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Mediating Knowledge: Power in the Digital Era[1]

Mohadeseh Vahidimehr[1], Abolfazl Davodiroknabadi[2] ✉, Mahsa Khoie[3], Aliakbar Jahangard[4]

1. Department of Art Research, Ki.C., Islamic Azad University, Kish, Iran. E-mail: mohadeseh.vahidimehr86@gmail.com
2. Corresponding author, Department of Design and Clothing, Ya.C., Islamic Azad University, Yazd, Iran. E-mail: davodi@iauyazd.ac.ir
3. Department of Art Research, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: mahsakhoie@gmail.com
4. Department of Art and Architecture, Shi.C., Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran. E-mail: ali.jahangard@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary institutions of power increasingly operate through subtle, technology-mediated mechanisms. Drawing on Michel Foucault's conception of the reciprocal relationship between knowledge and power, this study examines the role of digital objects as epistemic instruments within such power structures. Following Don Ihde's framework, technologies are understood as non-neutral mediators that shape and sustain "structures of meaning."

This study addresses two central questions: To what extent do tools and technologies shape human understanding of existence? And how do digital objects, as material mediators, function within mechanisms of power to produce, regulate, and perpetuate meaning?

Employing a phenomenological methodology, this research explores lived experiences, focusing on how digital platforms, smartphones, augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and search engines embed users within pervasive networks of influence. Findings indicate that digital technologies simultaneously generate knowledge, structure meaning, and subtly guide voluntary compliance with algorithmic norms. This underscores the continuous interplay between knowledge production and surveillance in the digital era.

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Introduction

Institutions of power have existed alongside human societies since their inception, functioning primarily through mechanisms of surveillance and control. Modernity, however, introduced a decisive transformation: power ceased to be exercised solely through visibility and increasingly operated through invisibility. Michel Foucault situates the vitality of power in its constitutive relation with knowledge. This knowledge/power nexus produces forms of domination that are diffuse, decentralized, and embedded within everyday practices. As disciplinary regimes give way to bio political and techno scientific modes of governance, power becomes progressively entwined with technological mediations of knowledge.

In the philosophy of technology, Don Ihde conceptualizes artifacts and technologies as epistemic instruments—tools that actively shape human understanding of the world. While articulated in different terms, Ihde's claim resonates with Foucault's assertion regarding the productivity of knowledge/power. This conceptual convergence forms the foundation for the present inquiry. One of the most significant consequences of contemporary techno science is the ubiquity of digital objects in daily life. Their epistemic function extends beyond narrowly "digital" concerns: they mediate perception, shape ontological horizons, and structure patterns of cognition and behavior. Digital artifacts are therefore not neutral; they actively participate in the constitution of subjectivity.

This paper analyzes institutions of power through a Foucauldian lens while integrating Ihde's account of the epistemic role of technology. By adopting a phenomenological approach to digital artifacts situated within the knowledge/power nexus, this study offers a reciprocal understanding of institutional power and technological mediation in the digital age. The central question explored is how digital technologies, as epistemic instruments, function in the service of power.

Literature Review

The epistemic configurations of the digital age have been examined from a variety of perspectives. Mackenzie and Bhatt (2021) investigate what they term the "epistemology of deception" in the post-digital condition. Their study explores how digital platforms and algorithmic infrastructures intervene in human perceptual and cognitive systems to manipulate beliefs. They argue that post-digital deception extends beyond individual misperception, manifesting within broader formations of algorithmic governance, including the emergence of states and the mobilization of social movements.

Turner (2022) approaches digital epistemology through the lens of augmented reality. He identifies three epistemic pathologies of the digital environment—digital distraction, digital deception, and digital divergence—before conducting a phenomenological analysis of how augmented reality both intensifies and reconfigures these conditions. In his account, augmented

reality exemplifies techno scientific mediation, reshaping the constitution of knowledge and experience.

Schwarzenegger (2020) examines digital epistemology from the perspective of media practices. Drawing on forty-nine qualitative interviews, he analyzes how users engage with media, seek information, and position themselves vis-à-vis algorithms, robots, alternative media, and filtering mechanisms. His study introduces three conceptual frames—selective critique, pragmatic trust, and competence trust—through which digital subjects negotiate epistemic authority within technologically mediated environments.

Risse (2021), in *The Fourth Generation of Human Rights: Epistemic Rights in the Digital World*, addresses the normative dimensions of digital epistemology. He contrasts China's extensive data collection and algorithmic scoring practices with the relative inertia of Western democracies, arguing that epistemic rights have not kept pace with the techno political realities of algorithmic governance. Risse further contends that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drafted in an analog era, requires reinterpretation to retain normative relevance in a digitally saturated world.

Despite these important contributions, digital epistemology remains an emergent field with many unexplored dimensions. This study advances the debate by focusing on digital objects as epistemic instruments. Far from neutral or passive, such artifacts actively participate in shaping digital subjectivity and may simultaneously consolidate institutional power within contemporary techno scientific regimes.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual foundation of this study rests on Michel Foucault's theorization of power, particularly his analysis of institutions and the reciprocal dynamics of the knowledge–power nexus. In the Foucauldian framework, power is not centralized but dispersed, fluid, and constitutively linked with epistemic practices.

To address the epistemic role of digital objects, this study also draws on Don Ihde's philosophy of technology, which emphasizes the epistemic productivity of technological mediation. For Ihde, technologies are not neutral instruments; they function as active mediators that shape the horizons of human perception, interpretation, and understanding. This theoretical alignment positions digital artifacts as epistemic instruments that simultaneously contribute to the constitution of knowledge and reinforce configurations of power.

Research Methodology

This study employs a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology begins from the premise that objects do not exist as independent entities in an external world but manifest meaningfully only through human consciousness. Its primary aim is to describe lived experience as it unfolds

within the lifeworld of social actors. From this perspective, experiences are not merely subjective impressions; they constitute the very structures through which phenomena acquire meaning.

Phenomenology thus analyzes phenomena as they are embodied, interpreted, and mediated in human existence. Applied to digital objects, this methodology allows for a detailed investigation of how such artifacts, as epistemic mediators, shape the constitution of meaning, subjectivity, and social reality in the digital age.

Power

Michel Foucault conceives of power as a fluid and ubiquitous force embedded within social life, one that regulates, classifies, and shapes individuals. Power, he argues, operates inextricably through knowledge, forming what is commonly referred to as the knowledge–power nexus. In modern societies, power is not concentrated in sovereign centers but diffused across institutions that scrutinize, normalize, and discipline human identities. In this sense, power is capillary and local, continuously imposing itself in everyday life, and it is neither fully destructible nor escapable (Callinicos, 2006).

For Foucault, modern mechanisms of power are more entrenched, less perceptible, and more insidious than those of premodern regimes. Under disciplinary systems, individuals internalize surveillance and coercion, often accepting domination under the seemingly attractive banners of "truth" or "freedom." Citizens learn to treat surveillance, categorization, and normalization as ordinary, reshaping their behavior and subjectivity according to disciplinary objectives (Hindess, 2001).

The modern penal system exemplifies this transformation. It consists of countless sites where power circulates through what Foucault terms the *microphysics of power*—the subtle intersections of subjects, scientific–social discourses, and political arrangements that mutually reinforce one another. The "individual," he argues, is itself an effect of disciplinary technologies of power (ibid., 134-135). As Foucault strikingly observes: *"Our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance. Under the surface of images, bodies are trapped in continuous networks of observation"* (Foucault, 2017: 27).

In this framework, knowledge is both productive of and produced by power. There can be no relations of power without corresponding fields of knowledge, and no knowledge exists outside the context of power relations (Fouladvand, 1997). The expansion of knowledge has enabled institutions to achieve surveillance without visibility, facilitating the collection and classification of physiological, behavioral, and identity-based data to regulate, normalize, and govern populations (Wells, 2013). Consequently, citizens are subtly manipulated: values, norms, and beliefs are inscribed into their dispositions in ways that appear self-generated.

Foucault emphasizes that disciplinary power enforces visibility selectively: it renders itself largely invisible while imposing compulsory visibility on its subjects. The "disciplined

individual" emerges through continuous observation, becoming compliant precisely because they are perpetually seen (Foucault, 2017: 230). In the digital age, this condition has intensified through algorithmic surveillance and pervasive data collection. While digital technologies appear to grant unprecedented freedoms, a Foucauldian perspective reveals a paradox: these same technologies simultaneously enclose individuals within what may be termed a digital carceral society (Zeimaran, 2017: 156).

Foucault's panopticon metaphor captures this logic of invisible surveillance: an abstract, omnipresent gaze that observes without itself being seen. Contemporary digital panopticism amplifies this principle: algorithmic infrastructures illuminate, record, and categorize virtually all forms of activity, leaving nothing outside their scope (Foucault, 2017: 218). Whereas visibility in premodern eras belonged to sovereign rulers, modernity redistributed it to ordinary individuals, while rendering the governing bodies increasingly invisible (Zeimaran, 2017: 151).

This study contends that the encirclement of bodies by disciplinary and algorithmic power—through surveillance, normalization, and behavioral regulation—constitutes a form of expanded prison. The proliferation of digital artifacts and the ubiquity of the internet appear, at first glance, to grant new freedoms: the ability to produce and disseminate information, images, and opinions at will. Yet this ostensible liberation conceals a reverse process: digital technologies also function as epistemic instruments of control. Through a phenomenological analysis of tools and technologies, the present study argues that digital artifacts shape human understanding, regulate thought, and configure subjectivity. Institutions of power in the digital age operate with such pervasiveness that they have become effectively invisible.

Technology as a Mediator of Human Knowledge and Perception

Technologies exert profound effects on human perception and knowledge, shaping not only our understanding of the world but also our behaviors. While not all human knowledge derives from tools and technologies, they are far from neutral; rather, they actively structure human engagement with reality and, in this sense, function as epistemic agents. Don Ihde conceptualizes technologies as mediators of human experience, arguing that they are transformative rather than passive objects of use: *"There is no neutral technology; or, positively stated, all technologies are non-neutral"* (Ihde, 1993b: 34).

Although technologies have not always possessed the complexity observed in contemporary society, they have consistently played a constitutive role in knowledge formation. As Foucault notes, *"The initial human condition neither informs us of the time of his birth nor of his earliest experiences. It connects humans to matters whose temporal existence does not coincide with theirs… revealing that objects began long before humans, and thus no one can attribute an origin to humans whose experience is fully shaped and limited by these objects"* (Foucault, *Words and Things*, p. 422).

Technologies are also context-sensitive: they can be employed in multiple ways, develop along divergent trajectories, and manifest differently across cultures. Ihde observes that *"technological culture is not a single entity. It is neither uniform nor has it progressed globally to the point that its critics fear or its proponents hope for"* (Ihde, 1990: 150–151).

In *Bodies of Technology* (Ihde, 2002), Ihde explores the epistemological implications of technological artifacts. He conceives technological innovations as objects that historically integrate human and mechanical agency, generating knowledge in the process. According to Ihde, *"the devices [I use], machines, or particular technologies themselves provide paradigmatic metaphors for knowledge"* (Ihde, 2002: 69). He terms these human–technology interactions as epistemic engines, raising fundamental questions: How is perception constituted? How do we acquire understanding of our environment? How is this perception disseminated?

This perspective highlights the reciprocal interplay between humans and technology, which generates knowledge and shapes ontology in mutually constitutive ways. In this context, technologies function analogously to lenses, shaping human perception and understanding of reality.

Digital technologies, beyond providing tools and artifacts, introduce a distinct epistemic orientation. Galloway (2014) emphasizes that digitality is primarily a mode of thought rather than a mere assemblage of machines, networks, or databases. He argues that digitality *"evokes a relationship—a genuine marvel—between sets of things that, in principle, should have nothing to say to each other"* (Galloway, 2014: 63). Contemporary digital networks of media and communication systems have reconfigured how data are perceived, transmitted, and accumulated, thereby transforming epistemic practices and knowledge infrastructures.

Alan Liu (2014) further argues that digital capabilities extend beyond mere tool use; digital knowledge itself signifies an epistemic shift. The metaphor of the lens, as previously noted, remains central to understanding how both digital and non-digital technologies mediate human engagement with reality.

In sum, technologies—particularly digital ones—are not merely instruments for action or knowledge transfer. They constitute epistemic mediators and engines that shape perception, understanding, and the distribution of knowledge, situating human cognition within broader technological and ontological frameworks.

Discussion

In the present study, to elucidate the epistemic function of tools and their impact on human understanding of reality, three historically significant instruments are examined phenomenologically. The insights gained from this analysis are then applied to explore the epistemic role of digital tools and artifacts. In addition to this phenomenological inquiry, the study also considers the function of these technologies within broader structures of power.

The Digital Reconfiguration of Time

In *Technics and Civilization* (1936), Lewis Mumford highlights the pivotal role of the clock in reorganizing and structuring life during the Middle Ages. Initially employed primarily in monastic settings to regulate religious practices and coordinate church work, clocks gradually shaped the human perception of time. With the advent of clock technology, humans began to experience time through mechanical mediation.

The precision of clocks illustrates two key points. First, until relatively recently, clocks conveyed time via moving indicators—such as the shadow of a sundial, the displacement of water in water clocks, or the motion of cathedral hands. Second, these instruments provided a visual representation of temporal change, making the "now" perceptible. The interval between an indicator's current and next position, whether linear or circular, could be observed directly.

The evolution of clock design further underscores this mediation. Early circular clocks featured a single hand to mark the hour. With mechanical refinements, time was subdivided into increasingly smaller units, and additional hands were added to indicate minutes and seconds. Time became progressively quantified, enabling humans to perceive it as a series of discrete, atomized moments.

The advent of digital clocks altered this perception. Digital displays present only the current moment, eliminating the visual representation of temporal spans. For instance, a person waiting for a train, who previously could relate the clock's hands to the expected arrival time, now sees only numerical indicators, requiring calculation or inference to understand the interval remaining. Technology thus mediates not only measurement but the very experience of temporality.

Telescopes: Redefining the Universe

In 1597, Galileo initially defended the Ptolemaic cosmology, placing Earth at the universe's center. By 1609, he had collaborated with Hans Lippershey, a Dutch lensmaker, and developed a compound refracting telescope with magnifications up to nine times. By the end of his work, Galileo had constructed approximately 100 instruments achieving magnifications of up to thirty times (Boorstin, 1985).

Before the telescope, humans perceived the cosmos as Earth-centered, and the lunar surface was assumed smooth and circular. Galileo's observations radically transformed this understanding. His telescope revealed celestial phenomena invisible to the naked eye, demonstrating how a technological artifact could irreversibly alter human comprehension of both the universe and the self.

Several aspects of this episode are noteworthy:

1. **Instrumental Artifacts:** The telescope mediated observation while introducing instrumental effects initially unrecognized as distortions.

2. **Operational Constraints:** Accurate use required careful adherence to procedures and equipment, such as movable tripods, demonstrating that technology is effective only under specific conditions.
3. **Epistemic Implications:** The telescope facilitated the rejection of Ptolemaic cosmology and the adoption of the Copernican model, offering an intuitive, accessible reinterpretation of the cosmos.

Galileo's work exemplifies how technological mediation not only extends human perception but also reshapes conceptual frameworks and structures of meaning.

Photography: Preserving the Eternal Moment

If the telescope transformed spatial perception, photography reconfigured temporal experience. Early photographic processes required prolonged exposures, necessitating static poses. Eadweard Muybridge's sequential photography (1878) allowed humans to perceive motion imperceptible to the naked eye, such as the simultaneous lift of all four hooves of a galloping horse (Daryoush, 1984: 34–35). Photography, therefore, arrested time, revealing dynamics and structures inaccessible to direct observation.

By 1888, high-speed photography captured shock waves of projectiles, correcting misconceptions about the motion of bullets (Daryoush, 1984: 42–43). Beyond knowledge production, photography influenced collective perception and social norms, disseminating narratives that shaped public sentiment, national identity, and collective memory. Photographs became instruments of historical documentation and social regulation.

Phenomenologically, photographs function as silent witnesses. Legal and administrative institutions leveraged photography's realism to monitor and regulate populations. Mugshots enabled visual tracking, supplementing or replacing written records. The distribution of images facilitated broader participation in social surveillance, demonstrating the epistemic and regulatory power of visual media (Sekula, 2011: 18–22, 41). In this sense, the authority of the photograph resides in its quiet, evidentiary presence—a "silence that enforces silence."

Epistemic Tools in the Digital Age

In this paper, digital epistemology is approached not as a framework that prioritizes the technical advantages of digital artifacts, but as an inquiry into their relationship with the production of knowledge.

Considering the networked functionality of digital technologies, Friedrich Kittler conceptualizes digitalization as a "discourse network" or a "writing system" (Kittler, 1990). This perspective situates digital artifacts within the domain of language and evokes post-structuralist linguistic arguments, such as the claim that *"we do not speak language; language speaks us"* (Young, 2011).

In the digital age, multiple media tools serve as intermediaries for language, influencing the ways in which language itself is used and perceived. These tools demonstrate that *"objects in the*

digital age speak with humans." As humans interact with technology across nearly all aspects of life, they must adapt to evolving digital systems to work and live effectively. From this standpoint, technological tools are far from neutral; they shape human thought, behavior, and modes of life.

Digital tools, like Galileo's telescope, operate according to their own internal logic, compelling humans to follow specific protocols. The pervasiveness of these tools positions individuals in a state where functioning as ordinary citizens requires adherence to the structures embedded within digital systems. In this sense, the communicative infrastructure of the digital era precedes the ways in which people communicate. Kittler, quoting Nietzsche, asserts that *"our writing tools work on our thoughts,"* highlighting how human cognition is regulated and mediated by digital technologies in the modern era.

Contemporary digital artifacts now occupy an unprecedented presence in human life, influencing individual and social activities across communication, leisure, education, healthcare, economics, and wellness. Like earlier technologies, these tools contribute to knowledge production, functioning analogously to the lens of Galileo's telescope. What distinguishes digital artifacts, however, is their ubiquity and their evolution toward forms of "thinking" that actively shape human cognition and perception.

Power in the Digital Age

The proliferation of digital artifacts is strikingly illustrated by smartphone usage. In the fall of 2023, there were 6.92 billion smartphone users worldwide—representing 85.74% of the global population—an 88.65% increase from 2016, when only 3.668 billion individuals (49.4% of the population) possessed smartphones (BankMyCell, 2023).

Alongside smartphones, internet-based social networks have become pervasive. Users can create personal pages, share content, and generate vast quantities of digital information and imagery, organized within networked platforms. Social media profiles reveal individual interests and connections, facilitating the identification of users with shared preferences. By 2023, the average global user participated in more than 2.7 social networks, and 85% accessed these platforms via mobile devices in the first quarter of the year.

Through content sharing, users voluntarily submit themselves to continuous surveillance. In Foucauldian terms, citizens have effectively entered a digital panopticon. Smartphones and social media replicate mechanisms of power, placing individuals under constant observation, measurement, and influence. Users also function as unpaid laborers, producing content and data that algorithms monetize for platform owners, advertisers, and stakeholders (Sernichak, 2020: 57). Platforms provide valuable services—communication, entertainment, income opportunities—while simultaneously harvesting behavioral data to influence attention and decision-making. As Shoshana Zuboff observes in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2015),

digital economies exemplify the convergence of surveillance and profit, now commonly referred to as "surveillance capitalism" (Sernichak, 2020: 62).

Foucauldian concepts can be reformulated for the digital age: individuals navigating digital platforms inhabit a "camp-like" model under continuous observation, while an "all-seeing eye" invisibly monitors behavior. Search engines, social networks, and other digital platforms are not neutral; algorithms mediate access differently across users and geographies, serving the objectives of platform owners rather than public interests.

Digital artifacts function as pervasive intermediaries between humans and the external world, shaping knowledge acquisition and production across all domains of cognition. These tools influence thought and behavior both through regulatory frameworks and embedded algorithms, and through their intrinsic role as epistemic instruments. The adage *"tools work on our thoughts"* now extends beyond metaphor: digital artifacts increasingly "think" on behalf of humans. Voice assistants, such as Siri, exemplify technologies that actively "speak" with users rather than merely mediating input.

Just as Galileo's telescope transformed perception through its lens, contemporary devices such as the Apple Vision Pro redefine visual experience. Combining headset and augmented reality technologies, the Vision Pro mediates interaction with the external environment. Its Digital Crown allows users to switch between layered digital windows and the external world, while augmented and virtual realities merge to create immersive 3D environments. Users can manipulate both their visual presence and surroundings in real time, engaging with others in interactive digital spaces (Rosenberg, CNBC Make It).

In this light, digital tools emerge as new loci of power. Their ubiquity, capacity to mediate perception, shape knowledge, and influence social interaction, positions them as the most pervasive instruments of influence in contemporary society.

Conclusion

Michel Foucault conceptualizes power as the surveillance, control, and disciplining of individuals—a function that manifests through the reciprocal relationship between knowledge and power. With the advancement of technology, power is no longer exercised solely in a centralized manner; rather, institutions of power operate in fluid, diffuse, and often invisible ways.

To understand the operation of power in contemporary societies, it is essential to examine the role of technology. Following Don Ihde's framework, this paper has shown that technologies shape human perception and behavior, generate meaning, and mediate human understanding of reality—functioning, in effect, like a lens. Yet these lenses are not neutral or impartial; they actively structure how humans perceive, interpret, and engage with the world.

In the digital era, artifacts such as smartphones, social media platforms, and immersive devices constitute some of the most pervasive tools in everyday life. Through these technologies, users share information and express interests, voluntarily exposing themselves to continuous visibility. At the same time, this engagement amplifies the influence of often invisible stakeholders. From a Foucauldian perspective, by employing digital artifacts, citizens inhabit a world of continuous observation and regulation. Digital tools simultaneously generate knowledge and constrain behavior, enforcing adherence to protocols, rules, and algorithms that serve institutional or commercial interests. In this sense, digital artifacts function as instruments of power—a role shaped by contemporary conditions rather than any normative judgment.

Finally, two critical questions emerge for further inquiry:

1. **Reliability of Knowledge:** Considering Galileo's telescope, which revealed halos around celestial bodies that did not exist, to what extent is knowledge acquired through technological tools reliable? How often do humans unknowingly engage with knowledge that is essentially an "artifact of the instrument"?
2. **Co-evolution of Tools and Theory:** Tools and theories develop in tandem to minimize contradictions and align technological functions with conceptual frameworks. If foundational assumptions about reality had been based on a framework other than the Copernican model, how would theories, tools, and sources of knowledge differ from those of the present era?

These questions underscore the enduring epistemic and normative challenges posed by technological mediation, emphasizing the need for continued philosophical inquiry into the interplay of power, knowledge, and digital artifacts.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization of the article and writing of the original and subsequent drafts.

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Data available on request from the authors.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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