to interact with customers or clients, they may not be aware that the company or organization whose services or products they are paying for has a right-to-disconnect policy in place. But this is a longer and more involved discussion that distracts us from the main question here, which is: How effective is this right to disconnect in supporting our freedom from digital technologies? There are two sides to this question: one conceptual, the other empirical. On the conceptual side, we should note that the right to disconnect is definitionally close kin to freedom from digital technologies, for it is specifically designed as a basis on which that freedom can be exercised when the source that may impinge on the same freedom (the source of interference) is an employer, a colleague,

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[2] EurWORK (European Observatory of Working Life), "Right to Disconnect," https://bit.ly/eurofound-right-to-disconnect, 1 December 2021.

[3] France was the first European country to implement this right, but it has since been implemented in several other Member States, including Germany, Portugal, and Spain

or the work environment generally. In this sense, the right to disconnect can be understood as a straightforward application of freedom from digital technologies, giving employees the option not to be constantly on call, ready to respond to any work-related request from their employers at any time. Indeed, as mentioned, the point of this right is precisely to ensure that employers will not encroach on their employees' personal life and leisure time. But this takes us to the empirical side of the question, for we have to ask how likely this scenario is in practice. We clearly need more experience with this right to make such an assessment, but at least it exists as a tool, and one that can be *directly* applied to support freedom from digital technologies outside the workplace or the working day, without having to be repurposed to that end.

As a direct tool for guaranteeing freedom from digital technologies, the right to disconnect can therefore be said to stand as a robust right in the current landscape. But lest we should place too much weight on this right—in view of its limitations (its restricted scope) and the challenges of putting it into practice—let us turn to the third right that could be put to use in securing freedom from digital technologies, one that is likewise specifically designed for that purpose, but which is likewise limited and equally hampered when it comes to its practical application.

2.3. Administrative Law: The Right Not to Interact Digitally with Government Agencies

In administrative law, freedom from digital technologies is expressed in national frameworks. In Spain, it is contained in Law 39/2015 on the Common Administrative Procedure for Public Sector Bodies, and in particular in Article 14, titled "Right and Obligation to Interact Electronically with Public Sector Bodies." To be sure, this is not an unconditional right, as we can appreciate from its wording,[4] but it does give citizens or anyone having to interact with a government agency the ability to do so without having to use digital technologies. The idea behind this right is not so much to enable people to enjoy freedom from digital technologies per se, in its own right, as it is to make it as easy as possible to interact with the government in such a way that no one is left out. The concern arises because not everyone is a digital native or is digitally literate, and some people may not even have access to the digital technology required to interact with the government's administrative apparatus. So this is a democratizing right designed for equal access to government services and for inclusion rather than a right designed to enable people in the digital society to *opt out* of that society, that is, to exit a social world they are already part of, having the skills and resources needed to engage with it.

In this sense, the right not to interact digitally with government agencies can be thought of as the mirror image of the right to disconnect previously considered: While the latter is about choosing to *disengage* from a social world—from the reach of the digitally extended workplace environment—the former is about giving people the ability to *engage* with one, that is, with the government and its agencies. In Berlin's framing of the idea of liberty, the latter right supports a freedom from a source of interference (the employer's digital tentacles), while the latter supports freedom to interact with a source (with the government).

This, incidentally, highlights a curious aspect of the right not to interact digitally with the government. For in Berlin's analysis this right supports a *positive* freedom (its point being to ensure access to the state, and thus the ability to interact with it), but it does so using language that frames this freedom in the negative (a right *not* to interact digitally). And we can explain

[4] "When natural persons interface with a public sector body in order to exercise a right or fulfil an obligation, they may choose whether or not they wish this interaction to happen through electronic means, *but only so long as the public sector body in question does not specifically require them to use electronic means. At any time, the public sector body may change the means a natural person has chosen for interacting with it*" (italics added; my translation). Ley 39/2015, de 1 de octubre, del Procedimiento Administrativo Común de las Administraciones Públicas. *Boletín Oficial del Estado* (BOE), no. 236, 2 Oct. 2015. Entered into force on 2 Oct. 2016. Artículo 14(1), "Derecho y obligación de relacionarse electrónicamente con las Administraciones Públicas." The original text at https://bit.ly/ley39-2015-BOE236-art14.

that peculiarity if we assume, as we are assuming, that our communication with any organization, and so with the government, is by default digital or uses digital means. What was once the rule, then— namely, nondigital communication—is now the exception. Hence the need for negative language (a right *not* to interact digitally) in order to carve out an exception (traditional or analog communication) that is designed not to exclude people (those who choose this kind of communication) but to include them, securing for them an ability to enjoy a positive freedom that others can already enjoy.

At the same time, what this logic of inclusion underscores is that the default mode of communication we take for granted—namely, digital communication, making it necessary to carve out an (inclusive) exception to enable nondigital communication—may not be something we should take for granted, after all. What it underscores, in other words, is the reality of the digital divide, even within the EU. Thus, if we look at the statistical data, we will discover that only 20% of Greek households, for example, are connected to the internet, and the rural population is almost completely disconnected (Alexander 2023). The right not to interact digitally with the government can in this sense be understood as an inclusive right meant to address a socioeconomic inequality, highlighting the need to reject the idea of digital communication as the standard and only way for citizens to interact with the state.

In this regard, Chisnall (2020, 498) speaks of digital slavery, arguing as follows, particularly as concerns the public sector:

> In dealing with an online government digital decision-making system, the citizen cannot see the overall logic of the system and the assumptions it makes. She simply must go along with "the way it thinks." If the process of self-realisation through appropriation is the opposite to alienation from self, then such systems […] are systems that induce alienation from self, and, in that sense, can be seen as an "enslaving" technology. What I refer to as digital slavery occurs in the alienation of users from themselves, enabled by access to data associated with their identity and preferences. As in chattel slavery, the harm is not so much in the slave's abstract legal status of being "owned" but in the implications of this; i.e. the inability to think, decide and act on one's own volition, and to be enslaved by "chains," rewards and punishment.

This adds one more layer of depth to the logic behind the need to enable citizens to interact with the government using nondigital means of communication: This is not just about ensuring greater access to government services or making it easier to comply with one's legal obligations; it is also about freeing citizens from a form of slavery—
namely, digital slavery—in such a way as to empower them as human beings vis-à-vis the government's administrative apparatus, that is, in such a way as to give them an agency they would otherwise not have.

3. Conclusions

In this paper I have addressed the idea of freedom from digital technologies broadly construed, meaning that this is not a freedom from specific technologies but rather a freedom from any interaction or communication enabled by way of digital networks or by way of digital tools such as algorithms (in the case of automated decision-making).

I have articulated this right through three rights that have been recognised within the EU: the first right is the right to object to automated decision-making (a fundamental right in the area of privacy and personal data protection); the second is the right to disconnect (in the area of labour law); and the third is the right not to interact through digital means with government agencies (in the area of administrative law).

In analyzing these three rights and their impact on the idea of freedom from digital technologies, the conclusion was reached that these rights contribute to keeping this freedom alive, even if not

in the best of ways. Indeed, the right to object to automated decision-making appears to rest on a questionable assumption, namely, that when a human being becomes involved in decision-making, the decision is better. This assumption is fallacious: Humans do not necessarily make better decisions, and their involvement in the process does not necessarily mean that the automated decision will be corrected or reviewed. Furthermore, the right to object does not free the person from being processed by digital technologies, nor does it pretend to do that: It merely gives the illusion that one is not just being processed by digital technologies (as by profiling algorithms), but that these algorithms are supervised by a human being. Therefore, by bringing a human into the equation, thereby making it possible to put guardrails in the process of individualized automated decision-making, this right suggests a greater degree of control over these processes than we can actually exercise.

In the second case—the right to disconnect—freedom from digital technologies is guaranteed within the scope of the working day and within the framework of the employment relationship. So, while this right is directly aimed at preventing workplace digital technologies from encroaching on our personal sphere, and is thus most pertinent as a tool for freeing us from such technologies, it is limited in two ways, for it only applies to the regular workday hours and can only be asserted by employees. It, therefore, cannot be held up as an effective and comprehensive solution to the problem of the digital inroads that work generally can make into our personal lives: It is more like a temporary leave that employees can take between shifts, nor does it address the way these shifts or working hours are assigned.

The third right—the right not to interact digitally with government agencies—gives citizens the option to interact with these agencies in person. Like the right to disconnect, however, it is limited in scope because it does not apply to our interactions with nongovernmental organizations. Nor is this an unconditional right, for it does not ensure that *all* interactions with the government can at *all* times be nondigital. And this is a serious limitation, for if this is a discretionary right (more like a privilege granted by the government) and is not comprehensive, it does little to address the problem of the digital divide and of digital slavery, both of which undercut the ability of citizens to exercise human agency.

It is difficult to put these three rights together and see what kind of narrative they weave together. The right to disconnect means that we have a freedom from digital technologies in what concerns our employment, whereas the right not to interact with the government through digital means in a way says the opposite thing, namely, that we do *not* have to enter the digital space to interact the government. In other words, while as employees, we are obliged to be digitally connected to our work during regular working hours, as citizens, we are *not* obliged to interact with the state in the digital space. And in any case, whether in the private or public sector, we have a right not to agree to automated decision-making if that is the only tool in a decision-making process that affects us individually.

Aside from arguing that this freedom from digital technologies exists in a very rudimentary form, my aim is also to stimulate the debate and ask whether we should talk about this freedom in the first place. We usually frame our debates on rights and freedoms in the digital sphere in terms of rights and obligations, taking it for granted that we have no option but to exist in the digital space in addition to existing in the nondigital space of interaction with other persons and with organizations, whether public or private. My argument is different: I ask whether we should have a choice about whether to exist digitally. This may sound like an existential question (or a digitally existential one), yet it goes to the very essence of freedom as a human choice to be or to participate in any human community. This question will become increasingly more pressing the more the digital space expands—not least thanks to advancements in virtual reality and the metaverse—threatening to take over or at least chip away at the physical space.

There are many other related questions that need to be addressed, and the puzzle I have attempted to piece together in this discussion could be more complex in helping us build a clearer picture of our freedom from digital technologies. It may not even be enough to argue that such a freedom exists in the first place, but my aim is to argue that it does and should.

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