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Technology at Every Moment

Justin Vander Werff

Dordt College, justin.vanderwerff@dordt.edu

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Technology at Every Moment

Abstract

"We interact with technology every day, every minute, pretty much every second. And on rare occasions, we may stop to ponder how technology is affecting our lives and relationships."

Posting about how technology affects the way people relate to each other 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-at-every-moment/>

Keywords

In All Things, technology, communication, stewardship, culture, justice, relationships

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Comments

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

Technology At Every Moment

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Justin Vander Werff

This is post #6 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](#)
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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?

A few weeks ago, my wife and I had the privilege of finalizing the adoption of our 11-month-old son. Because of surrounding circumstances, it was quite uncertain whether the finalization was going to occur at this hearing or if it was going to be the beginning of a long and winding road of hearings, legal paperwork, and more uncertainty. Consequently, friends and family were praying fervently for us and very interested in hearing how things went. As it turned out, the Lord answered our prayers in an amazing way, allowing the entire finalization to proceed in that hearing and in the course of 15 minutes or so transitioning us from all that uncertainty to our son being fully and permanently a member of our family. What a celebration it was! And this was a 21st-century celebration, because with a couple text messages and a Facebook post, friends and family from Chicagoland to California to Oklahoma to northwest Iowa were enjoying the picture of our family's and the judge's wide smiles behind the bench of that courtroom. Brothers and sisters in Christ all over the country were praising God and celebrating with us!

Communication technology certainly played a role in bringing us closer together on that great day. However, on the flip side, did the convenience of that [Facebook](#) communication prevent us from having deeper one-on-one phone conversations or even person-to-person visits sharing the exciting news? Perhaps.

We interact with technology every day, every minute, pretty much every second. And on rare occasion, we may stop to ponder how technology is affecting our lives and relationships. Especially with the proliferation of social media, it is difficult to not think about how current tools of communication play a formative role in our relationships and interactions with each other. In fact, even the term “social media” aptly captures an interaction between relationships (social) and technology (media). So, in a brief moment of clarity and introspection, we may find ourselves asking the question: “Is technology bringing us together or pushing us apart?”

This question is an interesting one. One of the most important things to note about the question is the underlying assumption of what “technology” is. When we are posed the question of how technology is affecting our relationships, we may all quickly think about how our relationships are affected by social

media, the Internet, or text messaging. However, we are probably less likely to think about how our relationships are affected by the telephone, the automobile, single-family dwellings, or even sound systems in church sanctuaries. Why is this? Everything I've mentioned is clearly an example of technology. However, it seems that we are prone to think of technology only as recently developed technology, and often our perceptions and biases toward technology reflect this tendency.¹

Given the ambiguity of the term "technology," we need to be much more precise in stating what technology we are considering in the original question of whether it is bringing us together or pushing us apart. Technology is an integral part of God's plan for His creation and has been since the beginning, as we see in the creational mandate in Genesis 1:28 and the call to "work" and "keep" the garden in Genesis 2:15. Simply critiquing technology as a whole will not suffice. Our evaluation of how bicycle technology affects our relationships would likely be vastly different than how satellite technology does so. Since new communication technology is likely what most of us think about in terms of what affects our relationships, I am going to focus on that technology for the remainder of this article.

So, how do we carefully and biblically consider the question of whether new communication technology is bringing us together or pushing us apart? Here is a framework to use to evaluate how technology is effecting our human relationships according to *Responsible Technology (RT)*²

1. **Cultural Appropriateness.** While another article could be devoted to critiquing the cultural appropriateness of new communication technology like social media and text messaging, for now I am going to simply suggest that, given our culture's proficiency with computers, telephones, and similar devices, recent developments in communication technology seem to be culturally appropriate.

2. **Open Communication** is interesting with regards to current communication technology. On the surface, it seems that technological tools like social media and text messaging do nothing but enhance open communication and thus promote and strengthen relationships with respect to this principle. Upon closer inspection, however, I suggest that almost all our new communication tools promote only one-sided communication that does not bring with it the full relational experience that face-to-face (or voice-to-voice) interaction does.

A recent article by ESPN captured well how this phenomenon tragically resulted in a college student taking her own life.³ She apparently was unable to reconcile the social media stories of her friends' lives with the reality of her own life, all the while portraying an equally-as-false rose-colored story of her own life on social media. Current communication technology, in the hands of mere creatures such as us, does not promote honest and open communication.

3. **Stewardship.** One big stewardship-related question is whether current communication technology promotes the stewardship of our time. The Bible is clear that, while there is famously a time for "everything" (Ecclesiastes 3), we are responsible to use our time wisely (consider Proverbs 6:6, for example). There are ways that technology can promote stewardly use of time in our relationships, such as when we have a simple tidbit of information that can easily be relayed via text message such as, "I am here," or "Lunch at noon." However, social media in particular can, as any of us who use it know all too well, cause us to waste huge amounts of time.

Why is it so easy to glance at the tablet or computer screen with the noble motive of finding that one crucial piece of information from a friend in a Facebook post, only to find ourselves emerging hours later having consumed gossip, cute-but-artificially-cheerful pictures of our friends' kids, and one or two soapbox rants, but having accomplished absolutely nothing in terms of true relationship building? Are we personally responsible because of our own issues with self-discipline? Sure. But the technology itself is designed to suck you into conversations you were previously unaware of, so the technology itself definitely holds some

of the blame as well.

4. **Delightful harmony.** I propose that new communication technology does this quite well. The idea of this principle is that technology that truly loves neighbor is simple (and even delightful) to use and that it encourages harmonious relationships. The proliferation of social media, smart phones, etc., shows that people find the technology usable. The encouragement of harmonious relationships is a bigger question, and in a way really what this whole article is about, but at least on its surface new communication technology certainly allows communication between individuals, between those in a similar culture or society, and even between those in different cultures and societies that was never possible before. However, an interesting question to ask is whether the quality and harmony of relationships with those in close proximity to you are affected by communication technology in the same ways as those who are further away. For now, I'll just ask the question, but let's keep this in mind as we consider the rest of the principles.

5. **Justice** seems to be promoted reasonably well by modern communication technology. While it is true that economic inequality certainly plays a role in who has access to the communication tools that are prevalent in our day, it is also true that these tools have become available for large portions of the population in Western society and even around the world. Libraries typically provide Internet access free-of-charge. Also, an increasingly popular service project in developing nations is to build cell phone charging stations, because cell phones are often prevalent in these regions despite not always having reliable power sources.⁴

6. **Caring.** How well modern communication technology does with promoting caring is interesting to ponder. On one hand, instantly sharing pictures and status updates and easily having [Skype](#) conversations with friends and family around the globe increases our ability to care for each other when physical location gets in the way. However, I suspect that our tendency to use technological tools for conversations with those who are also physically close to us could contribute to less caring interactions (at least as they are expressed physically and emotionally) to those with whom we live in close proximity. The ease of posting a quick comment or sending a brief text message may lead us to use one of those options when in the past we would have been forced to drop in for a visit or at minimum have a phone conversation.

7. The final principle, **trust**, may be one where new communication technology is most lacking and perhaps could have the greatest effect on our relationships. As mentioned previously, the way that communication technology allows us to share only the "good stuff" with everyone else, and our tendency to do just that, is not very helpful in developing trust in our relationships. In addition, since communication via email and text messages lose the aural inflections and verbal emotion that are part of a telephone conversation and the facial expressions that are part of face-to-face interaction, these messages often result in us missing the true intention of the communicator and, I suggest, play a role in the trust we place in the communication or even the communicator.

Okay, so now that we've conducted a more systematic critique of current communication technology, can we answer the question? Does today's communication technology bring us together? Yes. Does it push us apart? Yes.

In the analysis in the preceding paragraphs, we noted that related to the principles of delightful harmony and caring, today's communication technology seems to be helpful for relationships with those whom we are emotionally close to but don't live close to, whereas it may be detrimental for relationships with those whom we could visit in person on a daily basis. Also, based on the principle of trust, communication technology seems to negatively affect relationships. The other principles reveal a mixed bag, with some definitely-negative observations but also some benefits related to our relationships with others. What does

this mean?

I propose that it should challenge us not to simply abandon all new communication technology, but rather we should be mindful of how we are using technological tools and make sure that we use them in ways that benefit our relationships rather than tear down our relationships. Simply being thoughtful about the way we use technological communication tools rather than mindlessly going with the flow and using technology for technology's sake should make a large difference in the way that technology affects our relationships.

Are we simply riding the wave of communication technology, measuring its temperature and simply using it like everyone else does without actively thinking about how it is affecting our relationships? Or are we actively engaging communication technology by using it thoughtfully in ways that enhance our relationships, perhaps even being thermostats⁵ in our social circles to adjust the temperature of new technology's effect on our relationships?

Footnotes

1. John Dyer, in his book *From the Garden to the City: the Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011) does a nice job of pointing out that our tendency is to view technology as only that which was invented after the time we are 30 years old or so. ↩
2. Stephen V. Monsma, ed., *Responsible Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), pp.170-177.4. This book fleshes out norms for technology that are outworkings of Herman Dooyeweerd's [modal aspects](#).⁵ In brief, these aspects and the subsequent design norms are an attempt to recognize the holistic nature of the creation-fall-redemption narrative in which God has placed us and apply this holistic understanding to technological development. ↩
3. Kate Fagan, "[Split Image](#)," May 7, 2015. ↩
4. Kristopher Hatchell, Kerry Patterson, and A. Fort Gwinn, Jr., "Engineering that Makes a Difference: A Faith-Based Approach to Community Development in the Ulpan Valley of Guatemala", *Proceedings of the 2013 Christian Engineering Conference*, June 2013, Atlanta, GA. ↩
5. The idea of challenging Christians to be thermostats in the culture rather than simply thermometers is credited to Martin Luther King, Jr., as presented by Brian J. Walsh in his book (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), orig 1992) 29. ↩