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Technology, Social Networks, and Faithful Living

IN Gregory Stock's *The Book of Questions*, he posits this question for discussion: 'Assume there were a technological breakthrough that would allow people to travel as easily and cheaply between continents as between nearby cities. Unfortunately, there would also be 100,000 deaths per year from the device. Would you try to prevent its use?' When I pose this query to my students, the consensus is they would never allow the device to see the light of day. Apparently, getting from St Louis to London in fifty minutes isn't worth the potential loss of human life. But Dr Stock comes back to this question later in his book when he notes 'In the mid 1800s, had you been able to look into the future and see that the automobile would cause five million fatalities in the next century, how would you have felt about this new device?'¹ Yes, that works out to 100,000 deaths per year from the automobile, and yet no one questions or pushes back against its existence, nor do people deny it's better to drive one's Honda to the movies rather than

1. I can't recommend Stock's book enough for conversation starters or personal growth. <https://www.amazon.com/Book-Questions-Revised-Updated/dp/0761177310>

walk or take a horse carriage a distance of ten miles (except for Amish communities, perhaps). All of this is to say that when we introduce new technology, there are some drawbacks that we must recognize alongside the benefits.

In a similar fashion, inhabiting a world without online social networks is well-nigh impossible. I could sooner imagine my father without a nose than a world without Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, Whisper, and so on. Our world is hyperconnected and cyber-enmeshed, and it's unreasonable to think it will become less so.

Still, even though society has a given environment, our actions within it are not automatically good at best or neutral at worst. Social media and networking can be used for good or for evil. I don't think one can shout against the use of such platforms, nor can we expect to live 'off the grid' from any techno-reach. You can see this book is the result of technology—not the least because I wrote it on my laptop with Internet access—and when it's published, I fully expect to promote it on my Facebook and Twitter accounts. But the rapid speed of life brought on in our overly connected world means we have greater difficulty in slowing down and assessing if our experiences are good, noble, and true.

'What?': The Speed and Action of Technological Life

The Internet is not solely guilty of speeding up what was once a manageable human rate of existence, but it has certainly played a role in moving life velocity several Machs upward. The American architect and theorist Buckminster Fuller [1895-1983] coined the term 'knowledge doubling curve.' From his research, Fuller discerned that until the twentieth century, the amount of human knowledge in the world doubled nearly every century. At the end of the Second World War, the rate changed to where knowledge was doubling every twenty-five years. Now, well over a quarter-century after the first World Wide Web browser was

released to the general public, human knowledge doubles every thirteen months. And IBM estimates that we could eventually hit a critical mass of knowledge doubling every *twelve hours!*²

This speed affects us in a variety of ways. First, our brains cannot process life at its warp speed. It is true that we can increase the processing speed of our brains, which are blessed with a reasonable amount of neurological plasticity. We can make new pathways, new connections, and increase the amount of neural circuits. Our brains can be highly adaptable organs.³ However, we still have to make deliberate decisions about what we will pay attention to and what we need to dump by the side of the cyber-road. There is only so much information overload we can reasonably handle. A good analogy is your cable, satellite, or Internet television service. Whether you are a patron of Charter, Comcast, DirecTV, Dish Network, SlingTV, or YouTubeTV, you practically end up with a handful of channels that become your favorite; there is much of your product you don't (and can't) reasonably use.

Secondly, the speed of technological information makes it difficult to discern what information is true and what isn't. Granted, there is digital media that is deliberately satirical and makes no pretense of being legitimate news sites; examples include The Onion and the Babylon Bee. But when we get online and check out sites like CNN, Fox News, Bloomberg, *The Economist*, *The Guardian*, and others, we expect more light than heat.⁴ Yet the speed of the news cycle means the competition to

2. <http://www.industrytap.com/knowledge-doubling-every-12-months-soon-to-be-every-12-hours/3950>. Keep in mind there are several fields where knowledge doubling varies from the general average. For example, atomic engineering doubles its knowledge every two years.

3. <https://www.cognifit.com/science/cognitive-skills/processing-speed>

4. Although you might not agree fully with the plotting of this chart, Market Watch made an attempt to show where different sites fall on a spectrum of

get ratings and website hits and to be the first person or group to break the story has intensified. This can lead to a lack of fact-checking and a story that is less than true or helpful.

Also, the speed of life can play havoc with one's spiritual journey. I am not disdaining the use of technology in the church (our church has song lyrics on the screens for our 9 a.m. service, after all!), but when we allow ourselves to be carried away by a hyperconnected lifestyle and are constantly wedded to our devices, the chances are we are not rooted enough to abide in Jesus so that we can grow in the grace He provides. The Christian heart and will is nurtured and fortified when one takes conscious, deliberate steps to walk at Jesus' pace and not try to get Him to adjust to ours. I love what the late Michael Yaconelli says about how this happens:

Spiritual growth is not running faster ... Spiritual growth happens when we slow our activities down. If we want to meet Jesus, we can't do it on the run. If we want to stay on the road of faith, we have to hit the brakes, pull over to a rest area, and stop. Christianity is not about inviting Jesus to speed through life with us; it's about noticing Jesus sitting at the rest stop.⁵

'So What?': Technology and Life

I'm not asking any of us to go Amish and torch our computers and iPhones. I do think what's helpful is to take a sober look at how the connectedness of technology can be at once a benefit and a bane.

political bias and factual reporting. It's helpful for getting a wide-angle view of things, if nothing else. See <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/how-biased-is-your-news-source-you-probably-wont-agree-with-this-chart-2018-02-28>

5. From Yaconelli's book *Messy Spirituality: God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People*. I literally cannot praise this book too highly. It's simultaneously a passion-raiser and a soul-rescuer.