

21B MORE ON SCREEN TECHNOLOGY

Introduction

“Screen technology” commonly refers to television, video games, computers, and smartphones.

The advantages of such devices are huge:

- 24 hour access to news, local and international
- Almost immediate communication with family members and friends
- Ability to search almost any topic
- Access to thousands of older books and movies
- Access to thousands of journal articles
- Ability to livestream or watch seminars and sermons
- Ability to have camera, web searching, texting, and phoning all in one device

Many of those over 50 think, “If only this technology had existed when I was in school!”

Disadvantages

Coupled with nearly every advance are unwanted consequences. Screen technology can be addicting, and social media algorithm designers aim to keep users interacting with their sites. Many teens spend 8 hours a day, 7 days a week on electronic media, far more time than most adults spend at work. [1]

Hours spent in front of a screen can injure kids in numerous ways:

- Unhealthy messages
- Algorithms that push users towards an extreme position
- Narrowed world
- Hours spent on trivia
- Inappropriate content
- Social media- comparisons, envy, bullying
- Lack of face-to-face interactions
- Lack of exercise
- Lack of sleep
- Lack of outdoor activity
- Lack of confidence-building activities

The results, coupled to increased screen use, are disturbing: [2]

- Increase in cases of ADHD
- Continual distraction
- Decrease in empathy

- Decrease in learning
- Lack of focus
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Reclusiveness
- Actual brain changes, shown by MRI's
- Lessened self-control
- Increased obesity
- Losing touch with the real world
- Texting while driving
- Diminished resilience
- Inability to interview for jobs

“The more we become used to just sound bites and tweets, the less patient we will become with more complex, more meaningful information.”[3]

Because of lack of use, “the brain weeds out neural pathways that are necessary for becoming good face-to-face communicators.” [4]

Strong emotional intelligence requires hours of face-to-face interaction. [5]

According to psychologist Nicholas Kardaras in *Digital Madness*, teens are particularly affected in a negative way by massive doses of screen time, especially social media. Results include boredom, apathy, isolation, and depression. We were not, he says, intended to live sedentary, isolated, screen-dependent lives. [6]

Screen technology needs to be seen as a tool, not a toy.

Addictions

Screen technology makes it easier to feed our non-physical addictions, whether gambling, shopping, collecting, gaming, or porn. Even if we are not addicted to video games or social media, we risk becoming information addicts.

The inability to resist checking email or Facebook rather than focus on the person talking to us leads to what the sociologist Erving Goffman, a masterly observer of social interaction, called an “away,” a gesture that tells the other person “I’m not interested” in what’s going on here and now. [7]

Screen technology and Christian growth

As handy as Bible apps are for putting verses at our fingertips, there are a number of difficulties that we may encounter:

- It is too easy to move from a verse /passage web page to a game site instead of to a time of prayer.
- Kids may think that a Bible on a phone has the same value as a website or a Wikipedia entry.
- When we search for passages or theology via Google we need to remember that the search engine produces results based on greatest number of hits or Google's unique algorithm.

(If misused, Bible software contributes to a decline of wisdom, diminishes our ability to internalize God's Word wisely, allows us to overlook the importance of context, and can turn our study of the Bible into a search for material to support our preconceptions.

Bible software can also contribute, ironically, to biblical illiteracy. For example, some may no longer see a need to internalize Scripture by memorizing portions of it. After all, if the entire Bible is at our fingertips via software, why bother memorizing it? Or why bother studying it? [8]

Limitations

We need to keep in mind the limitations associated with electronic media:

- Texts are very handy for quick communication, not for conveying deep ideas.
(Can U get here by 4? Thx.)
- Emails are very handy for company updates and attaching documents, not for developing relationships.
- Social media is handy for staying in touch with friends, not for self-identity.

Screen technology and our souls

Instead of asking what a given technology will do to our jobs, our economy, our lifestyle, we need to be asking: What will this do to our souls?

What does technology do to our thinking?

We were not designed to sit passively in front of a screen for eight hours or more. Even if our job requires hours of computing, we need break up the time with activity and human interaction.

Educated people used to read four or five books in a month. Today they may look at hundreds of websites and may possibly complete one book in a month.

Lewis Mumford wrote about the prior technology: "To control the external environment we had to learn the laws of its behavior. As a result, we had a strong picture of objective reality." In contrast, says Cary Gray, today, in the computer world, there are few limits. "Our experiences,

habits and thoughts shape our expectations, character, and self-understanding. The computer programmer shapes a universe in which he or she alone is the lawgiver. In the virtual world you could conceivably create, or do, or be, anything.” [9]

Consider:

- What does technology do to our concept of the self?
- What does technology do to our human relationships?
- What does technology do to our relationship with God?

Conclusions

Groothuis writes:

Cyberspace may be the greatest temptation yet offered to humanity to lose its soul in diversion. Having the senses inundated with information or overwhelmed with stimulation is not conducive to a soul finding serenity in the knowledge of the truth. [10]

With each technology we should ask:

- Am I more human or less human?
- Am I closer to God or not?
- Am I more Christ-like or less?
- How self-centered am I? How patient and forgiving as a result of using this?

Throw away all our devices? Not possible. Learn to limit our use and return to outdoor activity and personal interaction? Absolutely.

References

1. Kersting, T., *Disconnected*, Baker, 2020.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Kersting, p. 29.
5. Kersting, p. 139.
6. Kardaras, N., *Digital Madness*, St. Martin's Press, 2022, p. 49.
7. Goleman, D., *Focus*, Harper, 2015, p. 9.
8. Velarde, R., “Bible Software and the Decline of Wisdom,” posted online October 15, 2008.
9. Quoted from Cary Gray, Computer Science Dept., Wheaton College.
10. Groothuis, D., *The Soul in Cyberspace*, Baker Books, 1997, p. 82.