Europe’s digital cities are changing what it means to be human

The rise of new technology means European cities are increasingly “digital cities”. But is this shift changing what it means to be human? **Myria Georgiou** *and* **Sindhoora Pemmaraju** *discuss the implications of the “technologisation” of our cities and explain why Myria Georgiou’s new book Being Human in Digital Cities offers a toolkit for navigating new technologies without giving up our humanity.*

A 15-year-old Iraqi refugee in Athens speaks with uncontainable enthusiasm about his discovery of the city. The pocket-sized technology he carries everywhere, his smartphone, comes with increased confidence, as he doesn’t require anyone’s assistance to do what he wants, to go where he wants. Google Maps is all he needs.

Google Maps navigation is familiar to most of us, a way to discover a new city. Yet, for some, this autonomy is much more than an exploration of an unknown place. For this teenager, as with many other migrants, a smartphone might mean avoiding humiliation, even racism, as this precious pocketsize technology can offer access to vital information, reducing dependence on others who might be indifferent or even hostile. This teenage boy appreciates his phone as, effectively, it allows him to live and explore the city with autonomy and dignity – states of being that we all need to become human.

Digital cities

As shown in a new book, *Being Human in Digital Cities*, European cities are now technologised. Their digital infrastructures – 5G, WIFI, and fibreoptic networks – open up enormous opportunities for communication and connection.

They enable access to tools and skills for living with dignity to many of those pushed to the margins through dehumanising urban conditions such as poverty, racism and urban divisions. With a smartphone at hand, someone like the young man above gains a sense of independence and belonging to the city. Paradoxically, however, these are the same technologies that constrain freedoms, especially as they are, at the same time, tools for

connection and systems for surveillance and control.

This paradoxical role of digitisation in European cities generates an important question: *if so much of what we do and know about the city depends on smartphones, networks, and digital infrastructures, how do we become human in the increasingly technologised environments where we live?*

While conducting research across European cities, we heard many people expressing awareness of their smartphones' contradictory functions. This is a technology of connection with loved ones and an important tool for gaining access to information about work, housing and education. However, it is also much more than a communication technology.

Many know that, at any time, smartphones can be used by authorities and corporations to extract data and to monitor who they speak to and what they speak about. It is technology that can suddenly make their sense of security and privacy uncertain. The digital city is at the same time a site of humanisation and dehumanisation.

Popular humanism

European cities, such as Athens, Berlin and London, represent different incarnations of digital cities. Some European cities have established or are evolving digital economies – as is the case in London and Berlin respectively. Others aspire to achieve this status, such as Athens. In their differences, European digital cities have something in common: their technological makeup cannot be separated from the ways the city is claimed as a site of belonging, security and freedom. Ultimately, what we see across Europe, albeit very differently, are cities that are changing through digital technologies. And with them so are their humans.

An important observation across Europe is the growing emphasis now put on a human-centric vision of digital futures. For example, Eurocities, the largest network of European cities, centres its agenda for urban digital futures on people. This moves beyond the technocentric and technocratic frames of digital change, embracing a human-centric conception of digital urban transformation. More and more, we see policy and corporate strategic narratives of the need to invest in technologies in the name of humanity, sustainability and democracy. This is what we could call a *popular humanism*.

Demotic humanism

Cities are not only shaped by those in power however but also by those occupying their streets and neighbourhoods. While decision-makers might have specific strategies of change, with cities and people promised freedom and democracy via technological pathways, urban humans engage with technologies tactically and in contradictory ways.

What we often see is that digitisation is sought after to sustain continuity, not change. A striking example is that of mutual aid groups, which exploded in numbers across British urban neighbourhoods during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Thousands of mutual aid groups across British cities used the simple functionalities of social media to develop horizontal and effective networks of support among neighbours in what we could call an example of *demotic humanism.* This was a humanism emerging as an ordinary and often contradictory attempt among urban humans to sustain community and achieve solidarity in conditions of crisis.

Demotic humanism, in this case, as in others, proved to be contradictory. In the midst of the lockdowns, the language of mutual aid, once a staple of anarchism, became a demotic, shared discourse, enacted through an ethos of horizontal and collective action. But this activism was also marked by liminality – a key aspect of our digital lives. Liminality points to how everything is temporary and ephemeral.

Consider how a new trend pops up every few days, is critiqued, made into memes, studied, pulled apart and then put back together before something new captures people's attention again. What happens when this logic of liminality is applied to digital activism? How is this connected to how we navigate our cities? Many of the same groups that momentarily enacted community across class and racial divisions soon transformed into sites of middle-class urban identification, with those more active sharing, not solidarity, but sourdough recipes and gardening advice.

A better future

And so, while technology can empower, we need to reconsider what this empowerment means in terms of its liminality and in the larger context of digitisation of urban spaces, where this empowerment is mainly taking place. While individual and collective acts of solidarity are examples of how humans, at the demotic level, resist the digital order, their

liminality is a persistent problem.

We need a more sustainable model of resistance, a long-lasting one – a *critical humanism.* A critical humanist perspective would involve rebuilding what the word "human" means from a decolonised, feminist standpoint and recentring a politics of care and enduring solidarity. A host of organisations and groups are working to protect digital rights and promise a better future – as the digital order does – but one rooted in democratic digital cultures. By allowing different perspectives on what this "better future" means, we can ensure power remains decentralised and resistance can thrive in plurality.

For more information, see Myria Georgiou's new book Being Human in Digital Cities and the accompanying LSE event.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: Rawpixel.com / Shutterstock.com

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