

Parenting and Technology

Helping People in the Digital Age

Wednesdays at 6:30 p.m. in May 2021

@ Emmanuel Baptist Church, Raleigh

Lesson 1:

An Introduction to Parenting and Technology: The Sounding Alarm (Josh Scally)

Wednesday, May 5

Technology can be a Great Good, Yet Unintended Consequences can Come

Before we rightly consider dangers and concerns we know (and perhaps attempt to unsuccessfully suppress) about technology, we do well to admit that in many ways technology has been a blessing in our lives. Technology has especially been a blessing in its broadest sense, for example, automobiles, dishwashers, and the incandescent lightbulb. However, even in those broad, positive blessings of technology a law of unintended consequences took effect. Automobiles meant the ability to travel quickly, which has had some unintended consequences on the social fabric of civilization and familial relationships. Dishwashers means less time on manual labor, but we have quickly found ways to stay busy (or even become busier) in ways often less rejuvenating. The lightbulb meant the ability to see at night, which meant the onset of the industrial revolution. Yet, the lightbulb also meant the ability for employers to work laborers much longer and later hours, requiring labor laws to provide some eventual relief. In a similar way, many of the technological advancements more present to our day, often coming through the work of big tech companies like Apple, Google, and Amazon, provide some great blessings and also some unintended (and perhaps even some intended) consequences.

Narrowing our Focus: What is meant in this study by “Technology”

For our study these Wednesdays in May, I will not be using the term “technology” in the broad sense. I, instead, wish to narrow the focus of technology to devices often used most frequently in our lives. My main focus, then, is on digital devices with screens such as smartphones, tablets, and similar devices.

Technology and the Young: The Alarm has been Sounded!

Americans have been expressing angst over the intersection of technology and the young for years.

Parents Pleading for Help!

Andy Crouch writes:

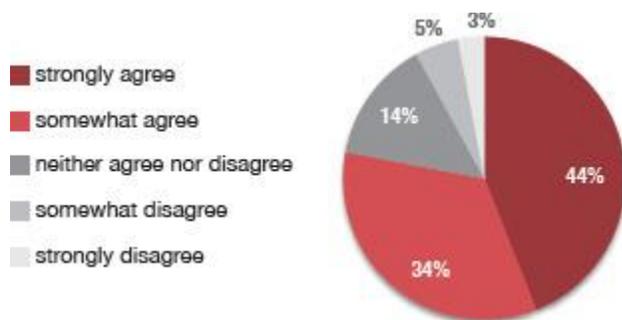
Parents know we need help.

We love the way devices make our lives easier amid the stress and busyness that fill our days. We love the way screens can, almost magically, absorb our children's attention and give us a few moments of quiet in the car or before dinner. We admire the ease with which our children master technology, the prowess they show with video games, the bursts of creativity in the arts, movies, and music that devices help them produce.

But we also sense the precious days of childhood are passing by, far too fast, in a haze of ghostly blue light. We watch as the inevitable intensity of teenage relationships is raised to near-toxic levels by a sleep-depriving, round-the-clock deluge of messages. We feel helpless to prevent them from overexposure, far too early, to the most violent and intimate facts of life.

Technology Is the Number One Reason Parents Believe Raising Kids Today Is More Complicated Than in the Past

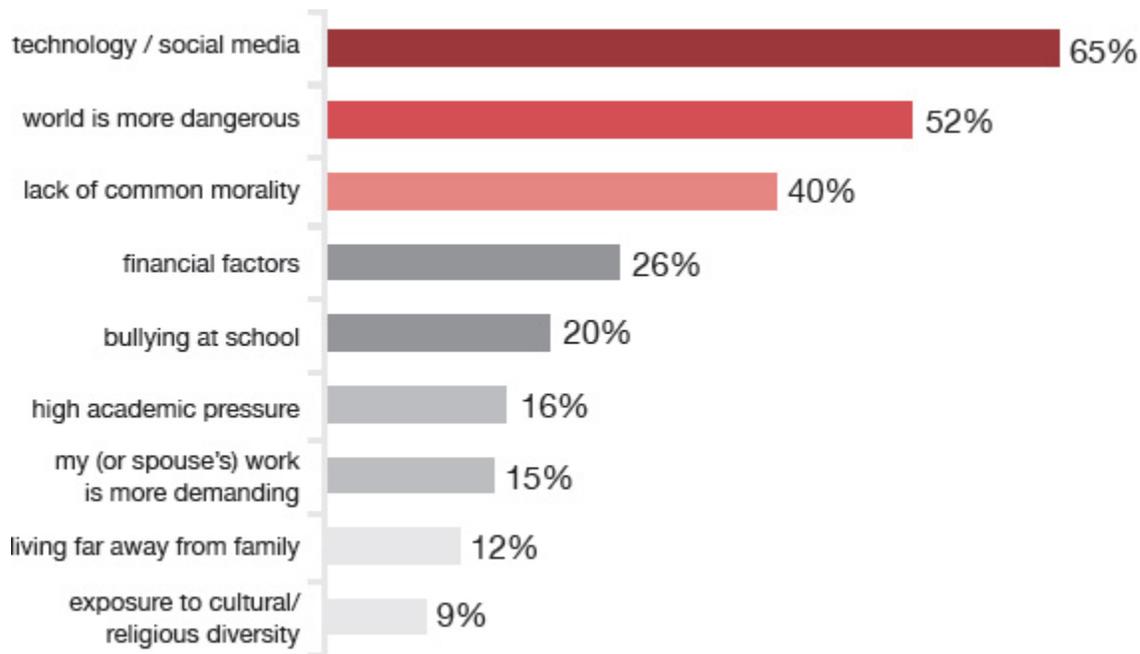
Raising kids today is more complicated than it was when I was a kid.



n = 1,021 US parents of children ages 4 to 17¹

¹ Andy Crouch, [*The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017).

What makes it more difficult to raise kids today?



$n = 780$ US parents who agree raising kids today is more difficult²

Technology's Downside

Americans have been expressing angst over the intersection of technology and the young for years, though this concern has increasingly been recognized as a danger for all ages.

Some broad considerations:

#1. The Tyranny of the Urgent

As a simple example, in our digital age the ability to check e-mails immediately has made a once exciting event—checking your home's mailbox—an unceasing demand, replying to e-mails. Georgetown University professor of computer science, Cal Newport has recently lamented this change in his book, *A World Without E-mail*. I should add that of course some professions require instant communication (e.g. a receptionist) but many do not, yet humans feel pressured to respond to everything.

Technology in digital devices can enslave us to urgent “felt needs” to the point that we cannot finish what we started. Matt Richtel shares a humorous true story in *The New York Times*

² Andy Crouch, [*The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017).

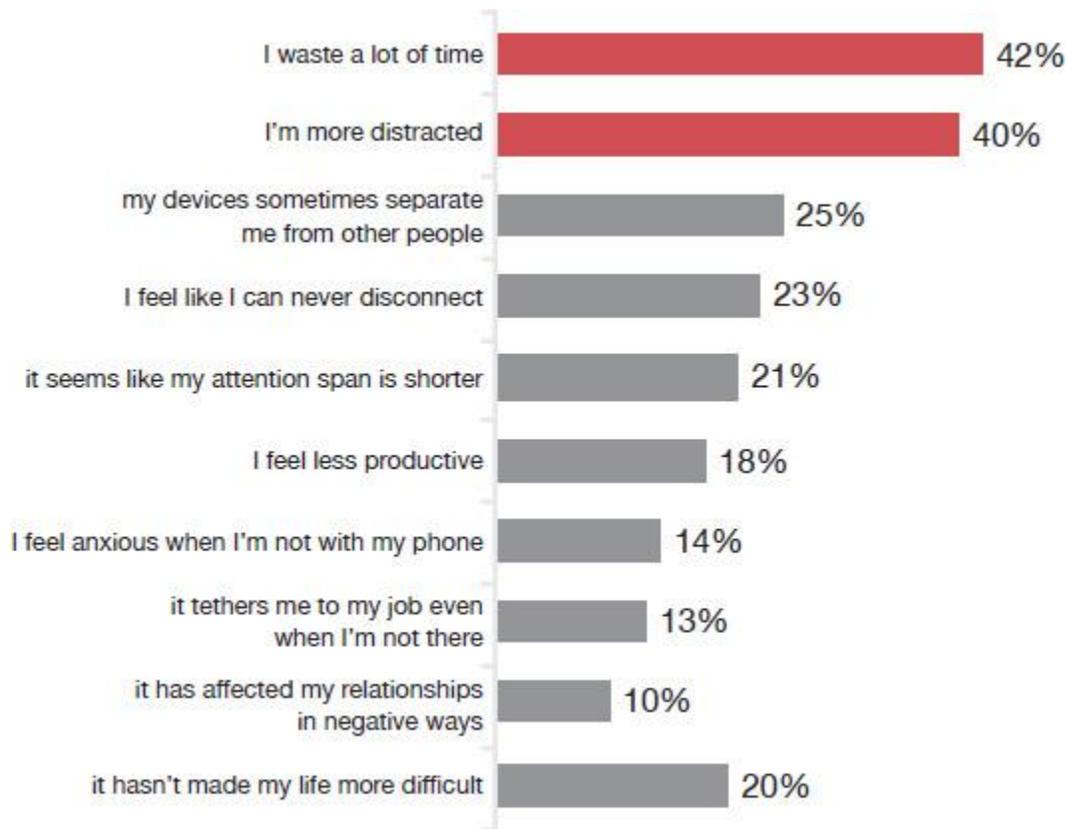
showing how humans can be embarrassingly enslaved by the perceived urgency of their digital devices:

Recently, [Mrs. Brenda Campbell] was baking peanut butter cookies for Teacher Appreciation Day when her phone chimed in the living room. She answered a text, then became lost in Facebook, forgot about the cookies and burned them. She started a new batch, but heard the phone again, got lost in messaging, and burned those too. Out of ingredients and shamed, she bought cookies at the store.³

Tony Reinke writes, “We check our smartphones about 81,500 times each year, or once every 4.3 minutes of our waking lives.”⁴

Technology Has Made Life Harder

*In what ways has technology actually made your life more difficult?
Select all that apply.*



n = 1,021 US parents of children ages 4 to 17⁵

³ Richtel, Matt. “[Hooked on Gadgets and Paying a Mental Price](#),” *The New York Times*, Monday, June 7, 2010.

⁴ Tony Reinke and John Piper, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

⁵ Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017).

#2. Desensitization

Neil Postman observes a frightening practice in the news, which he calls: “Now...this.” He explains:

“Now...this” [is] the phenomenon whereby the reporting of a horrific event—a rape or a five-alarm fire or global warming—is followed immediately by the anchor’s cheerfully exclaiming “Now...this,” which segues into a story about [a trivial matter] or a commercial for lite beer, creating a sequencing of information so random, so disparate in scale and value, as to be incoherent, even psychotic.⁶

Technology as a medium moves information so rapidly that it truncates proper human responses to such information. If the news of a horrific event could only be shared in a slower medium, it would better create the reflective space necessary for a proper response.

#3. Image Replaces Proposition

When style outshines substance the medium replaces the message. Whether careful discourse be written or spoken, ideas cannot be carefully considered in a soundbite culture bent on titillation and haste. Just as you could not do philosophy through smoke signals, so you cannot make profound arguments through images. Imagery as a form cannot clearly convey the content of complex propositions.

Propositions require subjects and predicates. To convey ideas, these propositions must be woven together to coherently forward thoughts. Since the television’s advent, however, thoughts and ideas have taken a backseat to the promulgation of images. At times, digital images preclude ideas entirely. At times, digital images overshadow ideas. When John F. Kennedy ran for president he maximized the use of imagery and found television to be to his advantage. Yet those with a less culturally appealing physical appearance can find their ideas to be devalued because imagery overshadows ideas. Neil Postman observed this writing,

[I]magine that anyone like our twenty-seventh President, the multi-chinned, three-hundred-pound William Howard Taft, could be put forward as a presidential candidate in today’s world. The shape of a man’s body is largely irrelevant to the shape of his ideas when he is addressing a public in writing or on the radio or, for that matter, in smoke signals. But it is quite relevant on television. ... For on television, discourse is conducted largely though visual imagery, which is to say that television gives us conversation in images, not words.⁷

⁶ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005), p. xi.

⁷ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 7.

#4. Dilution of Intimacy

In 2018, Amazon’s digital voice assistant, Alexa, crashed. Alexa’s crash came because of overloaded requests, including confessions such as “Alexa, I’m depressed.” In fact, over 50 percent of human interactions with Alexa go beyond simple command and fulfillment (e.g. “Alexa, I feel lonely”).⁸ Many in younger generations have a mental category for disembodied connection unlike the expected personal intimacy known by their previous generations. In fact, to make digital devices more human, tech companies have worked to make digital creations like Alexa take on more emotionally considerate—therapeutic—vocal tones.⁹ A consequence of technology has been a dilution of intimacy that has often confused a facsimile of connection with embodied intimacy.

Sometimes perceived intimacy with technology actually isolates humans from one another. Reinke explains:

In the big picture, technology offers us many benefits, but with one major pitfall: isolation. Isolation is both the promise and the price of technological advance. “The problem is that we invite loneliness, even though it makes us miserable,” writes author Stephen Marche. “The history of our use of technology is a history of isolation desired and achieved.”

The long story of isolation desired and achieved is retold by Giles Slade in his book *The Big Disconnect: The Story of Technology and Loneliness*. There he shows how many strands of technology and loneliness have been woven together in the history of various innovations, from street peddlers and phones to television and music.

As technology improves, machines replace people and automation replaces interaction. Street vendors gave way to vending machines. Fresh milk deliveries gave way to dairy products preserved in refrigerators. Bankers gave way to ATMs. ... The community cinema gave way to a large shared television in each family’s home, which gave way to portable televisions, and now to personal LED TVs in every bedroom.

... Attending a live orchestra performance on a Saturday evening was, for many people, replaced by the stationary phonograph (or record player) in the family room, which was replaced by a large transistor radio, which was replaced by a portable transistor radio, which was replaced by a boom box with open speakers carried on the shoulder, which was replaced by a Walkman clipped to the belt, which was replaced by a tiny iPod clipped to the sleeve. Music went from a social community experience to a shared family experience to a private earbud experience. ...

Many of these technological trajectories converge in the smartphone—the supreme invention of personal isolation.¹⁰

⁸ Laura Stevens, “Alexa, Can You Prevent Suicide?” *The Wall Street Journal* (October 23, 2017). <https://www.wsj.com/articles/alexa-can-you-prevent-suicide-1508762311>

⁹ Judith Shulevitz, “Alexa, Should We Trust You?” *The Atlantic* (November 2018).

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/11/alexa-how-will-you-change-us/570844/>

¹⁰ Tony Reinke and John Piper, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

#5. Brain Drain, Overstimulation

TIME magazine observes,

Every day, we check our phones an average of 47 times—every 19 minutes of our waking lives—and spend roughly five hours total peering at their silvery glow. There’s no good consensus about what all this screen time means for children’s brains, adolescents’ moods or the future of our democratic institutions. But many of us are seized these days with a feeling that it’s not good. Last year, the American Psychological Association found that 65% of us believe that periodically unplugging would improve our mental health, and a 2017 University of Texas study found that the mere presence of our smartphones, face down on the desk in front of us, undercuts our ability to perform basic cognitive tasks. New York University psychologist Adam Alter describes the current state of tech obsession as a “full-blown epidemic.”¹¹

Silicon Valley has intentionally made technology addictive because every second humans are on their screen means more money for its creators through selling a person’s personal data. Ironically, people are the product being sold on digital devices.¹² Those designing technology have intentionally designed their technology to manipulate and persuade users to stay beyond their original intention.

Every major consumer tech company operating today—from behemoths like Amazon to the lone programmer building the next Candy Crush—uses some form of persuasive technology. Most of the time, the goal is unambiguous: the companies want to get us to spend as much time as possible on their platforms. Facebook’s platform, for example, is not neutral. Its designers determine which videos, news stories and friends’ comments appear at the top of your feed, as well as how often you’re informed of new notifications. Snapchat’s interface distributes badges to users who maintain daily streaks—a nifty system built in part on humans’ well-studied psychological need to bank progress. “Your kid is not weak-willed because he can’t get off his phone,” Brown says. “Your kid’s brain is being engineered to get him to stay on his phone.”¹³

Often, I notice people (including adults) who believe they are overly exhausted. They can’t quite figure out why they are so tired because they realize that many previous generations and other civilizations have, objectively speaking, been much busier than them. But, perhaps, their weariness has been digitally accelerated. Technology as an instrument fatigues in a unique way.

¹¹ Haley Sweetland Edwards, “You’re Addicted to Your Smartphone. This Company Thinks It Can Change That,” *TIME* (April 13, 2018). <https://time.com/5237434/youre-addicted-to-your-smartphone-this-company-thinks-it-can-change-that/>

¹² Haley Sweetland Edwards, “You’re Addicted to Your Smartphone. This Company Thinks It Can Change That,” *TIME* (April 13, 2018). <https://time.com/5237434/youre-addicted-to-your-smartphone-this-company-thinks-it-can-change-that/>

¹³ Haley Sweetland Edwards, “You’re Addicted to Your Smartphone. This Company Thinks It Can Change That,” *TIME* (April 13, 2018). <https://time.com/5237434/youre-addicted-to-your-smartphone-this-company-thinks-it-can-change-that/>

The brain, he explained, sounding like the graduate teaching assistant he once was, has two basic neural pathways for controlling behavior. One is structurally weak but helps us make conscious, intentional decisions to serve our long-term goals. The other is more automatic and easily suggestible. Brown drew an orange swirl in the middle of the brain: the basal ganglia. When the brain gets some sort of external cue, like the ding of a Facebook notification, that often precedes a reward, the basal ganglia receive a burst of dopamine, a powerful neurotransmitter linked to the anticipation of pleasure. That three-part process—trigger, action, reward—undergirds the brain’s basic habit-forming loop, he said.

...

Most of the alluring apps and websites in wide use today were engineered to exploit this habit-forming loop. Snapchat, for example, which relies heavily on the trigger-action-reward triumvirate, also uses a powerful trick to get users to open the app daily. When two people send and receive Snaps with each other for days on end, both receive emoji flames next to their names, alongside a number, which ticks up every 24 hours, indicating how long the two have maintained their connection. If either misses a day, both lose their flame. That interface, while playful, capitalizes on what psychologists call the endowed progress effect. Fearful of zeroing out their banked progress, teenagers have handed over their log-in information to friends before vacations.

Pinterest, one of the first Silicon Valley firms to hire behavioral psychologists to work alongside designers, plays on our psychology in a different way. Its interface, which features an endless scroll of pictures arranged in a staggered, jigsaw-like pattern, is human catnip. It ensures that users always see a partial image of what comes next, which tantalizes our curiosity and deprives us of any natural stopping point, while simultaneously offering an endless well of new content. Brown and Combs refer to this as “bottomless bowl” design, a reference to a 2005 Cornell University study that found that participants ate 73% more soup when their bowls secretly self-refilled. Dozens of other apps employ similar interfaces. No matter how long you scroll down on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, and no matter how many hours you spend watching YouTube or Netflix, there is always more content cued up to auto-play.¹⁴

Many technology apps, then, are not designed neutrally, but manipulatively.

On an earnings call in April last year, Netflix CEO Reed Hastings told investors that his company’s main competition was customers’ sleep. “When you watch a show from Netflix and you get addicted to it, you stay up late at night,” he said, adding, “We’re competing with sleep, on the margin. And so, it’s a very large pool of time.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Haley Sweetland Edwards, “You’re Addicted to Your Smartphone. This Company Thinks It Can Change That,” *TIME* (April 13, 2018). <https://time.com/5237434/youre-addicted-to-your-smartphone-this-company-thinks-it-can-change-that/>

¹⁵ Haley Sweetland Edwards, “You’re Addicted to Your Smartphone. This Company Thinks It Can Change That,” *TIME* (April 13, 2018). <https://time.com/5237434/youre-addicted-to-your-smartphone-this-company-thinks-it-can-change-that/>

OBJECT: Technology is a Neutral Instrument – It's Only How You Use It

When I have warned about some dangers with technology, I often hear a response that defends technology as an instrument in the assumption that all instruments are equal, it only matters how you use them. But I disagree with the premise. All instruments are not equal. A butter knife and a tank are both instruments / vehicles but they are not designed the same and thus cannot be used the same. Someone might argue that both the butter knife and the tank are weapons. They both can be used dangerously, even to kill. Yet the butter knife was crafted to spread butter and its design best does so. The tank does not share that design. A physical book, for example, and a smartphone are not equal instruments. An app like Pinterest was not designed in the same way as a Calculator app. They are not designed the same, and they do not have the same uses or consequences.

#6. “Chronological Snobbery”

C. S. Lewis came recognize that every age, including his and ours, is a period which, like past periods, has its own characteristic illusions. Therefore, cultural assumptions must be questioned rather than unthinkingly embraced. To help ward off the myopia of our cultural milieu, Lewis advocated letting the “breezes of the centuries” blow through our minds and thereby avoiding “chronological snobbery.” Specifically, Lewis encouraged:

It's a good rule after reading a new book never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between. If that is too much for you, you should at least read one old one to three new ones.... Every age has its own outlook. It is especially good at seeing certain truths and especially liable to make certain mistakes. We all therefore need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period.... None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books....The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds and this can only be done by reading old books.¹⁶

Some may object to Lewis's counsel because they presuppose that all history inevitably moves towards progress. But Lewis counters:

... as to putting the clock back, would you think I was joking if I said that you can put a clock back, and that if the clock is wrong it is often a very sensible thing to do? But I would rather get away from that whole idea of clocks. We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be and if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man.¹⁷

¹⁶ C. S. Lewis quoted in Art Lindsay, “C. S. Lewis on Chronological Snobbery,” *Knowing & Doing* (Spring 2003): 1. https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/47

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis quoted in Art Lindsay, “C. S. Lewis on Chronological Snobbery,” *Knowing & Doing* (Spring 2003): 2. https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/47

#7. The Entertainment of All Things

One college student named Liz recognized this writing:

In class we asked if, now that there's cable...are there channels that are not just about entertainment? We tried to find one... One kid said the Weather Channel but another mentioned how they have all those shows on tornadoes and try to make weather fun. The only good example we came up with was C-SPAN, which no one watches.¹⁸

Another student gave an example of the trend for even religions magazines or publications about the Bible to have covers mimicking a teen-gearred magazine by including cover lines like "Top 10 Tips to Getting Closer to God."¹⁹

#8. The Elimination of Shades and See-Through Blinds

Recently a 14 year-old girl vented about her school's cheerleading squad after she failed to make varsity cheer (and softball), so she posted some vulgar complaints on Snapchat expecting them to dissolve before any damage was done. Unsurprisingly, someone else in the school took a screenshot and shared it with her mom, one of the team coaches. The girl was suspended for the year and the case is currently before the Supreme Court. NPR had a provocative headline, "Mean Girls Meet the First Amendment."²⁰

What makes the case of this teenage girl interesting is that her frustrated outburst was technically made when she was off-campus. But unlike previous generations of frustrated outbursts (which, for the record as a Christian I cannot commend her vulgarity laced rant), her space to vent was digital, so it was preserved in perpetuity. This leads to a broad reminder for all of us, namely, that we no longer have privacy.

In ways that vacillate between humorous and harrowing, Americans have voluntarily ceded private spaces for years. We joke about selling our soul to Apple when we click our agreement to reams of digital contracts that we have no patience to read, but we likely also feel at least of prick of concern about large companies gathering information about us beyond our comfort level only to use us as market value for aggressive sellers. Few would wish to have a government agent move in with us, but we probably wouldn't object to Alexa or Siri live with us. Honestly, I am not attempting to propose a grand conspiracy, I am simply observing that we have lost a level of privacy through technological acceptance. Our loss of private speech is somewhat like living in a house without shades or with see-through blinds.

¹⁸ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005), p. x.

¹⁹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005), p. x.

²⁰ Nina Totenberg, "At Supreme Court, Mean Girls Meet 1st Amendment," NPR (April 28, 2021). <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/28/988083256/at-supreme-court-mean-girls-meet-1st-amendment>

9. Diminishment of Observation & Reflection

As technology becomes ever more ubiquitous, handheld or wearable, time to reflect has become ever less available.

Tony Reinke notes:

The average output of email and social-media text is estimated at 3.6 trillion words, or about thirty-six million books—typed out every day! In comparison, the Library of Congress holds thirty-five million books.¹

We now live in an information deluge only dystopian novelists could have foreseen. In the introduction to his landmark book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman contrasted two very different cultural warnings, those of George Orwell's 1984 and of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Orwell argued that books would disappear by censorship; Huxley thought books would be marginalized by data torrent. Postman summarizes the contrast well. "Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much information that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared that the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance." Huxley seems to have won.

Reminiscent of Huxley and Postman, more recently, Pope Francis dropped his own warning about info overload in an encyclical on global pollution, warning that "when media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply, and to love generously. In this context, the great sages of the past run the risk of going unheard amid the noise and distractions of an information overload." He argued that digital distractions must be held in check because true wisdom is the result of deep reading, self-examination, and "dialogue and generous encounter between persons." Merely amassing data, he warned, "leads to overload and confusion, a sort of mental pollution."²¹

²¹ Tony Reinke and John Piper, [*12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).



#10. The Illusion—and Allurement—of Anonymity

Digital technology has falsely led young people especially to believe that since they are behind a screen, they can behave with impunity. Of course, this perception of anonymity is not reality (see point #8), but young people especially can fail to realize that their digital activity can be called into account so they may behave with less restraint in a digital world, then they would in reality. Martha Pickerill reports for TIME:

Anonymity, or at least the absence of in-person reprisals, emboldens some kids to pick on others over social media or text messages. Some [statistics](#) show that 33% of teenagers report having been cyber bullied, while [others](#) put the figure nearer 15%. Some older kids also engage in [sexting](#), sending suggestive or partially clothed photos via smartphone, content that can later be used to bully the sender. Kids’ basic safety is the main reason for the proliferation of tools to monitor and limit their digital activities.²²

Is it just a matter of taste? Why do even experts have disagreement over the value and influence of technology, even among the young?

Urs Gasser and John Palfrey, authors of *The Connected Parent: An Expert Guide to Parenting in a Digital World* are generally favorable of children and youth using technology and positive in their assessment of technology’s influence in culture.²³ Neil Postman, author of *Amusing ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* is generally unfavorable in technology’s influence in culture.²⁴ Neither of these books espouse a Christian worldview (they are both non-Christian), yet they differ vastly on their assessment of technology because of their vast difference on underlying questions. Diverse approaches to the proper use of technology divert based on these prior (often presupposed answers) to foundational questions.

Questioning our Presuppositions about Technology

- Does technology mainly liberate or enslave people?
- Improve or degrade democracy?
- Make leaders more or less accountable?
- Make systems more or less transparent?
- Make us better citizens or consumers?²⁵

²² Pickerill, Martha. “Raising the Screen Generation: Everything You wanted to Know about Kids and Technology But were too Distracted to Ask.” *TIME* Magazine. January 12, 2015. <https://time.com/raising-the-screen-generation/>

²³ See, for example, Liz Mineo, “Helping Your Child Make the Best Use of Time On-Line,” *The Harvard Gazette* (December 14, 2020). <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/12/how-parents-can-manage-children-and-their-technology-use/>

²⁴ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

²⁵ I drew on Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005), p. xv.

Some Foundational Considerations: What questions will form our use of technology?

- Why do we exist?
- What is “the good life”?
- What is worth living for, what is true success?
- What are dangers to living well?
- What hope is there to live well?

Towards a Technology Use Manifesto:

1. Exercise: Write down what you want from your technology.

C) Benefits – What are some ways technology has helped me live well?

B) Dangers – What are some concerns I have with technology?

A) Goals – What do I want to get out of my use of technology?

BONUS Exercise:

Pick 1 Day and spend that entire 24 hours without any digital technology. You can read physical books, you can do physical activities (e.g. going outside, playing board games, etc.) but nothing electronic / digital at all.

The Toothpaste is out of the Tube: Is the Situation Hopeless?

Steve Almond puts it humorously for *The New York Times Magazine*

Our children not only pick up on this fraught dynamic; they re-enact it. We ostensibly limit Josie (age 6) and Judah (age 4) to 45 minutes of screen time per day. But they find ways to get more: hunkering down with the videos Josie takes on her camera, sweet-talking the grandparents and so on. The temptations have only multiplied as they move out into a world saturated by technology.

Consider an incident that has come to be known in my household as the Leapster Imbroglia. For those unfamiliar with the Leapster, it is a “learning game system” aimed at 4-to-9-year-olds. Josie has wanted one for more than a year. “My two best friends have a Leapster and I don’t,” she sobbed to her mother recently. “I feel like a loser!”

My wife was practically in tears as she related this episode to me. It struck me as terribly sad that an electronic device had become, in our daughter’s mind, such a powerful talisman of personal worth. But even sadder was the fact that I knew, deep down, exactly how she felt.

This is the moment we live in, the one our childhoods foretold. When I see Josie clutching her grandmother’s Kindle to play Angry Birds for the 10th straight time, or I watch my son stuporously soaking up a cartoon, I’m really seeing myself as a kid — anxious, needy for love but willing to settle for electronic distraction to soothe my nerves or hold tedium at bay.

And if experiencing this blast from the past weren’t troubling enough, I also get to confront my current failings as a parent. After all, we park the kiddos in front of SpongeBob because it’s convenient for us, not good for them. (“Quiet time,” we call it. Let’s please not dwell on how sad and perverse this phrase is.) We make this bargain every day, even though our kids are often restless and irritable afterward. ...

Still, I can’t be the only parent feeling whiplashed by the pace of technological changes, the manner in which every conceivable wonder — not just the diversions but also the curriculums and cures, the assembled beauty and wisdom of the ages — has migrated inside our portable machines. Is it really possible to hand kids these magical devices without somehow dimming their sense of wonder at the world beyond the screen?

In the course of mulling this question, I stumbled across an odd trove of videos (on YouTube, naturally) in which parents proudly record their babies operating iPads. One girl is 9 months old. Her ability to manipulate the touch screen is astonishing. But the clip is profoundly eerie. The child’s face glows like an alien as she scrolls from app to app. It’s like watching some bizarre inverse of Skinner’s box, in which the child subject is overrun by choices and stimuli. She seems agitated in the same way my kids are after “quiet time” — excited without being engaged.

As I watched her in action, I found myself wondering how a malleable brain like hers might be shaped by this odd experience of being the lord of a tiny two-dimensional universe. And

whether a child exposed to such an experience routinely might later struggle to contend with the necessary frustrations and mysteries of the actual world.²⁶

He adds later:

The reason people turn to screens hasn't changed much over the years. They remain mirrors that reflect a species in retreat from the burdens of modern consciousness, from boredom and isolation and helplessness.²⁷

Christian Hope

Ann Ajet notes well:

The Spike Jonze movie *Her* contains interesting insights into the intersection between humans and disembodied voices. In it, a lonely man named Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) strikes up a relationship with a voice assistant similar to Alexa. “Samantha” (voiced by Scarlett Johansson) is a sweet voice that Theodore comes to love. But he is left brokenhearted in the end, for while Samantha speaks of her love for him, her evolving abilities far eclipse Theodore’s limited world. She tells him:

I used to be so worried about not having a body, but now I truly love it. I’m growing in a way I couldn’t if I had a physical form. I mean, I’m not limited. I can be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously. I’m not tethered to time and space in a way that I would be if I was stuck in a body that’s inevitably going to die.

This prescient film wisely understands that even as voice technology advances, no non-human, disembodied voice will ever offer the true connection we need. In the end, Samantha could not relate to Theodore because he, unlike her, was limited by a perishable body and finite intelligence. She didn’t want to give that up for the sake of loving him.

Enfleshed Word

Thankfully for us, God did what Samantha would not. He loved us so much that he left heaven to take on human flesh, in all its limitations, to dwell among us ([John 1:14](#)). God is not only a *voice*—one that speaks to us in creation ([Ps. 19](#)) and, even more directly, in Scripture—but an embodied *presence*. Immanuel. God with us.²⁸

²⁶ Almond, Steve. “My Kids are Obsessed with Technology, and It’s All My Fault.” *The New York Times Magazine*. June 21, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/23/magazine/my-kids-are-obsessed-with-technology-and-its-all-my-fault.html>

²⁷ Almond, Steve. “My Kids are Obsessed with Technology, and It’s All My Fault.” *The New York Times Magazine*. June 21, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/23/magazine/my-kids-are-obsessed-with-technology-and-its-all-my-fault.html>

²⁸ Ann Ajet, “Alexa, Do You Love Me?” *The Gospel Coalition*, (October 18, 2019). <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/alexa-do-you-love-me/>