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Technology and Mindful Evaluation

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Technology and Mindful Evaluation

Abstract

"Living well with technology cannot involve either mindless acceptance or mindless rejection, but rather requires mindful evaluation."

Posting about being a mindful user of technology from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/technology-and-mindful-evaluation/>

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Technology and Mindful Evaluation

 inallthings.org/technology-and-mindful-evaluation

Nick Breems

This is post #5 of 6 in the series “*Technology Today*”

1. [Is Technology Bringing Us Together or Pushing Us Farther Apart?](#)
2. [Technology Isn't Just for Smart People](#)
3. [Technology is Imagination Incarnated](#)
4. [My iPhone Made Me Do it](#)
5. Technology and Mindful Evaluation
6. [Technology At Every Moment](#)

The editors of iAt have asked five *technology* experts their opinions on the use and expansion of technology in today's society. Is the use of technology pushing us apart from one another and changing the way we relate with one another? Or, is the use of technology bringing people together for the common good?

Is technology bringing us together or pushing us apart? This question is a sensible one to ask, but before an answer can be attempted, we need to be much more specific about *which* technology is referred to. That is because the effects of a technology are not inherent in the concept of technology itself, but rather in the design decisions and implementation that have gone into each particular technological artifact. Part of the design of any particular technology is an embedded, intrinsic set of *values*. That is, every technology is designed to *do something*, or to make some task easier, and thus the design suggests that some courses of action and outcomes are preferable to others. When we choose to use any particular technological artifact, we experience that suggestion as a *predisposition* – a subtle but unavoidable pull in the direction the technology is designed for.

For example, let's consider a simple office stapler. Often, the implicit claims of a technology are uncontroversial; for example, the mere existence of a stapler suggests that permanently attaching multiple pieces of paper together is frequently a desirable thing to do, and few would argue against this claim. In addition, the stapler also requires a mindset that views metal, in small quantities, as a disposable resource, and some small risk of minor puncture wounds as a worthwhile tradeoff for office place convenience. While most of us would also agree with these claims, the fact is that we don't usually recognize that we're subliminally agreeing to them whenever we use a stapler.

Of course, a stapler is a relatively straightforward technological artifact. When we ask whether technology is bringing us together or pushing us apart, we're most often concerned about the effects of digital, networked, and mobile technologies. In order to address this question, then, we must explore the various values that are expressed in the devices and applications we introduce into our lives. Each of these application is unique, and will of course have diverse impacts in our lives; nonetheless, we can examine the larger area of digital and mobile technologies to determine some of the overarching characteristics, and make predictions about what kinds of effects we might expect to see when we use these devices and applications as a regular part of our social reality.

One of the main unifying values that is present in the majority of modern digital technology is *efficiency*. For

the most part, whatever particular task an application is designed to assist us with, efficiency is one of the main design goals.¹ This is, of course, often positive. Finding ways to accomplish our tasks with less time, less energy, less effort, or less risk is obviously a worthy aim in many cases. However, when used in the context of *community* or *relationship*, a focus on *efficiency* can backfire badly. An “efficient friendship” is nearly an oxymoron – if you’re measuring a friendship in terms of the amount of utility you get compared to the amount of time and effort you invest, then it’s not really a friendship.

One example the pull of technology towards its values is the oft-felt preference, particularly among young people, for texting rather than voice calls. When a phone call is placed, there is a moment of connection, in which the caller and the recipient must announce themselves, must form or re-form, at least temporarily, a genuine human relationship. In many cases, even with close friends, there can be something mildly aversive about doing this – it requires us, however subtly, to step into vulnerability, to open ourselves up to “the other”. With texting, the moment of connection is much more abstract, because the amount of opening ourselves up required is much less. This makes texting take less emotional effort on our part than a live call, and thus communicating using this medium seems more *efficient*.

This does not mean that there is no role for modern technology to play in our relationships and communities. As a flexible medium which can represent and transmit with great subtlety the meaning we find in our lives together, there are many ways in which a careful use of technology can greatly enhance our relationships with friends, family, and community by opening up new possibilities for interaction. Thus, we need not abandon all forms of technologically-mediated communication. Rather, we need to remember that not all of the goals and values inherent in our chosen tools necessarily line up with the professed values we try to live out in our friendships, relationships, and communities. In order to make the use of technology in our lives line up most faithfully with how we are called to live our lives, we must first be sensitive to the possibility for a mismatch between the tool and the goal, and second, be wise about how to respond to such a mismatch.

One possible response is simply to recognize that the device or application we are using may be pulling at us in a direction we do not want to go, and to exert extra effort of will to pull back. In the example of texting versus calling on the phone, for example, we can engage in the discipline of evaluating each situation to determine whether calling or texting would be the most appropriate course of action. In order for this to be workable, we would need good self-knowledge – we need to understand our own internal predispositions, and gauge whether or not we’ll be able to successfully resist the temptation to do what is easy rather than what is right. If we determine that our willpower is not up to that task, then the second alternative is much more radical and countercultural – to selectively abandon that particular use of technology.

A number of my acquaintances have taken this approach with Facebook, for example. Having determined that it was having a negative impact on their behavior in relationships – and in particular, their own narcissistic (human) tendencies to post comments and replies for reason of subtle self-promotion and self-love rather than edifying friends – they have either temporarily or permanently ended their participation on the premiere online social networking tool. This has, in some cases, resulted in consternation or confusion among their friends, but they continue to deem it the most responsible choice.

In conclusion, the question of whether technology brings us together or pushes us apart is not a simple one. Living well with technology cannot involve either mindless acceptance or mindless rejection, but rather requires mindful evaluation. We must be sensitive to the embedded suggestions inherent in any technology, so as to perceive the subtle pull exerted by any particular device or application we choose to use. With this, and having both a clear understanding our own internal motives and predispositions, and a vision of how we wish to engage with others, we can be prepared to make careful choices about which technologies we use, and how we employ them.

Footnotes

1. This need not always be the case. In the example of computer games, the concept of efficiency is murky at best, since use of the word “utility” to describe what we get from these games seems a bit of a stretch. ↩