Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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A Campfire (Laptop) Story: Doing Technology

Justin R. Vander Werff

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Abstract

"We should critically evaluate everything we do and use as we live and work and love in God's creation."

Posting about a perceived juxtaposition between nature and technology from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

https://inallthings.org/a-campfire-laptop-story-doing-technology/

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*This article is part of our ongoing series: **Living with Intentionality**. Our lives are a series of decisions of how best to love others, care for our creation, seek good, prevent harm, and glorify God. We will highlight these articles where fellow believers make very intentional choices that can expand our imagination for what the Christian life—and the life of the mind—can accomplish.*

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Several years ago, I was enjoying a beautiful summer evening at a local campground. The rest of my family had retreated to the camper for the night, and I found myself alone by the campfire. I decided to get out my laptop and use the campground WiFi to take care of a few to-do list items. For some reason, it happened to strike me that something seemed odd about sitting outdoors under the trees and stars by a campfire while working online with a laptop. I immediately began thinking about *why* it felt "off", and why it even made me feel a little *guilty*? I surprised myself at my uncertainty, since I believe that a campfire built by human hands is a technological activity just as much as a laptop is a technological device. I also believe that a Christ-follower can in good conscience use a laptop, just as a Christ-follower can in good conscience enjoy a campfire. So why did it feel off? This question might be even more timely today since we all have these amazingly powerful handheld computers known as smartphones that we now use in every imaginable situation, perhaps some more appropriate than others.

Let's begin to explore this question by defining technology. We can get a cultural definition from Merriam-Webster, where technology is defined as "the practical application of knowledge especially in a particular area."[1] This definition is alright, but I tend to prefer one that grows out of a faithful Christian understanding of the wholeness of God's story. The book *Responsible Technology* provides such a definition: "a human cultural activity in which human beings exercise freedom and responsibility in response to God by forming and transforming the natural creation, with the aid of tools and procedures, for practical ends or purposes."[2] It seems like a campfire and a laptop fit both the cultural and the wholistic definitions. So why does it feel like they are at odds with each other?

Perhaps it is because technology is *value laden*.[3] Since technology comes from human hands, technological artifacts and activities inevitably have some sort of direction and purpose weaved

into them. A particular technological device can be used for something different than the original intent, but that possibility does not eliminate the baked-in starting point. The Spirit gives us a fascinating passage through the prophet Isaiah that speaks to this sort of technological direction, reflecting on the difference between a carpenter using wood to craft on idol or provide fuel for a fire.[4] So, does the weirdness of the campfire/laptop combination come because both were designed for two very different purposes? Perhaps.

Another reason for the perceived disconnect might be cultural appropriateness. *Responsible Technology* proposed design norms that the Christian should consider in developing technology.[5] These norms recognize the humanness of doing technology and go beyond simply the math or physics related to formation. One of these norms is the cultural norm, based on the biblical directive to love our neighbor and have "a basic respect for and understanding of the God-created and God-willed diversity found within creation and humankind."[6] This norm also recognizes the context surrounding technological development. "Designing technology is a creative, cultural activity that produces concrete cultural artifacts, drives historical development, and communicates deep cultural meaning."[7] There is probably a difference in the cultural appropriateness of a campfire versus a laptop at a campground. However, I think I would be hard-pressed to make a solid biblical argument for one or the other. Is there still something else going on?

One final comparison can be made by diving into a helpful discussion on doing technology by John Dyer in his book *From the Garden to the City*. He builds on an observation from Douglas Adams that we tend to view whatever is in the world when we are born as normal, whatever is developed after we are born and before we are thirty as "exciting and creative," and whatever is developed after we're thirty as "against the natural order of things and the beginning of the end of {civilization} as we know it until it's been around for about ten years when it gradually turns out to be alright really."[8] Dyer, I think, appropriately describes these as our "generational myths" concerning technology.[9] So, going back to our technological combination, although both campfire and laptop technology were developed prior to my thirtieth birthday, the laptop technology is much more recent. In fact, the use of laptops with wide-spread WiFi is recent enough to even fall past that critical thirtieth year for me, even though it might be a bit painful for me to admit it. So maybe my feeling of the disconnect between the laptop and the campfire simply has to do with my generational myths of each of those technological developments?

Here's a summary of a few thoughts that I have brought forth on why the juxtaposition of a campfire and a laptop feel weird: (1) they are different technologies, (2) they might have different values baked into their "DNA," (3) they might have differing degrees of cultural appropriateness, or (4) they are from different generational myths. I suppose in the end it is a bit of a combination of all four, along with other critiques that haven't been mentioned here.

So, what are some takeaways from this analysis? First, I hope we can recognize that technology is not "stuff," but that we *do* technology. God has called us to steward his creation,[10] and us

doing technology is inevitably part of being human in God's creation. Second, I hope this recognition pushes us to think carefully and biblically about how we do technology. We shouldn't assume that technological artifacts developed before we were born are fine and normal, and that recent developments are not; rather, we should critically evaluate everything we do and use as we live and work and love in God's creation. Finally, I hope that we can be salt and light in doing technology, that we can help others realize the amazing, exhilarating, at times terrifying, and always challenging responsibility God has given us in entrusting His creation to our care.

Will I use a laptop by a campfire again? Perhaps. Will you find yourself in some similar technological juxtaposition in the future? Likely. I pray that as we do technology according to God's call, the Spirit will be at work showing us whether we are truly serving the Lord, loving our neighbor, and living the moment in gratitude for God's creation and His work in us.

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2. Editor Stephen V. Monsma, *Responsible Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 19.

3. Derek C. Schuurman, *Shaping a Digital World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 15.

4. Isaiah 44:13-17

5. *Responsible Technology*, 170

6. *Responsible Technology*, 172

7. Ethan J. Brue, Derek C. Shuurman, and Steven H. VanderLeest, *A Christian Field Guide to Technology for Engineers and Designers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 76

8. Douglas Adams, "How to Stop Worrying and Learn to Love the Internet," September 1, 1999. https://douglasadams.com/dna/19990901-00-a.html. Retrieved May 12, 2022

9. John Dyer, From the Garden to the City (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011), 26

10. Genesis 1:28, Genesis 2:15, etc