Information Technology: Using It or Being Used By It?
Xenos Summer Institute – 2013

Introduction

Most American Christians think superficially about the moral implications of information technology (IT).

- They are like most non-Christian Americans in their naïve approval of technology.

- But they tend to miss the moral and spiritual implications of *the over-use of IT*.

- See good overviews of some of the consequences of IT over-use in Tony Doukopil's *Newsweek* article "Is the Internet Making Us Crazy?" (http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/07/08/is-the-internet-making-us-crazy-what-the-new-research-says.html) and Sherry Turkle's *New York Times* article "The Flight from Conversation" (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/opinion/sunday/the-flight-from-conversation.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) because it distills research-based concerns about the effect of IT on FTF relating (see below).

  THESIS: IT over-use inhibits and/or erodes key elements of our humanity and (biblical) spirituality.

The ability to follow sophisticated thought-progression

Paul wrote Romans to all Christians, expecting them to be able to follow his argument. The same is true of Hebrews, etc. This is a key part of being "accustomed to the Word" (Heb. 5:13), without which Christians will not mature.

But those habituated to the stimulation of internet surfing, texting, You-Tubing, etc. tend not to develop or value this ability; instead they tend to view it as boring and unimportant.

- This is the main concern of Nicholas Carr in his Pulitzer Prize-nominated *The Shallows*: "I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I feel it most strongly when I'm reading. I used to find it easy to immerse myself in a book or a lengthy article. My mind would get caught up in the twists of the narrative or the turns of the argument . . . That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration starts to drift after a page or two. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to

do. I feel like I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle."[1]

- This was the concern of author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who in *1978* critiqued American culture for its ". . . forfeited right of people *not to know*, not to have their divine souls stuffed with gossip, nonsense, vain talk. A person who works and leads a meaningful life has no need for this excessive and burdening flow of information . . . hastiness and superficiality (are the) psychic diseases of the twentieth century."[2]

The value of solitude for reflection & biblical meditation

Scripture speaks of our need to be wait for God in silence (Ps. 62:1), and it extols the value of meditating on His Word (Ps. 1:2,3). Our fallen-natures are already deeply allergic to these spiritual activities, and Satan already does a great job of distracting us from them.

But IT over-use promotes a restless addiction to external stimulation which makes such priorities irrelevant and increasingly impossible.

- Robert Iger boasts: "I get up at 4:30 every morning. I like the quiet time. It's a time I can recharge my batteries a bit. I exercise and clear my head and I catch up on the world. I read the newspaper. I look at e-mail. I surf the Web. I watch a little TV, all at the same time. I call it my quiet time, but I'm already multitasking. I love listening to music, so I'll do that in the morning, too, when I'm exercising and watching the news."[3]

- Decades ago, Jacques Ellul warned that the person absorbed by modern communication media "falls prey to these ways of acquiring information . . . (and is) profoundly incapable of meditation and reflection."[4]

- Todd Gitlin observes: "Even as we click around, something *feels* uniform—a relentless pace, a pattern of interruption, a pressure toward unseriousness, a readiness for sensation, an anticipation of the next new thing."[5]

- David Levy, a University of Washington professor who studies high-tech communications and quality of life, acknowledges that young people have become adept at managing multiple sources of information at once, but he worries that their

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[1] Carr, Nicholas (2010-06-06T15:00:00+00:00). The Shallows (Kindle Locations 123-124). W. W. Norton & Company. Kindle Edition.

[2] Aleksandr I. Solzhensitsyn, *A World Split Apart*, trans. Irina Ilovayskaya Alberti (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), pp. 25,27.

[3] Robert Iger, quoted in Andy Borowitz, "My Quiet Time," *The New Yorker*, June 1, 2009, p. 45.

[4] Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, p. 87.

[5] Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002), p. 7.

ability to multitask has curbed their "ability to focus on a single thing, the ability to be silent and still inside, basically the ability to be unplugged and content."[6]

The ability to appreciate & learn from nature

Because God created nature, He has instilled many lessons in it for our instruction. Solomon and Jesus constantly drew attention to these lessons (cf. Prov. 6:6-11; Matt. 6:26-30). The immensity of nature helps us to cultivate humility, which includes the fact that God (not we) is the Center of the universe (Rom. 1:20,21). The beauty of nature is one of the key ways of appreciating the beauty of God (Ps. 19:1) and one of the key foretastes of the New Heavens and the New Earth.

But those who over-use IT tends to be bored by natured and blinded to its great lessons.

- Atheist Thomas de Zengotita observes that excessive IT usage promotes narcissism, and (ironically) points out that nature is important for humanity sanity because of its "benign indifference to our existence."[7]

- See the perverse irony of "Roughing It" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n69r9S0wfg4)

The value of memorizing Scripture

God calls His people to memorize His Word. The Psalmist models the importance of hiding God's Word in our hearts (Ps. 119:11). Extemporaneous teachings in the New Testament are studded with memorized Old Testament quotations (see Acts 2,3,7). Paul' commands all Christians to be saturated with the word of Christ (Col. 3:16), which implies memorization since few could afford written scriptures.

But IT's emphasis on ease of access to information undermines the importance of memorization. Scripture memorization is in eclipse, which will result in incalculable loss for Christians and the people they influence.

- SPIRITUAL NOURISHMENT AND GROWTH: Biblical meditation[8] is crucial for spiritual health and fruitfulness (Ps. 1:2,3). But how can we meditate without first memorizing passages?

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[6] Cited in Mireya Navarro, "Parents Fret That Dialing Up Interferes With Growing Up," *New York Times*, October 23, 2005.

[7] Thomas de Zengotita, *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Our World and the Way We Live in It* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006).

[8] "Taste the goodness of your Redeemer. . . chew the honeycomb of his words, suck their flavor which is sweeter than honey, swallow their wholesome sweetness; chew by thinking, suck by understanding, swallow by loving and rejoicing." Anselm, "Meditation on Human Redemption," *Anselm of Canterbury: Volume One*, ed., trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1974), 137.

- SPIRITUAL PROTECTION & WARFARE: Jesus defeated Satan in the wilderness by saying: "It is written . . ." (Matt. 4:4,7,11). How can we do this without first memorizing passages?

- ENCOURAGEMENT & COUNSEL: How can we encourage people with God's Word unless we are regularly meditating on what we have memorized (Isa. 50:4)? How can we counsel people with God's Word unless we have memorized it (Col. 3:16)?

The prioritization of face-to-face relating

Paul's inspired letters tell us that his face-to-face (FTF) communication provides something that his letters alone cannot supply (see Rom. 1:10-12; 1 Thess. 2:17-3:10). John makes the same point (see 2 Jn. 1:12; 3 Jn. 1:13,14). Most of the "one another" commands that cultivate quality Christian community require face-to-face communication. This is because God has created us as *embodied persons*, flesh and spirit beings—so that fully human (and therefore fully spiritual) interaction requires bodily presence. In light of this, the very idea of "cyber-church" is a contradiction in terms, and the suggestion that a quality smart phone app can "keep your people connected to the life of the church" is ridiculous.

But IT over-use assumes a Gnostic denial of this priority, and wrongly values transcending physical limitations over face-to-face communication. Consider what IT over-use costs us in this crucial area:

- It *seduces* us from spending precious time and energy that should go into FTF relating.

- It makes us *aversive* to FTF relating.

  Sherry Turkle: "In today's workplace, young people who have grown up fearing conversation show up on the job wearing earphones. Walking through a college library or the campus of a high-tech start-up, one sees the same thing: we are together, but each of us is in our own bubble, furiously connected to keyboards and tiny touch screens."[9]

  Christine Rosen: "(A) young woman writing in the *Times* admitted, 'I consistently trade actual human contact for the more reliable high of . . . winks on Match.com, and pokes on Facebook.' That she finds these online relationships more *reliable* is telling: it shows a desire to avoid the vulnerability and uncertainty that true friendship entails. Real intimacy requires risk—the risk of

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[9] Sherry Turkle, "The Flight From Conversation," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2012.

disapproval, of heartache, of being thought a fool. Social networking websites may make relationships more reliable, but whether those relationships can be humanly satisfying remains to be seen."[10]

- It *distracts* us when we are relating FTF, thus encouraging rudeness, poor listening, and loss of opportunity in our conversations.

  Sherry Turkle: "My students tell me about an important new skill: it involves maintaining eye contact with someone while you text someone else; it's hard, but it can be done . . . In conversation we (must) . . . attend to tone and nuance. In conversation, we are called upon to see things from another's point of view. Face-to-face conversation unfolds slowly. It teaches patience. (But) when we communicate on our digital devices, we learn different habits."

  Tony Doukopil: "More than two thirds of these normal, everyday cyborgs, myself included, report feeling their phone vibrate when in fact nothing is happening. Researchers call it 'phantom-vibration syndrome.'"[11]

- It encourages *narcissism*. Instead of being forced out of our self-focus to focus on truth and other people, IT over-use encourages and facilitates making ourselves the center of our universe.

  Christine Rosen on social networking: "Does this technology, with its constant demands to collect (friends and status), and perform (by marketing ourselves), in some ways undermine our ability to attain what it promises—a surer sense of who we are and where we belong? The Delphic oracle's guidance was *know thyself*. Today, in the world of online social networks, the oracle's advice might be *show thyself*."[12]

- It encourages *incivility*. There is something about the "safety" of IT relating that erodes respect for how our words are affecting others.

  Sherry Turkle: "We want to move in and out of where we are because the thing we value most is control over where we focus our attention. We have gotten used to the idea of being in a tribe of one, loyal to our own party . . . Human relationships are rich; they're messy and demanding. We have learned the habit of cleaning them up with technology. (But in) the move from

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[10] Christine Rosen, "Virtual Friendship & the New Narcissism" (*The New Atlantis*, Summer, 2007), p. 31.

[11] Tony Doukopil, "Is the Internet Making Us Crazy?" *Newsweek*, July 9, 2012.

[12] Christine Rosen, "Virtual Friendship & the New Narcissism" (*The New Atlantis*, Summer, 2007), p. 16.

> conversation to connection . . . we short-change ourselves. Worse, it seems that over time we stop caring."

> Quentin Schultze: "Real community means to be in relationship in the flesh or for that to be a possibility *in situ*. The advantage of cyber-community is that you can just log off if you don't want to deal with a member of your community anymore. Human relations take on a quality of temporariness and proceed on strictly cost-benefit lines."[13]

- It *deceives* us into believing that we are relationally healthy when we may actually be profoundly hollow and alienated.

> Kevin Adler: "The average number of friends that a user has on Facebook has gone from about 150 to 300 in only two years. We're losing all sense of what a friendship actually means. We are more connected than ever before, yet all these people feel completely disconnected from the communities where they met, the context of the relationships."[14]

> Sherry Turkle: "We expect more from technology and less from one another and seem increasingly drawn to technologies that provide the illusion of companionship without the demands of relationship . . . Our new devices have turned being alone into a problem that can be solved . . . We think constant connection will make us feel less lonely (but) the opposite is true."

A constructive response to IT over-use

First, we need to affirm from the heart that, although technology in general and IT in particular are not in themselves evil, they are nevertheless enmeshed in and used by Satan's world-system (1 Jn. 5:19). Just as the over-desire for good things like physical pleasure and material goods and personal accomplishment is worldly (1 Jn. 2:15,16), so also is the over-use of IT. We desperately need to reclaim this theological conviction and affirm that relating counter-culturally to IT is a key aspect of Christian faithfulness.

"One of the major conditions for such resistance and redirection is the existence of a community which perceives in technology significant *disvalue*, and whose shared values provide it with a place to stand as it tries to limit or redirect technology."[15]

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[13] Quentin J. Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age (Baker Academic*, 2002), p. 10.

[14] Kevin Adler, owner of inthis.co, which designs an online potluck app to bring real-life contacts together for more personal relating. *Christianity Today*, "Here's To the Misfits," May, 2013, Vol. 57, No. 4., p. 48.

[15] Paul F. Camenisch, "Medical Technologies and Communities of Value," in *Technological Change*, 128-29.

Second, we need to teach that there is such a thing as IT gluttony, and point out the negative consequences of IT over-use (see above).

- We should make this a key application point in Bible teachings on Christian community, the world-system, etc.

- We should be willing to challenge one another with questions like: "Do I *prefer* face-to-face relating over communication via information technology? If not, why not?" and "Do I *contain* my usage of information technology and *resist* its encroachment? If not, why not?"

- Paul's principles in 1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23 can help us to move in this direction without becoming legalistic. The issue is not whether IT usage is "lawful"/"permissible," but rather whether this usage is "edifying" (e.g., checking your phone while conversing with people is very rude and counter-productive), whether it is "profitable" (e.g., using a smart phone at Bible studies when you know it puts you in "distraction mode"), and whether it will "master" you (e.g., spending several hours/day on gaming or social media is a signal to take drastic action).

Third, in addition to "fleeing" IT over-use (see 1 Tim. 6:11a; 2 Tim. 2:22a), we should actively "pursue" (see 1 Tim. 6:11b; 2 Tim. 2:22b) the good way of life which excessive IT usage counterfeits. Why? Because unless we "pursue," we will ultimately be unable to "flee." It is when we experience the goodness of God's way that we are strengthened to resist the counterfeit.

- Ask yourself and one another questions like:

  "Do I schedule regular face-to-face time with family, Christian brothers and sisters, and non-Christians? If not, why not?"

  "Am I growing in my enjoyment of and effectiveness in personal conversation (e.g., listening; full attention; etc.)?"

  "Am I cultivating an ability to be alone before God, and to enjoy nature?"

  "Am I growing in my ability to memorize and mediate on scripture, and to read longer and more sophisticated texts—or do I rationalize these areas as unimportant?"

- Set concrete goals in the above areas!

Fourth, we need to create cultures (or sub-cultures) within our churches which pursue the above "pursuing" measures *together*. Such cultures are more powerfully transforming than individual disciplines, and they tend to find their way to the proper use of IT.[16] Healthy cultures will include:

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[16] "Information technology seems to amplify the relational patterns and problems *already in place*: families that have healthy and frequent conversations find technology aiding that process, while families without such

- Making personal discipleship (mentor and peer) the practical "engine" that drives Christian community. This prioritizes regular FTF relating in which we talk to God, study and discuss scripture, encourage and challenge one another, spur one another on to love others in the same way. Notice how this positively counteracts so many of the liabilities of IT over-use!

- Urging single Christians to live together to practice real Christian community. Such households (like healthy families) should agree to limits on their IT usage.

- Using small group and personal discipleship meetings to periodically practice and share Bible memorization and meditation. Each person memorizes a passage of his/her choosing. At the meetings, he explains why he chose this passage, he recites it, and he explains how memorizing and meditation on it affected him.

- Periodic retreats for concentrated teaching, fellowship and prayer in a nature setting. We encourage our home groups should do this at least twice a year. Our high school summer camp does this for a week, and we notice much less IT usage for obvious reasons.

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healthy interactions find that technology exacerbates the isolation of its members."George Barna: "How Technology is Influencing Families," May 23, 2011.