WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC:
A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Organização das Nações Unidas para a Educação, a Ciência e a Cultura

Universidade de Coimbra – Alta e Sofia inscrita na Lista do Património Mundial em 2013

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TECHNOLOGY

Tiago Santos Pereira

Combined with continued research activity, the inventive spirit ensures that new technologies are constantly being developed in the search for technology-based solutions to existing problems or in opening doors to new challenges not previously imagined. Advances in health or new communication technologies are excellent examples of this. Combined with an entrepreneurial spirit, established companies or public welfare initiatives, technology can thus develop successfully, achieving faster diffusion. However, the market exploits its novelty faster than it questions its impacts. Technology is not always a solution to an existing problem; sometimes it creates new needs. The development of digital social networks is an example of this – it was quickly adopted without imagining what its effects might be. In other cases, the benefits to some bring harm to others, e.g. invading the private sphere or causing collective damage, as in the case of environmental damage. What is at stake here is society's ability to influence the direction, adoption or consequences of new technologies.

The alternative is clear enough: we need spaces, both formal and informal, to foster the debate around new technologies and their impacts. Technology is often seen as an inexorable symbol of progress to which society must adapt as it seeks to maximise its benefits, without being aware of the limitation we thus impose on ourselves. We rarely think the opposite – shaping, adapting, or limiting technology. The debate around and assessment of technology is thus essential not only to recognise that technology and society shape and co-produce each other, but also to help us reflect upon what kind of societies we want to be, what problems we define as central, and what options we should consider or promote. The inventive spirit is not only visible when a solution is proposed; it is also evident when we develop alternative solutions. The entrepreneurial spirit, described by Schumpeter, is not only present when it brings solutions to the market; it is also evident when it brings solutions to people and to the problems that societies face. That is the big challenge.

Sheila Jasanoff calls for the development of "technologies of humility", methods that seek to deal with the uncertainty associated with new technologies and their impacts by promoting the participation of citizens, experts, public decision-makers and other stakeholders. In several countries, parliament-based institutions promote these technology assessment processes. Based on free, open and critical debate, informed by the knowledge and experience of each participant, these processes have a goal that is central to an informed democracy: to imagine various paths for a collective future.