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My iPhone Made Me Do It!

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My iPhone made me do it!

Kevin Timmer

I believe most of us sense that technology is impacting our lives, but often we do not completely understand how. It seems like technology is generally helpful, allowing us to do more things more quickly. Nevertheless, we might hesitate to declare it GOOD in a Genesis sort of way. In fact, technology feels like an intruder at times, distracting us from what is important and turning our priorities upside down. However, I think that most of us would also acknowledge that blaming their iPhone for their rude, anti-social behavior, is akin to blaming the fires of hell for the burnt beef roast they just pulled out of the oven. We know that our devices are tools and it's our responsibility to use them appropriately.

The realization that our tools are neither good nor evil in themselves may tempt us to conclude that they are harmless. However, it is a **dangerous** misconception to believe that our technologies are completely benign. Every human-made tool, from a sharpened stick to a microwave oven, is biased. The characteristics of each encourage certain behaviours and habits, while making others more difficult, as Andy Crouch might say (*Culture Making*, 2008). If I replaced my blunt stick with a sharp one, it would make poking and stabbing possible and pushing and prodding more difficult, if not impossible. In time, I would likely shape many of my habits and choices around sharp stick activities, leaving behind my old pushing and prodding methods. The same is true for a microwave. A microwave oven makes it possible to cook a small portion of food quickly, making it easier to heat up leftovers or a packaged meal. One result is that family members are less tied to a common eating schedule, which in turn makes it more difficult to maintain a regular family mealtime. In addition, with a microwave sitting on the countertop, conventional cooking starts to feel like a waste of time (and beef roast perhaps). Clearly, the microwave is not forcing us to abandon family mealtime, but its built-in characteristics make skipping family dinners a more doable option. I am not suggesting that sharp sticks, iPhones and microwave ovens are necessarily bad things, only that they are biased: they encourage certain behaviours. In a strict sense we have control over the extent to which we allow our technologies to shape our lives, but unless we vow to not use them at all, technologies always change the world and our interactions in it. If you play with sharp sticks, something or someone will inevitably end up getting poked.

Redefining normal patterns

While it may be easy to see how technology gives us new and important choices, it may not be clear how this is necessarily **dangerous**. God has created us to depend on him and to depend on each other as we love and serve in community. In fact, it is within our close, interdependent relationships where, through the work of the Holy Spirit, we often experience and share the gracious love of Christ most deeply. We need to depend on each other to know that we need God and to see God's active care for us through the love of others. In contrast, our culture values personal independence over meaningful relationships. We glorify self-sufficiency, giving rise to individualism. This cultural bias gets expressed and reinforced in and through the technologies that our society produces and eventually redefines what is considered to be the normal patterns of day-to-day life. (In fact, I suspect that in many circles it is no longer considered rude to let a text message distract you from a face-to-face conversation.) We need

to be cautious because these cultural currents are eroding our closest relationships, including our families, and with them, Christian community.

Our technologies are part of God's good creation, blessings that can open up many new and wonderful ways of serving, but they also come with cultural biases that can shape the way we interact with each other. So while our iPhones and other devices are not, by themselves, destroying our relationships, it is critical to remember that they come with characteristics that are, in concert with the surrounding cultural patterns, pulling us away from each other and ultimately from God. Using any technology brings risk. In fact, given our current individualistic cultural context, wisdom may require us to use less technology *in all things*.

Kevin Timmer is a Professor of Engineering at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa and enjoys exploring topics in renewable energy and responsible engineering design. This article was adapted from an essay originally published on inallthings.org, Dordt College, Sioux Center, IA. Republished with permission.