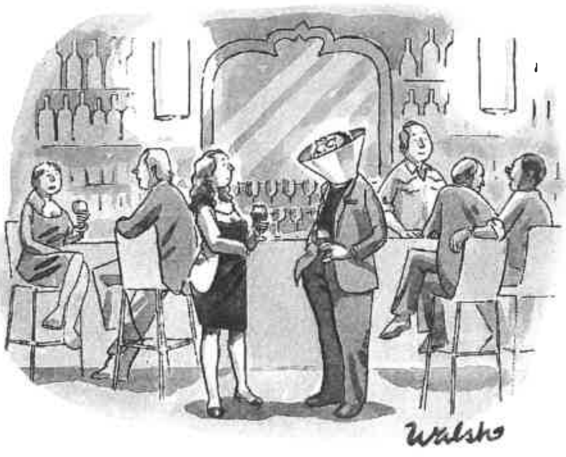
WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

Week Two:

How to think well... About technology



"It keeps me from looking at my phone every two seconds."

GRACE
MILLS RIVER

Keeping Technology in Its Proper Place: An Interview with Andy Crouch

Like most parents today, my husband and I spend a lot of time thinking about how to delay and limit screen use for our two children. Up until this year, smartphones and tablets have not been that big of an issue in our family because our kids, who are ages 12 and 6, do not have their own devices. But now that our daughter is in seventh grade, we increasingly find ourselves on the defensive, having to explain to her and even other adults in our social circle why she is one of just a few kids in her middle school without a cell phone and why we plan to keep it that way for as long as possible.

With new research linking smartphone use to teen loneliness, depression, and even suicide, more experts raising concerns over laptops in the classroom, and the ever-present threat of exposure to harder core pornographic material online, there are legitimate reasons for all of us to be concerned about the effects of technology on children's well-being and the health of family life. In his new book, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place*, former *Christianity Today* executive editor Andy Crouch digs into these issues, providing concerned parents with both encouragement and guidance. Crouch cites original research on family media use from the Barna Group and offers 10 steps to help families create a home life that is centered more around healthy relationships than on screens. I recently spoke with Crouch about how families can keep the ever-expanding arm of technology from encroaching upon healthy family life (this is a lightly edited version of our conversation).

Alysse ElHage: *How has technology—particularly smartphones and streaming devices—made life more difficult, especially for families?*

Andy Crouch: Well, I would put the smartphone, which is only 11 years old this year, in the context of a much more dramatic development, which is the introduction of technology into households generally. I really think of this as only about a 100- year-old story, where we've brought into our homes, really in a single lifetime, devices that largely work on their own and purport to make our lives dramatically easier and reduce certain kinds of toil and effort. When you think of how many devices have been introduced into the home over the last 100 years, I actually think the telephone, the microwave, and, of course, the television are at least as significant as the smartphone. A household, where family members used to depend on one another to provide for life together, now can be largely a place of leisure and consumption.

And this really changes what it is to be family. It notably reduces our dependence on one another. And this has accompanied a tremendous explosion of affluence in the United States and in the West—affluence which isn't evenly distributed. But the typical middle-class home now has so much more space for privacy, that is, places where you can be entirely alone. All of this has made us less dependent on one another. It means that, in particular, children don't see their parents exercising skill in the context of the household. And so while their parents may exercise a great deal of skill outside the home in the workplace, what children mainly see their parents doing is very much what they do, enjoying various kinds of leisure and play, watching TV, or checking Facebook or whatever. So I think you have to have that context, and then you add in another layer, which are these ubiquitous, glowing rectangles we have that now are just exquisitely customized to the preferences of each individual.

And the major decision in the design of the smartphone was really embodied in the name that Apple gave it, the iPhone. It was not the we-Phone. Think about the way that television was portrayed when it was introduced into American households. We have photographs from that time, which are kind of iconic, of the whole family sitting around and watching TV. And in retrospect, that probably wasn't such a great idea. But on the other hand, think about how communal that picture is of the family, at least the nuclear family, all having an experience together, sharing it in one room, sitting on a couch in physical proximity to one another, laughing at the same jokes, and so forth.

Now, every member of the household can have their own TV and their own device that is attuned to their particular desires. This is just one more step in a roughly century-long process of dissociating ourselves from one another. And I ultimately think that means dissociating ourselves from ourselves. Because I don't actually think we know ourselves until we know how we are known by others. And we find ourselves in relation to others, especially in the primary and formative context of the family. And the earlier and to the greater extent you introduce the smartphone into that, the more you disrupt that process of knowing and being known.

And let me say, there's a lot of anxiety about how children and teenagers use smartphones. But in some of the research that we did for *The Tech-Wise Family*, we asked teenagers what's the one thing they would like to change in their relationship with their parents if they could. And the number one answer the teenagers gave is they wish their parents would spend less time on their phones and more time talking to them.

My biggest concern is actually not about children or youth's use of these devices—though I think that is something to be very careful about—but about how parents use them and the effects on their marriages and the way they parent.

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Alysse ElHage: *In the book, you emphasize the importance of putting technology in its "proper place." For a healthy family life, if you could sum* *up the proper place for technology, where does it fit?*

Andy Crouch: Well, there's kind of a literal answer and a more figurative answer. The literal answer is: I think the best place for technology is at the edges or in the least central parts of our homes. I talk in the book about actually rearranging our living spaces as much as we can, so that the place where we spend the most time has the least technology—including screens, but not only screens. What do you really want at the heart of your home? I think even in these latter days when they sit down to dinner, people still want to sit, not around a table full of glowing things, but at a table with a different kind of glow, the glow of candlelight, and food that's been carefully and, hopefully, skillfully prepared.

So, in our own home, we have arranged as much as possible to have the devices, of all kinds, in peripheral areas. The only TV in our house is in the basement, which is not a place we go that often. The phones get parked in the kitchen when we come in the door. They get put into that charging station, and we don't generally carry them around unless we have a specific purpose to use them for. And if you walked into the main living area of our house, you'd have to look really closely to spot any technology in it. Certainly technology is not in the foreground, and it's not commanding attention. Instead, we have musical instruments. When the kids were younger, we had a place for them to draw and create art. We have books. We've got a fireplace, which is the original glowing rectangle, and a table where we eat. And we do not have any devices at that table, at least at the dinner hour or other meal times.

So, the literal sense of where is technology's proper place? It's at the margins, rather than taking over the central place where we spend the most time. Just staying literal for a moment, if there's one place that smartphones really do not belong for anyone, it's the bedroom. A very high proportion of teenagers, as well as adults, sleep with their smartphones—in the case of kids, literally in the bed with them. Maybe for adults, it's more often on a bedside table or something like that. But there are so many reasons not to have a smartphone in the bedroom. There are only two good reasons I know of: the concern that you be reached in an emergency by people you care about since a lot of people have “cut the cord” and don’t have a landline phone, and the other is to serve as an alarm clock. But I think the cost of a landline is very low compared to the cost of distraction and disengagement from one another if you’re married. And the cost of having these devices near our beds to a good night’s sleep is well documented at this point, especially for children. Teenagers, in particular, are texting one another all night—literally all night—and those notifications are coming in and disrupting their sleep. There are so many reasons to keep phones out of all our bedrooms.

The more metaphorical answer to your question about the “proper place” is that technology is wonderful for expressing human capacities. A very broad category for this is any kind of work. We’re able to have this interview together using technology and accomplish work. I can express the result of thinking I’ve done. You can then respond, and we can do really good work together using technology. And there’s work to be done in the home. We have an insanely complicated set of Google calendars for our family, and all that scheduling is made so much easier by technology. There’s no problem with that as far as I can tell.

But what technology is not good at is *forming* human capacities. So it’s good at expressing, amplifying, or distributing the fruits of human capacities, but it’s not good at actually making us into the kind of people who have something worth expressing.

What are the most formative environments for human beings? Well, the home is, for all human beings, the most formative environment. And it’s deeply formative even for adults, not just for children. And then I would say school and church, or religious communities, are the other primal formative environments for human beings. And these are the places we should be most careful. These are the places where technology has the least place. In other settings, like the workplace, I think on the whole it can have lots of benefits, and it’s a wonderful thing. But not when we’re trying to be shaped as people, and that’s what the home is for above all.

> Having these [technology] circuit breakers in our lives really robs these things of their most addictive power, which is their always-on, always-demanding, and always-comforting qualities.

Alysse ElHage: *I want to talk with you for a minute about the enormous pressure parents feel to allow our kids to use screens at earlier and earlier ages, and we get this pressure from schools, other family members, and other parents. For example, I have a first grader, and almost all of his friends have their own tablets, watch YouTube on their own, and use video gaming devices (he does none of these things). My 12-year-old daughter is one of maybe two girls in her class to not have a cell phone. In many ways, other parents’ media decisions for their family make things tougher for us as parents. What encouragement do you have for parents who want to keep technology in its proper place, but who feel pressured and also sort of infringed upon by other parents who maybe do not have these same values*?

Andy Crouch: Well, it’s absolutely the case that one of the factors that make it hardest to have a sane life with technology as a family is other parents, and I will say sometimes grandparents as well. It is very hard. And I think there is no shortcut to make it a lot easier.

One decision my wife and I made that served us on the whole well was to not try to exert a lot of control over what the technology environment was like outside of our home. You know, video games are a huge part of boys’ lives today. I think that’s not a good thing, and I don’t think it’s the best for boys. But we did not insist that our son not play video games when he was at a friend’s house. We just didn’t have video games at our house. And I will say, children [are] quite resilient, and they can bounce back from a lot of unfortunate experiences, and they have to. I mean, life has hardships of all kinds. If children are in a primary environment that is really healthy, I actually am not that worried about sort of limited-time exposure to things that are less healthy.

Now, obviously, there are limits. And there have always been risks in trusting your child to any other family, all the way up to abuse, and that has happened for all human history. And there are modern equivalents to that level of abuse that can happen in other homes. Of course, we have to be aware of that. We have to have the kind of relationship with our children that when they encounter something like that, they talk with us about it.

But we found that it was more workable to not try to dictate what other families did, but just to be very clear about what the expectations were in our house. Now, that being said, that meant, especially for our son at a certain age (I would say 8-10 years old) that none of his friends wanted to come to our house because to them it was just the most boring possible environment! And it was very painful to watch these boys come over once and have it not go well. An 8-year-old boy isn't going to be that good at coming up with alternatives. And to see those friends not come back, and to see a degree of loneliness from that, was hard as a parent.

But I will also say—and this may not apply in the same way to people who are not trying to raise their children within a particular faith tradition—but if you are raising your children within a faith tradition, whatever it is, you are—by definition—asking them to believe and act in ways that are different from the mainstream. And the choices that are going to come their way later in life are honestly much more consequential than whether they watch YouTube when their friends come over. And our children need practice saying these magic words: "Our family is different." Every Jewish family that keeps Kosher knows this, intrinsically. Every Christian family that has standards that are different from the world's about, say, sexuality in the teenage years and beyond, knows this. And we want our kids to be the kind of adults who are able to resist actually much more fearsome pressure. So, as hard as it is, it’s training for adulthood when we’re going to have to be saying the rest of our lives in as gracious a way as we can, “Our family is different.”

Alysse ElHage*: That’s really great advice, and it is something we frequently say to our kids, although it doesn't always go over so well!*

I also want to ask you about keeping kids safe from pornography because, honestly, this is my number one concern as a parent. You address online pornography in Chapter 8 of the book, and what I found interesting is that you talk more about limiting exposure rather than completely protecting against it. Why is that?

Andy Crouch: I think the evidence is quite overwhelming that one way or another there are so many vectors for children to be exposed to sexually explicit material that by age 13, the great majority of children have been exposed to it. This is a terrible thing, and we should certainly do everything we can to limit it. I think of it as being very much like living in a place like Beijing, in this sense: as I understand it, many days of the year, the city of Beijing has quite serious air pollution. If you live there, as a parent or just a person, there is pollution in the air. To live in that city is to breathe it in. And I do believe that these kinds of images—not just images, but that’s certainly the most visceral and powerful form of pornography—are polluting. But they are also all around us. So, what would you do if you live in Beijing? Well, families that have the means [to do so], install a filter, literally, to filter the air. And so certainly in our homes and certainly on any device that we give our children, we need to have the most robust possible filtering.

> Our children need practice saying these magic words: "Our family is different."

But right now, the number one way that adolescents are exposed to sexual content is not through a website, but through text messaging and images that are sent by other students. There's very little web-based filtering that can filter that out. So, the more important thing than filtering is actually getting over a very bad idea in Western culture, which is privacy. Privacy is, of course, a good thing when the government grants it to individual citizens. But as a categorical need for human beings, it's very doubtful that we thrive in private. I don't think human beings are meant to live that way. I certainly don't think that's what family is meant to be. So, the most important thing we can do, once we have the basic filters set up, is to create as little privacy as possible.

Alysse ElHage: *Yes, and I love the way you put it in the book. You write that a tech-wise family has "no technology secrets and no place to hide them" and that we need to practice this as parents and as couples.*

Andy Crouch: Exactly. So certainly with children and youth, to the extent they have access to screens, screens should be used only in public places where it's very straightforward for parents to look over their shoulder to see what they're getting. I think it absolutely makes sense to say to your children, "You can expect me to turn your phone on at any time and read all your text messages." I know that kids can delete things. Children are going to test all kinds of boundaries—adolescents in particular. But there's a big difference between them testing those boundaries, knowing they are there and that they are doing something their parents would consider wrong, and getting the impression that their parents really don't care.

So, you're not going to be able to prevent your children from testing boundaries. It's very unlikely to prevent them from encountering things that we would really not want them to encounter. But you can create an environment where the default is, we're connected to each other, we know what's going on in each other's lives and on each other's phones. So, we have kind of the relationships that support us when we encounter things that we shouldn't, that kind of help bring us back to health and sanity.

Alysse ElHage: *Before we go, what is your top piece of advice for parents* *regarding becoming a tech-wise family?*

Andy Crouch: Well, I'll tell you the one that people seem to find the most helpful. It's the simple principle of our devices not always being on. I recommend a rhythm of at least one hour a day, one day a week, and one week a year, the whole family being free from anything that glows, and as much as possible from other forms of technology as well. So we have a day a week largely free. Our "hour a day" is around dinnertime for us—for families with smaller children, bedtime may make the most sense. And then I think it's important to have a week or more a year that is technology-free. Not every family has the means or the opportunity to take a week of vacation. But many do, and to the extent that you can, make that a technology-free week for everyone, not just kids, but parents as well.

Having these [technology] circuit breakers in our lives really robs these things of their most addictive power, which is their always-on and always-demanding and always-comforting qualities, which may be the essence of addiction. These little disciplines—if they are built into every day, every week, and every year—can really help all of us have much more healthy relationships when the screens are on.

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Share this story

Rebecca Jennings

Haley Sharpe in her bedroom in Hunstville, Alabama.

Haley Sharpe is a little bit famous. This is true for more people right now than ever before in the history of the world, but when you are a 16-year-old in Huntsville, Alabama, it is a very big deal.

Being a little bit famous is different from being famous-famous, but it is not *that* different, because when you're a little bit famous it still feels like you are the center of the world. "A little bit famous" is the domain of Instagram influencers, reality TV contestants, YouTube creators, pageant queens, and mid-roster athletes who you yourself might not recognize on the street, but someone would.

Over the past year, another group have entered this category: TikTok stars. These people, most visibly teenagers, have found huge audiences on the nascent app known for short video posts, and Haley is one of them. Back in April, under the username @yodeling.karen — Karen is her middle name; "yodeling" references an old meme page she used to follow — Haley uploaded a video of herself dancing that went viral. A few weeks later, she made a video about celebrities who look like her and that went viral, too. After that, the hits came easier, and today she has just over 100,000 followers.

No, 100,000 followers is not a million followers. On TikTok, where followers are amassed at warp speed, it doesn't even put Haley close to the top 50 accounts, which all boast followers into the multiple millions, despite most adults having zero clue who any of these people making silly, seconds-long videos are. But this summer Haley got recognized at dance camp, twice. Another time a girl came up to her at the snack shack at the pool where she lifeguards and asked if she was that girl from TikTok. Haley said "Yeah" and handed her her ice cream, and the girl said "Okay, thanks." Now she has a journalist who flew all the way to Alabama from New York to find out what it's like to be her.

Haley is on her way to getting the thing she wants, the thing all of her friends want. To be a very online young person in 2019 is to share the same goal: have the kind of social media following wherein performing your life online becomes a paying job. Haley and her friends, and their friends, and their friends, want to be stars in the constellation of professionally watchable influencers who rack up millions of views and considerable livelihoods by simply hanging out on their couch. They don't want a boring day job, because who does? Why would you choose to eat sad desk salads when you could meet screaming fans and get paid by brands just for being yourself?

Haley has gotten a small taste of this, and like everybody else who has, she wants more.

I first meet Haley over fried chicken at an upscale restaurant in downtown Huntsville. In person she's tall and lanky, with a long heap of light brown hair behind her, a three-sizes-too-big T-shirt, and clunky white sneakers on her feet, which makes her sound like a geek in an '80s movie but really means she's a 2019 cool girl. She is shy and darkly funny and has a habit of sitting with one leg pulled to her chest as if to fold herself away. She is the owner of what she calls a "resting angry face" that she uses to humorous effect in her TikToks, which are at once joyous and surreal, and filtered through several layers of irony. Her constant deadpan gives the sense that everything she says isn't totally serious, but you can never quite be sure.

An example: She recently made a solemn-seeming TikTok in which she revealed that a couple of people she used to be friends with were trying to damage her reputation by outing her, and so she was just going to go ahead and tell the truth, that yes, she's a scientologist. It wasn't until my fourth day in Huntsville that I found out it was a joke. She's Lutheran.

That winking, subversive humor is on display in the very first video that made Haley TikTok famous. On April 28, she filmed herself mimicking the dance moves from the Wii video game Michael Jackson: The Experience. It was just one of many Michael Jackson memes that proliferated on TikTok last spring, around the same time that allegations of sexual assault against the musician resurfaced in the documentary *Leaving Neverland*. It's not that she's making light of the situation — Haley has been a big Michael Jackson fan since she was a child, and the documentary devastated her. Her deadpan, miserable expression in the video nods to that discomfort; it's what makes the video funny.

Haley found out the clip had blown up when, the next day, someone sent her a link to her video on an Instagram meme page known for stealing the most popular TikToks. Its virality was confirmed when someone shouted Jackson's signature "HEE HEE!" squeal at her in the hallway at school.

"I didn't really like that people were finding out, since I never asked for everyone to know about it," she says of her TikTok account. But beneath her outward shyness is a natural performer, and she's since learned to embrace the attention. "It's cool, but it's also weird to think I'm sitting here and somebody out there — more than somebody — is watching my videos right now. Constantly somebody is watching one. That's so weird for me."

We're at the restaurant with her mother Leslie, a petite blonde lawyer who, like any mother of a teenager who recently became kind of a celebrity, has some concerns. Who are all these people watching videos taken in her daughter's bedroom? What if a crazy person comes and finds her?

When Haley was a baby, Leslie tells me, she had these ringlets and enormous round eyes, the kind that would make strangers stop her in the mall or at the grocery store. "People have always noticed Haley," she says. "It kind of makes me nervous." At the same time, she's proud of her: She thinks Haley's videos are genuinely creative and funny. "There are worse things she could be doing," she adds, and she is correct.

TikTok was supposed to be bad. In August 2018, the app that was once called Musical.ly relaunched under the umbrella of Chinese internet company ByteDance, and even before the first video was uploaded to the platform, the world wanted it to fail. After the cultishly beloved Vine was shut down in 2016, fans of weirdo happenstance comedy waited impatiently for another short-form social video app to act as its second coming. But in the four years Musical.ly was around, it never shook its reputation for being a place where 12-year-olds tried to look hot while lip-synching to C-grade pop music. Surely TikTok, which looked nearly identical to Musical.ly and similarly limited videos to 60 seconds, would be more of the same.

For a little while, it basically was. Early TikTok memes went viral because they were embarrassing, not because they were good, and often featured aging emo kids trying to thirst trap or teenage gamers lobbing sexist insults. At best, they were lazy ways to show off a poster's money or looks. Influencers further up the video creator food chain — established YouTubers like PewDiePie and Denzel Dion — delighted in dunking on the most embarrassing trends with titles like "TikTok Must Be Stopped."

""It's cool, but it's also weird to think I'm sitting here

When she dances on TikTok, though, it isn't to show off. It is, like all of her videos, a joke.

On the first Monday of the school year, Haley and her two friends Bridgett and Lauren are hanging out in the school cafeteria talking about how much Instagram sucks now. This is a common feeling among their peers; the painstakingly curated aesthetic synonymous with the app is losing resonance with young people, and Gen Z is more interested in video content anyway. All the posts in their feeds, they complain, are either stolen tweets or TikToks or memes they've already seen, and Haley only checks it for her DMs. "It's all the same pictures," she says. "Once it's prom and fall break, all of it is just ..." To explain what she means, she throws a hand on her hips and turns to the side like a sorority girl.

Lauren, meanwhile, used to post lots of artsy photos to her page, but kids she knew would leave mean comments on them. "People will criticize anyone who posts stuff that's out of the norm of like, beach pics or prom pics," she says. Lauren — with her curly bangs, plaid pants, and heeled boots — looks more like a graphic designer in Bushwick than a teen in Alabama. "I'd love to be a big TikToker like Haley but then I feel like, oh, someone's gonna say something and make fun of me. I wish I could get past that."

Haley and her friend Ashli head to a football game, where they'll perform with their high school dance team.

Lauren and Haley and most people they know have been on social media since they were kids; they idolize the stars they've grown up with. They rattle off a list of names and their relationships to each other: lo-fi YouTube cool kids Drew Phillips and his ex-girlfriend Enya, who are friends with former Viners Josh and Lucas Ovalle and character comedian Casey Frey, who's friends with Viner-turned-standup comic Nick Colletti, who was in a show with Cody Ko, who co-hosts the series "That's Cringe" with Noel Miller, who's buds with talking-head YouTuber Danny Gonzalez. All of them are attractive and mostly white floppy-haired 20-somethings who wear big sweatshirts and built their followings less by shock value tactics of the Logan Paul variety and more by being genuinely funny and likable. Haley and her friends have filmed themselves being funny and likeable online for years; couldn't they be next?

"Those are just my people, my people right there," says Haley, although she's never met any of them.

They're the popular kids who trade in irony and internet in-jokes and make money simply by having more fun than everybody else. That money is far easier to make on YouTube than it is on TikTok thanks to YouTube's monetization platform AdSense, through which video creators generate revenue through pre-roll advertisements. Vine, meanwhile, never built tools for users to monetize their followings, and so the most industrious Viners defected to YouTube even before the service shut down. The most common way to make money on TikTok, meanwhile, remains livestreaming, during which viewers can purchase and send to their favorite creators digital coins that can then be cashed out for real money. This isn't something people are really doing, though, and thus has not translated into a meaningful source of revenue; not even users with millions of fans are seeing real returns. So far, Haley has collected $17.

Brands are only just beginning to harness the massively lucrative potential of the app — Haley's been contacted by a few companies in the hopes that she'd hawk products like contacts or jewelry in her videos in exchange for freebies (she hasn't agreed to do so), but unlike Instagram, sponsored content isn't part of TikTok's DNA. For now, it's difficult to make real money on the platform unless you happen to be one of the artists with a song that

> *and somebody out there — more than somebody — is watching my videos right now.""*

But last fall, I found myself regularly opening the TikTok app and closing it only to realize several hours had passed. Videos that had once been pretenses to show off how attractive or talented or wealthy users were, were now making fun of the very tropes with which TikTok had initially been associated. TikTok had quickly become everything Vine was and Musical.ly wasn't: clever, surprising, and truly fun to watch.

Mainstream media started paying attention not just to the app's content but to its astounding growth. In September 2018 — the month after it launched — TikTok surpassed Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat in monthly installs, and by February 2019 it had been downloaded more than a billion times globally. Though TikTok is secretive about its user demographics and mysterious algorithm (the company declined to speak on the record for this story), one analysis showed that its user base is young: 40 percent are under 20 and another 26 percent are under 30. This isn't surprising, considering young people watch 2.5 times more internet video than they do TV. All of this success allowed TikTok's parent company ByteDance to become the world's most highly valued startup in October 2018. It's now estimated to be worth $75 billion.

It was months later that a video of Haley, set to *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*'s theme song "Meet Rebecca," appeared on my For You page, TikTok's home feed that surfaces popular content and is personalized to each user. Like her Michael Jackson dancing videos, this one was an exercise in self-deprecation: The joke was that she looks like Post Malone, or the tween Musical.ly star Jacob Sartorius, or *The Room* director Tommy Wiseau. Her other TikToks share a similar tone; instead of making fun of herself, sometimes she'll direct her sharp wit at homophobes or Ted Bundy sympathizers or a culture that demands women's nails be constantly perfect.

With no real sharing function, making it to the For You page is essentially the only way a TikTok goes viral; users can spend hours scrolling through the infinite feed of vertical videos, favoriting or commenting as the algorithm learns to queue up ones similar to those they interact with. Though view counts are only visible to the poster, what matters is how many favorites it gets: A hundred thousand faves? That's viral. A million? Massive.

Millions of people have seen the inside of Haley's bedroom. "That's one of the first things someone said to me one day," she says. "They were like, 'I saw your video. Your room's huge.' I'm like, 'Thanks.'"

There are lots of ways to get famous on TikTok, and one of the main ones is exploiting one's own hotness. Angel-faced boys with steel cheekbones and forebodingly blue eyes abound on the platform, as do shiny-haired girls with winged liner and pouty lips. Some of the more alternative-looking users can be classified as e-boys or e-girls, mugging for their own cameras in chains and pink hair dye in their bedrooms. But regardless, the appeal is the same: People like to look at beautiful people. You don't really have to do much else.

Haley, despite being undoubtedly pretty, does do much else. Like all the users that give TikTok its true TikTokness, her videos are dry and weird and textured, yet feel as though they were given no more than 10 seconds' thought. The best TikToks are the work of people who are inherently funny but who take themselves far less seriously than professional comedians, which makes them even funnier. I later find out that Haley, for instance, is quite a talented dancer and even hopes to dance professionally after she graduates high school — if being internet famous doesn't become her job.

becomes a TikTok meme. A handful of them have scored record deals with major labels based on viral hits on the app alone, most famously "Old Town Road" rapper Lil Nas X, who broke the record for the all-time longest-running No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 this summer.

Which is why for Haley and for many TikTokers, YouTube, not TV or movies or music videos, is where they hope to end up — that's what they've grown up watching, after all. "I just want to get to YouTube, that's the goal," Haley says.

When you go on TikTok, she explains, you're looking for short videos to make you laugh. On YouTube, there's variety and, crucially, prestige. "I feel like everyone has always wanted to be a YouTuber," she says. "If you ask like little kids, they say they want to be a YouTuber." It makes sense, she explains, considering one of the primary qualities of being a YouTuber is documenting how much fun they're having.

Thanks to her following on TikTok, she now feels like she can actually start a successful YouTube channel of her own. She would follow the vlogging-slash-commentary format popular with her favorite creators. A month after I visited Huntsville, she tells me she's currently working on a vlog of her school's homecoming week. She's not sure whether she'll post it or not, though.

"TikTok feels temporary and a little unpredictable about how long it'll last," she says. "If they want people to stay on TikTok, they have to get paid."

Yet due to YouTube's years-long crackdown on monetization and the so-called "adpocalypse," the period beginning in 2017 when advertisers grew increasingly skittish to invest in a platform that always seemed to be mired in controversy, the gold rush is slowing down. These days, a career making money via AdSense dollars alone is increasingly implausible, and now

YouTubers often aim to transition into more traditional forms of entertainment, or supplement their incomes through merch, sponsored content, or crowdsourcing tools like Patreon. Going viral and building a following are difficult enough, but when not even the most popular talents are guaranteed a paycheck, the dream becomes even less achievable.

Haley and Bridgett in their high school cafeteria. "Most people will just have one [viral] thing, a one-hit-wonder," says Bridgett. "Haley actually gained a lot of followers." They both agree that Instagram is boring now. Bridgett's more of a Snapchatter.

Those are problems to be figured out later, though. Haley is still in high school, and studying combined with a rigorous dance schedule that includes near-daily rehearsals to prepare for weekend-long competitions, plus twice-weekly high school dance team practices that culminate in performances at football games, she hardly has the time required to conceptualize, shoot, edit, and promote videos longer than a minute. TikTok is the medium that works for her life right now, and the ultimate value of the fame she's achieved there may end up being the ability to promote her work on other platforms in the future. For the time being, though, her 100,000 followers are enough to keep her creatively fulfilled — and sometimes inspire envy from her friends.

"I get jealous of Haley but I don't let her know that," Lauren laughs. "You already have a big ego."

"People will downplay it. They'll be like, 'Oh, she's just famous on TikTok. It's just TikTok,'" Bridgett says.

Meanwhile, Lauren says, "They'll post something and get like, three likes."

The internet has made it such that almost everyone under 30 knows someone, or knows someone who knows someone, who has through some mechanism of virality achieved a non-insignificant amount of public attention, for better or for worse, intentionally or otherwise. Young people are used to it now. Bridgett recalls how just the other day, a video of a boy they know jumping into a lake and rising out of the water with a fish in his hands got reposted on the controversial viral content farm Barstool Sports. Most of the time, kids will go viral for a day or two and then they're old news. The ones who want it bad enough stick around, stretching their 15 minutes as long as digitally possible.

The next day in the cafeteria, Haley's friends Shiva and Ridley pore over the TikTok of another guy they know who's "literally famous" now but decide that he isn't that cute. Ridley mentions that she's pretty good friends with Mitchell, as in Mitchell Crawford, the TikToker with 1.3 million followers who now lives in LA.

And then there is Aly White, an 18-year-old TikToker with 242,000 followers who lives in Huntsville and went to high school with some of Haley's dance friends. None of the girls at Haley's school know her but they all know *of* her. She's pretty and blonde and kind of looks like Disney Channel star Dove Cameron and knows it. She makes earnest TikToks that show off her singing voice or acting chops or how much being on your period or having crushes sucks, and is essentially the kind of TikToker that Haley is not. "I try to do as much relatable, original content as I possibly can, whether it's just telling original stories about what happened in my day or making it funny," Aly tells me over the phone.

> *""People will downplay it. They'll be like, 'Oh, she's just famous on TikTok. It's just TikTok.'""*

They've never met, and neither of them have anything personal against each other. But a few months ago Haley, as a joke, took one of Aly's singing videos and did a fake Irish jig to it, and then some other people started doing it too. Haley also dueted a few videos of Aly's in a way Aly felt was mocking — dueting is when you make a side-by-side video reply and upload it to your own profile — so Aly blocked her.

Like Haley, Aly wants to make this her career: She hopes to work the meet-and-greet circuit as a full-time social media influencer, the kind who's big on TikTok and also YouTube and also Instagram and also whatever platform gets big next. Also like Haley, she has a backup: early childhood education, which she's currently studying at a local college. Despite their differences, they have plenty in common. They can both relay stories of getting recognized around Huntsville, or a stranger hurling a TikTok joke at them on their way to class, or the pressure that comes with knowing that younger girls look up to them.

Like everyone else on the app, they use TikTok to have fun, even though there is a big invisible asterisk next to the word "fun" when being good at TikTok could potentially be a ticket to the life they've always dreamed of. Every TikTok video, even the most slapdash and offhand, is calculated to some degree.

After school, Haley and a half dozen of her lifeguard friends drive an hour to a local swimming hole to go cliff jumping.

Standing over the slippery edge of a waterfall, she asks, "Caleb, should I make a TikTok of me jumping?"

"Can I be in it?" asks another boy.

"What's something funny I should say before I jump? I'm thinking of saying, 'Period!'"

A few minutes later, from behind the trees, she yells "PERIOD!" and a splash.

When Haley got back from dance camp in July, she started caring too much about numbers: "I used to just stare and refresh and wait and see if a video did well, and if it didn't, then I'd have to take it down." She's always compared herself to other TikTokers with more followers or whose videos constantly blow up, but after a month of obsessing she came to realize, "It's because they're funny. I can't be so mad about it."

Haley with her parents, two younger siblings, Ian and Julia, and three dogs in their kitchen.

You do not have to be TikTok famous to understand what Haley is talking about. Anyone with so much as an Instagram account has likely experienced those same anxieties. The platforms that offer constant attention and affirmation have the same capacity to warp the brains of regular people just as much as the famous among us.

The study of fame is a relatively new field. In 2006, a peak in the era of reality TV and tabloid snark, the New York Times wrote, "For most of its existence, the field of psychology has ignored fame as a primary motivator of human behavior: it was considered too shallow, too culturally variable, too often mingled with other motives to be taken seriously." But that was changing during a time when the newest generation of celebrities were simply "famous for being famous," or as we would ultimately come to know them, influencers. Fame had never seemed to be quite so randomly distributed, nor so possible.

But as far back as 1996, research showed that fame was a precarious aspiration. A University of Rochester study at the time showed that adults whose goals were tied to the approval of others and fame "reported significantly higher levels of distress than those interested primarily in self-acceptance and friendship."

In an essay on celebrity culture, Timothy Caulfield, a law professor at the University of Alberta, takes an even bleaker view on celebrity culture, arguing that the countries most obsessed with it (the US, UK, and South Korea, for instance), do not score particularly well on world happiness reports, nor are they countries with high social mobility. Fame, therefore, is likened to a get-rich-quick fantasy, a shortcut to circumvent societal stagnation.

In her book *Celebrity Culture and the American Dream*, Karen Sternheimer paints a similarly dark portrait: "Getting enough attention, be it positive or negative, could yield a new career as a celebrity during a time when the gap between the wealthy and everyone else has widened," she writes. Meanwhile, "the truly rich and powerful do not need to sell their private lives or endure the volatility of fame."

In 2009, psychologists Donna Rockwell and David C. Giles conducted a study with the participation of 15 well-known but anonymous celebrities, finding that fame forced the famous to undergo a psychological process in which they experienced depersonalization, a mistrust of others, and the idea that they were two people: their public self and their authentic self.

Today, Rockwell says that pretty much all of us go through that process to some degree. "All of a sudden you have to take care of these two parts of you," she says. "It's changing our psychology collectively because we have to worry about social media platforms on a daily basis and keep up this celebrated entity of oneself, the part that has been depersonalized by a fan base. That has to be considered."

Those who've accrued enough notoriety for their online presence to become a potential career have more at stake. To the famous person, the level of fame is irrelevant. "You can be a 13-year-old and have 100,000 followers or be Taylor Swift, but the 13-year-old is going to feel the same," she says. After all, their self-worth is just as quantifiable, and once you're even a little bit famous, there's nowhere to go but down. "The only thing you can become after famous, unfortunately, is a has-been," Rockwell says. "Then you have to deal with the depression, the anxiety, and the after-effects of having lost something."

Even Haley's AP US history teacher has a theory about all this. After giving a lecture on the Salem witch trials, he tells the class that the Puritans' belief in predetermination didn't comfort them. In fact, it made them even more anxious because they felt as though they had to spend their entire lives signalling to their community that they were indeed virtuous enough to enter heaven. He thinks that on social media we do the same thing: "We're so scared of not belonging."

TikTok-famous teens, the envy of their generation, are all too aware that their fame could go away at any moment. What goes unspoken is that there is always someone funnier or prettier or more likable or who works harder, and that soon their own face may show up less and less on strangers' screens. That so many people will become TikTok-famous or Instagram-famous or Twitter-famous that it will cease to mean quite so much; that someday there will be simply too many influencers and not enough eyeballs and money. That if everyone is a little bit famous, no one is.

Haley has made TikTok friends she can talk to about the peculiarities and uncertainty of her position. Sam, a 15-year-old in Los Angeles who goes by the username @sugarramen and asked that his last name not be used, was the first person to upload a "Meet Rebecca" video and was the inspiration for Haley's version. After both their videos went viral, they started DMing and eventually FaceTiming each other from across the country. Sam later added Haley to an Instagram DM started by a couple of fans who gathered all their favorite TikTokers in the same place, and now there's a group of about 15 famous TikTokers chatting about what's going on on the app.

"Recently I remember just staring at my followers and I wasn't gaining any and I was like, 'What am I doing wrong?'" Haley says. "But then they just go right back up. Sometimes it's just nothing you can control. You can't control whether or not you get on the For You page."

Sam's videos are goofy like Haley's, if a bit more blatantly bizarre. He often appears to be sobbing, though he achieves this effect by putting Carmex in his eyes; in one video, Sufjan Stevens' "Mystery of Love," the pensive love song written for *Call Me By Your Name,* plays while a weeping Sam pleads for help because he can't spell the word "cocanut."

Sam has 166,000 followers now, and he says hitting the 100,000 mark was like a rite of passage: "People on TikTok start to see you differently. They're looking for that consistent thing from you, and you have to focus on posting that consistent thing."

"But," he adds, "you can't talk about your numbers with regular friends because then you just sound like a dick."

TikTok teens outside Haley's circle share the same concerns. Emma, a 17-year-old TikToker based in South Carolina who goes by the username @graytulip and has 246,000 followers, got famous on the app by posting POVs, point-of-view videos satirizing popular high school typecasts like VSCO girls and K-pop obsessives. She says that after a while the commenters begging for more POV videos got frustrating, as if they only liked her for one specific type of content. "If I was constantly thinking over and over, like, 'I need to make this next video pronto,'" she says, "I think I would make myself go crazy."

> *""I don't even mean this in a bad way, but a lot of people are nicer to me." "*

The younger kids at school, she says, regard YouTubers like PewDiePie and other hugely popular creators as having simply stumbled upon their success, as though they were always destined for fame. "I've seen a lot more kids even a year younger than me being like, 'I want to be a YouTuber.' 'I want to be an Instagram model.' And people a few years older than me already have set career paths."

Emma sees herself stuck somewhere in the middle. On the prospect of a high-paying career as a content creator, she's more in the "if it happens, it happens" camp. "We're smart enough to know that that's not how it's going to work out for everybody," she says. After all, she's not even the only TikTok famous student at her school — the two of them posed for a photo in the yearbook this spring.

Like Haley and Aly, she has a more traditional career path lined up, just in case: She wants to attend school for broadcast journalism, because, she says, "I obviously would not use TikTok as my only income, even at the follower rate I'm at now. It's so random and sporadic the way you get an income from there. I would never quit my job."

These kids know the platforms are not their friends. This is why Haley is worrying about the health of a multibillion dollar Chinese corporation as we're sitting in her bedroom, with its lilac walls and slanted ceiling I've seen dozens of times on my phone in my own bedroom 1,000 miles away. She knows that TikTok could shut down or fizzle out — look what happened to

Vine. Even minor changes to the mysterious TikTok algorithm feel like they carry career-altering consequences. She thinks about what time of day she should post and how best to get on the For You page, even though nobody knows the precise answers or probably ever will.

Haley grew up listening to Michael Jackson, and was devastated by the resurfaced allegations against him. "I just love his music," she says. "I think I can separate the art from the artist."

Haley's mom Leslie is cautiously supportive of her daughter's burgeoning career. "I wouldn't mind it, I guess," she says of Haley becoming a household name, "as long as she stays focused on school and just regular teenage stuff." She wants Haley to go to college instead of diving full force into influencerdom. Like many parents of natural performers, she could see Haley ending up on *Saturday Night Live*, and considering *SNL* now regularly hires internet-famous comedians, the first TikTok cast member may not be far off.

There is pressure in this path, but Haley means it when she says her life is generally better after becoming TikTok-famous. "Honestly, this sounds so weird, but I'm happier now. I just, I like making TikToks. It's fun and it makes me feel creative. I like that I reached out to people and that people watch them and like them."

"I don't even mean this in a bad way, but a lot of people are nicer to me," she says. "I don't know how to put it, but I've become friends with more people because they're interested. Not even in a clout-chasing way, but they're interested in what it's like." What it's like to be her, that is.

"I feel like my biggest fear," she says, unprompted, "is just fading into like, nobody remembers me on TikTok."

On Tuesday morning, Haley and Bridgett go to Advisory, a small class that operates as part homeroom and part group therapy session. They sit in a quartet of giggling girls in oversized T-shirts, long, straight hair, and scrunchies on their wrists while Haley sips from a Chick-fil-A cup that's bigger than her face. On the projector at the front of the room is a quote from Plato: "The beginning is the most important part of the work."

"You guys know who Plato is, right?" asks their teacher Mr. Green, who in fact looks like the Platonic ideal of an English professor.

"A planet," says Haley so that only Bridgett, who is Snapchatting, can hear.

Haley's friends describe her as a trendsetter, noting that she was the first in their grade to make Crocs cool.

"I feel like Haley is just her own," says her friend Lauren. "She's probably the most original person that I know."

They're learning about how junior year is the important one, and Mr. Green wants to make sure that they can handle the expectations that come with being an upperclassman at their private school.

"Perception is reality," he says. "Straight facts," murmurs a sleepy-looking kid. "Tea," adds one of Haley's friends. Quietly, Haley says, "We're all living in a simulation anyway."

He's talking about what it means to be successful. They're supposed to go to college, make connections and money and become doctors or lawyers. But whose expectations are those, anyway, he asks.

"This year is about wresting away your goals from other peoples' wants," Mr. Green says. "You want to have the year that you want, not what the school wants or your parents want." I'd forgotten how stressful junior year was and how much worse it was because everyone kept on telling you how stressful it was going to be. I imagine it is not made any less stressful by the fact that even theoretically stable industries aren't necessarily tickets to financial success anymore.

Like any high school kid would, the students mostly use Advisory as an opportunity to zone out or check their phones, but the weight of the discussion feels heavy for the two adults in the room. Every generation has its own specific anxieties, which means no one has faced precisely the same ones American teenagers do today. Dystopian concerns like whether the earth will still be habitable by the time they enter middle age or whether someone with a gun will prevent them from even making it that far are now just another part of growing up. And these are the well-off kids, burdened by high expectations, sure, but sheltered from the obstacles that put the most vulnerable among them in an even worse position.

"Do you all believe there's a place you're meant to go? A future for you that's meant to be?" As if they're supposed to be sure of anything besides the fact that all they want is the same thing that all of us want, which is to be liked, and it just so happens that now it's possible that you can be liked so much that being liked becomes your entire identity, and that well-liked identity can be a lucrative career if you try hard and are also very lucky.

At the end of the class, he asks if they think they have control over their lives right now. The kids, of course, all say no.

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Habits of Mind in an Age of Distraction

Small steps to meet the challenge of hearing God in a technologically disruptive environment.

Hidden away in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer may be found a small masterpiece of pastoral theology called "A Prayer for Persons Troubled in Mind or in Conscience." The prayer is a kind of exploded collect—longer and more complex than is typical:

comment
OUR BUILT WORLD

Appears in **Summer 2016**

> *O Blessed Lord, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comforts; We beseech thee, look down in pity and compassion upon this thy afflicted servant. Thou writest bitter things against him, and makest him to possess his former iniquities; thy wrath lieth hard upon him, and his soul is full of trouble: But, O merciful God, who hast written thy holy Word for our learning, that we, through patience and comfort of thy holy Scriptures, might have hope; give him a right understanding of himself, and of thy threats and promises; that he may neither cast away his confidence in thee, nor place it any where but in thee. Give him strength against all his temptations, and heal all his distempers. Break not the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax. Shut not up thy tender mercies in displeasure; but make him to hear of joy and gladness, that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. Deliver him from fear of the enemy, and lift up the light of thy countenance upon him, and give him peace, through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

This prayer has not achieved a prominent place in the Anglican tradition, although it contains great wisdom and comfort.

> *So what do we do with the great majority of people for whom excessive self-examination is the last problem they're likely to face?*

The place of this prayer in the prayer book is significant: it is one of the prayers for the sick. What is the nature of this sickness? The person prayed for here has mistaken the character and the purposes of God. She has looked back over her life and seen the sin and darkness therein and cannot see anything else: she has been "made to possess her former iniquities." Moreover, and worse still, she takes these iniquities and her consciousness of them as signs of God's displeasure toward her. Like Shakespeare's Macbeth she has "a mind of scorpions." The priest who comes to this woman in her time of need is instructed by this prayer to see her condition not less as God's punishment than as the sign of a diseased mind in need of healing. And only God can bring this healing.

So what does the prayer ask God to do? To give her a "*right* understanding of herself."

John Newton said at the end of his life, "I am a very old man and my memory has gone. But I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Jesus is a great saviour." Either of these two things is death, taken alone; but taken together, they are life eternal and abundant. The woman whom our imagined priest is visiting has lost half of the equation: she knows herself only to be a great sinner.

To have a right understanding of herself she must have a right understanding of God. God is not her punisher, but her deliverer: she must not "cast away her confidence" in him. There is so much to be set right, so much misunderstanding of self and God, so many terrors that must be overcome that she also must not place that confidence in anything or anyone *except* God.

But how did this poor woman get in such a condition?

MUM THE PERSIL-USER

Before we can properly answer, we need to turn to John Betjeman's poem "Original Sin on the Sussex Coast." Watching happy children coming home from a day at school, he remembers his own childhood nearby—and remembers that other happy children, indistinguishable from the ones he now sees, once took particular delight in beating him.

> *. . . Off they go*
> *Away, away, thank God, and out of sight*
> *So that I lie quite still and climb to sense*
> *Too out of breath and strength to make a*
> *sound.*

Then a pause, and a meditation:

> *Now over Polegate vastly sets the sun;*
> *Dark rise the Downs from darker looking elms,*
> *And out of Southern railway trains to tea*
> *Run happy boys down various Station Roads,*
> *Satchels of homework jogging on their backs,*
> *So trivial and so healthy in the shade*
> *Of these enormous Downs. And when they're home,*
> *When the Post-Toasties mixed with Golden Shred*

> *Make for the kiddies such a scrumptious feast,*
> *Does Mum, the Persil-user, still believe*
> *That there's no Devil and that youth is bliss?*
> *As certain as the sun behind the Downs*
> *And quite as plain to see, the Devil walks.*

Persil is a laundry detergent, and if you look at the history of Persil advertising, you'll see that the emphasis has pretty much always been on the cleaning of children's clothes. By calling Mum "the Persil-user" Betjeman is telling us that there is only one kind of uncleanness she is concerned with, and it's the kind that laundry detergent can fix. Mum is in the grip of a comprehensive ideology that, in this particular situation, has three interlocking elements.

First: youth is bliss because children are *innocent*. Don't all our TV shows and ads remind us of this every day? Our problems are not caused by anything internal to us, any deficiency in our fundamental makeup, but solely by external forces.

Second: those external problems are fixable by *technology*—in this case, the technologies of cleanliness, sanitation, hygiene.

Third: it is possible to *purchase* those technologies, and since those technologies keep your children clean, it would be quite irresponsible for Mum not to take advantage of them.

Ideology is, by definition, not a body of explicitly held beliefs but the unspoken, unacknowledged system of ideas that lie beneath and provide the unexamined foundation for all our explicitly held beliefs. Its purpose, then, is to bring certain things into our sphere of vision while hiding other things. What Mum sees is a ruddy-cheeked little boy in shorts with a book satchel on his back: the very picture of young innocence and bliss. But could she strip away the blinders of her ideology, Betjeman says, the Devil walking along the Sussex downs would be quite as real, quite as evident, as the sun.

Betjeman's point in those closing lines is actually very subtle. To borrow a phrase from C.S. Lewis, we do not, in this late afternoon on the Sussex coast, see the sun (it has gone behind the downs) but *by its light* we see everything else. So too with the Devil: we have no direct perception of the Evil One, but the effects of his existence are everywhere. So: "As certain as the sun behind the Downs / And quite as plain to see, the Devil walks." But Mum the Persil-user doesn't see it. The underlying and unconfronted structure of her thoughts and experiences makes such clear vision simply impossible.

Now, let us compare Betjeman's "Mum" with the woman "afflicted in mind and conscience." She and Mum, the Persil-user, clearly lie at opposite ends of a moral spectrum. One sees no evil within; the other sees nothing but evil within. For one external cleanliness matters, and can be bought; for the other internal cleanliness matters, and cannot be bought at any price. Both are, as Kierkegaard would say, in a state of illusion; but their illusions are mirror images of each other.

So to return to my earlier question: how did the afflicted woman get into this terrible predicament? I think it is likely that this is a case of self-examination run amok. Here is a person who, at the instruction of her church, has looked into her heart, and every time she looks the scene appears darker. She needed someone to tell her what W.H. Auden once said: "The same rules apply to self-examination as apply to auricular confession: *Be brief, be blunt, be gone*." She may have been blunt, but she wasn't brief, I expect, and most of all, she was never *gone*: she stayed in her own head until it became to her a house of horrors.

But it is impossible to imagine Mum the Persil-user suffering from a surfeit of self-examination. It is impossible to imagine her practicing self-examination at all, because she lives within a cultural frame that strongly discourages self-examination. Indeed, for this frame self-examination is a kind of Kryptonite: if we genuinely look within, that frame will lose its power over us, because we will see that it has nothing to sell us that will fix our deepest problems.

NOUS SOMMES MUM

We all live in that cultural frame now, indeed in a deepened and intensified version of it. We are all Mum the Persil-user. There are still, of course, persons afflicted in mind and conscience, but I'd wager there aren't nearly so many of them as there once were.

So what do we do with the great majority of people for whom excessive self-examination is the *last* problem they're likely to face? I think this is one of the most important problems Christians—and especially pastors—face today. Because all the forces that went into making Mum the Persil-user have increased their power quite dramatically in the subsequent decades. People today now believe even more intensely than she did that not just children but all of us are essentially good; the technological products that promise to fix whatever ails us have multiplied and diffused themselves into every imaginable area of our lives.

But there is one more force that does more than all of the others put together to make self-examination—the kind of self-examination that leads to an awareness of sin—nearly impossible.

In one of his most insightful writings, a talk called "Membership," C.S. Lewis distinguishes membership in a body from both *individualism* (which erases our identities by cutting us off from other people) and *collectivism* (which erases our identities by absorbing them in a vast abstraction). These twin perversions of true identity are always dangerous, and dangerous to everyone, but are profoundly hostile to Christian belief and practice—especially when we are taught to think that religion is an essentially *private* affair. Lewis writes:

> *In our own age the idea that religion belongs to our private life—that it is, in fact, an occupation for the individual's hour of leisure—is at once paradoxical, dangerous, and natural. It is paradoxical because this exaltation of the individual in the religious field springs up in an age when collectivism is ruthlessly defeating the individual in every other field. . . . That religion should be relegated to solitude in such an age is, then, paradoxical. But it is also dangerous for two reasons. In the first place, when the modern world says to us aloud, "You may be religious when you are alone," it adds under its breath, "and I will see to it that you never are alone." To make Christianity a private affair while banishing all privacy is to relegate it to the rainbow's end.*

This passage reminds me of something the comedian Louis C.K. said a few years ago, in an appearance on Conan O'Brien's show. Louie, as his friends call him, was explaining that he doesn't want his kids to have cell phones because he wants them to be sad. And sadness comes when you are forced to be alone with your thoughts: "That's what the phones are taking away, the ability to just sit there. That's being a person."

He described a day when he was driving along as an emotionally intense Bruce Springsteen song came on the radio, and he started to feel a certain melancholy welling up in him, and his instant response to that melancholy was to want to grab his phone and text someone. "People are willing to risk taking a life and ruining their own, because they don't want to be alone for a second," he said.

But on that day when, in his car, Louie felt the melancholy welling up, he resisted the temptation to grab his phone. As the sadness grew, he had to pull over to the side of the road to weep. And after the weeping came an equally strong joy and gratitude for his life. But when we heed that impulse to grab the phone and connect with someone, we don't allow the melancholy to develop, and therefore can't receive the compensatory joy. Which leaves us, Louie says, in this situation: "You don't ever feel really sad or really happy, you just feel . . . kinda satisfied with your products. And then you die. And that's why I don't want to get phones for my kids."

FREEBASING HUMAN CONNECTION

> *By our immersion in that ecosystem we are radically impeded from achieving a "right understanding of ourselves" and of God's disposition toward us.*

If you ask a random selection of people why we're all so distracted these days—so constantly in a state of what a researcher for Microsoft, Linda Stone, has called "continuous partial attention"—you'll get a somewhat different answer than you would have gotten thirty years ago. Then it would have been "Because we are addicted to television." Fifteen years ago it would have been, "Because we are addicted to the Internet." But now it's "Because we are addicted to our smartphones."

All of these answers are both right and wrong. They're right in one really important way: they link distraction with addiction. But they're wrong in an even more important way: we are *not* addicted to any of our machines. Those are just contraptions made up of silicon chips, plastic, metal, glass. None of those, even when combined into complex and sometimes beautiful devices, are things that human beings can become addicted to.

Then what are we addicted to?

In February 2016, Ben Rosen, a twenty-nine year-old writer for the massively popular website Buzzfeed, wrote a post about what he had learned about the social media service Snapchat by talking to his thirteen-year-old sister Brooke.

He got interested in this topic when he watched Brooke reply to forty snaps —that's the basic unit of Snapchat, like a tweet on Twitter—in less than a minute. So he asked her questions about how she uses, and thinks about, Snapchat. Three things emerged from that discussion.

First, for Brooke and her friends Snapchat is almost never text, it's all images, usually selfies in which they respond to one another with various facial expressions, as though they're using their faces to imitate emoticons. Second, Brooke is not unusual in being able to do forty of these in a minute. Third: When Rosen asked Brooke how often she's on Snapchat she replied, "On a day without school? There's not a time when I'm not on it. I do it while I watch Netflix, I do it at dinner, and I do it when people around me are being awkward. That app is my life."

Brooke also noted that "parents don't understand. It's about being there in the moment. Capturing that with your friends." And when her brother asked her how she could even mentally process forty snaps in less than a minute, much less respond to them, she said, "I don't really see what they send. I tap through so fast. It's rapid fire." Snapchat is a form of communication drained almost completely of content. It is pure undiluted human connection.

So there is a relationship between distraction and addiction, but we are not addicted to devices. As Brooke's Snapchat story demonstrates, we are addicted to *one another*, to the affirmation of our value—our very being—

that comes from other human beings. We are addicted to being validated by our peers.

OUR ECOSYSTEM OF INTERRUPTION TECHNOLOGIES

If you don't believe in God, you might not think this craving for validation is a problem. But if you do believe in the God of Jesus Christ, it doesn't look good at all. As Paul the apostle asks the Galatians, "Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ" (1:10).

Now, to be sure, there is one sense in which we should care what people think of us. Paul tells the Romans, "give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all" (12:17). But that is in order to commend Christ to the world in all that we do and say, to avoid being a stumbling block to those who might otherwise come in through the door of faith. That's a very different thing than seeking to "please man" because you so desperately crave their validation. If you measure your personal value in the currency of your Snapchat score, then you will be profoundly averse to doing or saying anything that might lower that score or even limit its growth.

A few years ago the science-fiction writer Cory Doctorow published an essay in which he referred to "your computer's ecosystem of interruption technologies." Keep in mind that Doctorow wrote that phrase *before* smartphones. My iPhone's "ecosystem of interruption technologies" makes the one on my computer seem like pretty weak sauce, because the latter is on my desk or in my bag while the former is ever-present. And it's ever-present because I *like* it that way. I *choose* the device that interrupts my thinking and, as Louis C.K. observed, gives me an ever-present opportunity to escape unwanted emotions.

I am a living illustration of Technological Stockholm Syndrome: I have embraced my kidnapper. Or, to change the metaphor yet again, I have welcomed this disruptive ecosystem into my mental domicile and invited it to make a home for itself here—like those poor kids who let the Cat in the Hat in.

> *The church who would draw such novices has a historically new task as well.*

But an awareness of the potential gravity of this situation has gradually dawned on me. I have been significantly affected by this pocket-sized disruptor, even though I had decades of formation in a different attentional environment to serve as a kind of counterweight. People like Ben Rosen's sister Brooke, the Snapchat queen, clearly don't have any of that. I wonder what her future—her future as a *self, as a person*—will hold.

Our "ecosystem of interruption technologies" affects our spiritual and moral lives in every aspect. By our immersion in that ecosystem we are *radically* impeded from achieving a "right understanding of ourselves" and of God's disposition toward us. We will not understand ourselves as sinners, or as people made in God's image, or as people spiritually endangered by wandering far from God, or as people made to live in communion with God, or as people whom God has come to a far country in order to seek and to save, if we cannot cease for a few moments from an endless procession of stimuli that shock us out of thought.

It has of course always been hard for people to come to God, to have a right knowledge of ourselves and of God's threats and promises. I don't believe it's harder to be a Christian today than it has been at any other time in history. But I think in different periods and places the common impediments are *different*. The threat of persecution is one kind of impediment; constant technological distraction is another. Who's to say which is worse?—even if it's obvious which is more painful. But I really do think we are in new and uniquely challenging territory in our culture today, and I don't believe that, in general, churches have been fully aware of the challenges—indeed, in many cases churches have made things worse.

In his 1996 essay "Philosophy . . . Artifacts . . . Friendship," the Catholic priest and theorist of technology Ivan Illich provides numerous insights into these challenges for the church in our age of distractions. He writes:

> *The novice to the sacred liturgy and to mental prayer has a historically new task. He is largely removed from those things—water, sunlight, soil, and weather—that were made to speak of God's presence. In comparison with the saints whom he tries to emulate, his search for God's presence is of a new kind.*

> *. . Today's convert must recognize how his senses are continuously shaped by the artifacts he uses. They are charged by design with intentional symbolic loads, something previously unknown.*

And remember, Illich wrote all this *before* the Internet. What he wrote then is even more true now: the age of television and print ads for Persil now seem a very primitive endeavour indeed. If then it could be said that "our perceptions are to a large extent technogenic," they are now almost wholly technogenic, for most of us. If Illich is right to say that "the novice to the sacred liturgy and to mental prayer has a historically new task," then that means that the church who would draw such novices has a historically new task as well.

SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF—SQUIRREL!!

And what Illich says about how we "search for God's presence" is related to how we understand and talk about and preach sin.

When George Whitefield and John Wesley were preaching sermons that created the First Great Awakening, they almost always *started* by trying to arouse in their hearers a conviction of sin. The typical sequence of their sermons looked like this:

> *1. You are a sinner, though no more, or less, of a sinner than anyone else.*
> *2. We sinners cannot rescue ourselves.*
> *3. But God in his grace and love has come to rescue us.*
> *4. So we need only to accept that grace and love, in penitence, to be reconciled to God.*

But I don't believe we can readily reach people today with the same sequence. The very *idea* that I am a sinner sends me groping for my smartphone to avoid unpleasant emotions. I think this will be especially true for the majority of North Americans whose basic default theology is what the sociologist of religion Christian Smith and his colleagues call Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. For such people an awareness of sin is going to be hard to achieve—certainly at the earlier stages of their Christian lives.

But what if we tried to tell people that by disconnecting, however temporarily, they might be able to hear God? Consider these thoughts by Rowan Williams:

> *The true disciple is an expectant person, always taking it for granted that there is something about to break through from the master, something about to burst through the ordinary and uncover a new light on the landscape.*

> *And I think that living in expectancy—living in awareness, your eyes sufficiently open and your mind sufficiently both slack and attentive to*

> *see that when it happens— has a great deal to do with discipleship, indeed with discipleship as the gospels present it to us. Interesting (isn't it?) that in the gospels the disciples don't just listen, they're expected to look as well. They're people who are picking up clues all the way through.*

We need to put people—those who don't yet believe, those whose belief is young, those whose lives with Christ have become attenuated in a "technogenic" environment where our thoughts are largely directed by engineers— in a position to "pick up clues."

If I have read the signs of the times accurately, the first clues are likely to suggest the presence and activity of God; next, God's love and grace. An awareness of sin is not likely to come early in the process. St. Paul tells us that the goodness of God leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4); that may need to be our watchword in these times. If people can come to know that divine goodness, then they may understand the flaws in their nature through contrast to it. And that may be the path by which people in our world can come to a right understanding of themselves.

For Anglicans the major resource is, of course, the Book of Common Prayer, and more particularly Thomas Cranmer's subtle and ingenious adaptation of the Daily Office for the use of laypeople. As vigorously as I applaud the centrality of the Eucharist to Anglican worship that has developed over the past 150 years or so, I think we may be at a point in our cultural history at which we need to turn more attention to the resources carried by our own versions of the Daily Office. In particular, we should place greater emphasis on contemplative services in the prayer book: Evensong, Vespers, Compline — but also Morning Prayer without music.

We should encourage parishioners to adapt these services for home use as well; and place special emphasis on training people in contemplative practices. Teaching about and reflection on technology should be a permanent and central part of church ministry, including pastoral understanding and regular conversation about the fears associated with silence and a lack of stimulation.

The church need not repudiate, or crusade against, digital communications technologies. But it cannot allow its—*our*—habits and practices to be determined by the massive multinational corporations that control these technologies, and have their own agendas for how we use them, agendas that care nothing for the development of true personhood in Christ. In all this the church must accept and embrace its status as a fully countercultural institution. It need not seek to produce persons troubled in mind or conscience; but if it cannot produce persons who *have* minds and consciences, it will surely die.

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LIMITING YOUR CHILD'S FIRE TIME: A GUIDE FOR CONCERNED PALEOLITHIC PARENTS

By Rachel Klein February 7, 2018

According to the most recent cave drawings, children nowadays are using fire more than ever before. And it's no wonder: fire has many wonderful applications, such as cooking meat, warming the home, and warding off wild animals in the night. We adult *Homo erectus*, with our enlarged brains and experience of pre-fire days, can moderate our use, but our children—some of whom never lived during a time when you *couldn't* simply strike two rocks together for an hour over a pile of dried grass to eventually produce a spark that, with gentle coaxing, might grow into a roaring flame—can have difficulty self-monitoring their interactions with fire.

You don't want to be the bad guy, but you also want to make sure that your child engages in other activities, like mammoth hunting and the gathering of rocks and bones with which to make tools. So, how do you set appropriate boundaries for your child on fire usage without jeopardizing the family unit so crucial to the survival of the species? Here are some tips:

Establish clear but firm limits: Fire is nice, but there's a time and a place for it. So institute specific fire-watching times, and stick to them. After dinner, when the fire is lit, anyway, is one good option, as well as early in the morning, when a fire is just the thing to warm a chilly cave. Those living in glacial areas may have a harder time curtailing the use of fire, but just remind your children that when you were their age several layers of animal pelts were enough to keep *you* perfectly warm. Remember, *you're* the patriarch (or matriarch, depending on your community's customs surrounding familial power structures), and *you* make the rules!

Have a designated "fire room" in your dwelling: Those with smaller caves or huts might find this suggestion difficult, but even establishing a "fire corner" can help to create separate "fire" and "non-fire" spaces in your living area. In the non-fire spaces, encourage traditional activities, such as conversation (as much as your current vocabulary will allow), arrowhead-shaving, or stick-drawing in mud or soft stones. Reminding your children of the pleasures provided by these traditional activities can help reduce the seductive lure of the fire's dancing flame.

Watch for changes and communicate concerns: For many children, fire is a harmless, pleasant addition to their lives. But for some it can become an all-consuming passion. If your child seems to be growing unhealthily attached to the fire, don't wait to talk to him about it. A few common fire-obsessed behaviors to look out for include:

- Distraction: ignoring people when they are in the same room as fire

- Preoccupation: talking or thinking about fire, even when there is no fire present

- Deception: going off to secretly find/make fires; lying about fire usage when confronted

- Anthropomorphization: talking to/interacting with the fire as if it were a sentient being, which the elders we consulted say is highly unlikely, though they have yet to entirely rule out the presence of powerful magical beings within the inferno

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

Why the Amazon Fires Are Surging

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Commit to non-fire family time: This last tip is the most important, because, if all you're doing is restricting your child's behavior and environment, he's bound to resent you. So introduce non-fire activities that the whole family can enjoy together, and commit to them on a regular basis. These activities will depend on your region and climate, of course, but hunting and/or gathering is always a great way to be active and insure your family's survival. If your tribe has already discovered music, carve a bone flute and work on a family song. Believe in a god (or gods)? Carve some rudimentary icons in his/her/their image. There's no end to the fun you can have when you put your significantly-larger-than-a-chimpanzee's mind to it!

In the end, just remember that fire, like most innovations, is both a blessing and a curse. Sure, it's made our lives easier, our survival likelier, and will probably lead to the greatest evolutionary paradigm shift in human history. But it's also dangerous, destructive, and, yes, *possibly* infested with demonic forces that wish us ill. As with everything in life, balance is key. If you can imagine what it was like a few thousand years ago, when the first humans started walking upright, and how much grief they probably got from their parents, you'll have some empathy for your children's unique place in the evolutionary narrative. At the same time, don't forget that *you're* the boss, and that, until they mate and produce viable offspring, what you say goes. And, of course, it goes without saying that, in the (again, very unlikely) event that fire is both sentient and vengeful, we humbly beg its forgiveness for our insolence and pray to be spared our fleeting and insignificant lives.

Video

The Man Who Shazamed the World
Introducing a new version of Shazam that recognizes every sound on Earth.

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Big Addiction

Jon Schweppe

According to my iPhone, I pick up my phone 177 times each day and spend 26 hours each week on social media. These are not hours deliberately allocated to a hobby I view as a priority. Rather, these are hours lost to what I can only describe as an addiction. Any time I experience even a few seconds of idle time, my hand compulsively reaches for my iPhone, and once I open Facebook or Twitter and begin the infinite scroll down my newsfeed, I am locked in—I have even learned how to pretend to keep light conversation going while my eyes remain glued to the screen.

Big Tech companies are known to hire psychologists and neurologists to develop addictive techniques that will keep users on the hamster wheel as long as humanly possible. The longer users stay on their platforms, the more advertisements they can serve and the more money they can make for their shareholders. Advertisers are the consumer. Users are merely the product.

In an effort to address this issue, Sen. Josh Hawley recently introduced the Social Media Addiction Reduction Technology (SMART) Act, a bill that would ban Big Tech companies from using psychologically manipulative practices to trap users in patterns of addictive behavior. The proposal was not popular among the usual suspects within the conservative movement. David French denounced it as heavy-handed regulation—"Welcome to the Daddy State," he quipped—while suggesting that regulating an industry with a business model built on selling addiction would "[erode] liberty into a culture of coddling and indulgence." Peter Suderman at *Reason* suggested the bill was "remarkably petty."

The SMART Act would ban some of Big Tech's most addictive features: "infinite scroll," which allows users to peruse other users' most recent content—interlaced with targeted advertising, of course—indefinitely without a stopping point; "autoplay," which subjects users to additional content they didn't deliberately seek out (with an exception written into the legislation for music-based platforms); and other addictive features that make it challenging to leave a platform.

Interestingly, the SMART Act also prohibits "badge" systems, a user-empowerment technique that has become common on social media platforms. These systems are strikingly similar to the way Big Tobacco once promoted products with prizes and sweepstakes for loyal users. Much like R. J. Reynolds used its "Camel Cash" program to entice users with a wide selection of merchandise and gadgets to flaunt brand loyalty, Facebook uses "Top Fan" badges, which allow users to appear on a list of top fans of a page and have a badge placed next to their name when commenting. Both strategies rely on similar psychology, appealing to one's desire to publicly demonstrate loyalty to a product or enjoy the implication of some authority on a subject. As a result, many Top Fans spend hours interacting with pages, enjoying their celebrated status in these subcultures.

The SMART Act also requires companies to provide users with an equal opportunity to either consent or decline consent to a particular user experience, while disallowing techniques used to manipulate users into giving consent. Finally, the bill mandates that companies provide their users with the ability to monitor and self-regulate time spent on social media platforms by allowing them to impose usage caps on themselves.

There's obviously plenty of room for policy wonks to debate the somewhat idiosyncratic intricacies of this bill. But the discussion so far has largely avoided the specifics and instead focused on a bigger question: Should we even be worried about whether people are addicted to social media? Does government have an interest in defending its citizens against a ubiquitous, trillion-dollar industry's cynical attempt to monopolize their most precious resource—their time—through the most sophisticated psychological tricks and neurological manipulations money can buy?

Historically, our politicians have determined that government should have a role when corporations exploit consumers by putting their physical or psychological health at risk. This is especially true when those consumers happen to be children. We regulate the gambling industry and, in most jurisdictions, prevent people under the age of 21 from participating. We regulate cigarettes, alcohol, and prescription drugs—all to defend the consumer. We require food and drink companies to fully disclose their products' ingredients down to the caloric content. No one laments any of this in the pages of *National Review*.

Is it really out of bounds to regulate what has become the most powerful industry in the country? We are now harder on ginseng than we are on Google. Is it really unfair to question the deceptive practices of companies that enjoy the unadulterated attention of the vast majority of the American people for several hours a day? Is this really the small-government hill conservatives are willing to die on?

After the events of recent weeks and months, there can be no doubt that social media is affecting our society in profoundly negative ways which we are only beginning to understand. Hawley's SMART Act may not be the end-all be-all solution, but he is certainly asking the right questions.

Jon Schweppe is the Director of Policy and Government Affairs for American Principles Project. Follow him on Twitter @JonSchweppe.

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3 Reasons Why You Shouldn't Check Your Phone Within 1 Hour Of Waking Up

Jari Roomer

Nowadays, most of us are glued to our smartphones. And even though they can help us be more productive and improve the quality of our lives — it can also be a major source of distraction and stress.

Smartphones make a good servant, but a bad master.

Despite the amazing benefits, it's becoming more and more obvious that most people have no control over their smartphone use — negatively impacting their productivity and mental health.

A study from IDC Research made this very clear. About 80% of smartphone users check their mobile devices within 15 minutes of waking up each morning — and that's a big problem.

Reason #1: Increased Stress And Anxiety

When you wake up and immediately check your phone, you're being bombarded with new messages, emails, to-dos, and other stimuli that often creates a feeling of stress and anxiety.

Immediately, external stimuli are pulling for your attention, giving you no time and space to start your day calmly.

According to Dr. Nikole Benders-Hadi, *"immediately turning to your phone when you wake up can start your day off in a way that is more likely to* *increase stress and leave you feeling overwhelmed."*

Furthermore, a study at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden measured the effects of smartphone usage on people in their 20s over the course of a year. The study showed that **high mobile phone use was directly correlated to increased reports of depression** in both men and women — and that's worrisome.

So, if you want to avoid starting your day feeling rushed, stressed, and anxious, stop checking your smartphone right after waking up. Instead, aim to start in a way so that your mind can relax.

Reason #2: Your Time & Attention Are Hijacked

By checking social media, email, or messaging right after waking up, you let other people's opinions, requests, and advertising into your mind, which pollutes your thinking.

Your thoughts, ideas, and focus are immediately hijacked by the new messages, emails, and notifications that you've received. In other words, your mind will be occupied with other people's agenda — not your own.

Instead of starting your day *proactively* focusing on your own goals, you're being forced to *react* to other people's stuff.

Think about it; you wouldn't let hundreds of people into your house, blasting their requests and opinions at you. So why would you let them into your mind through a device?

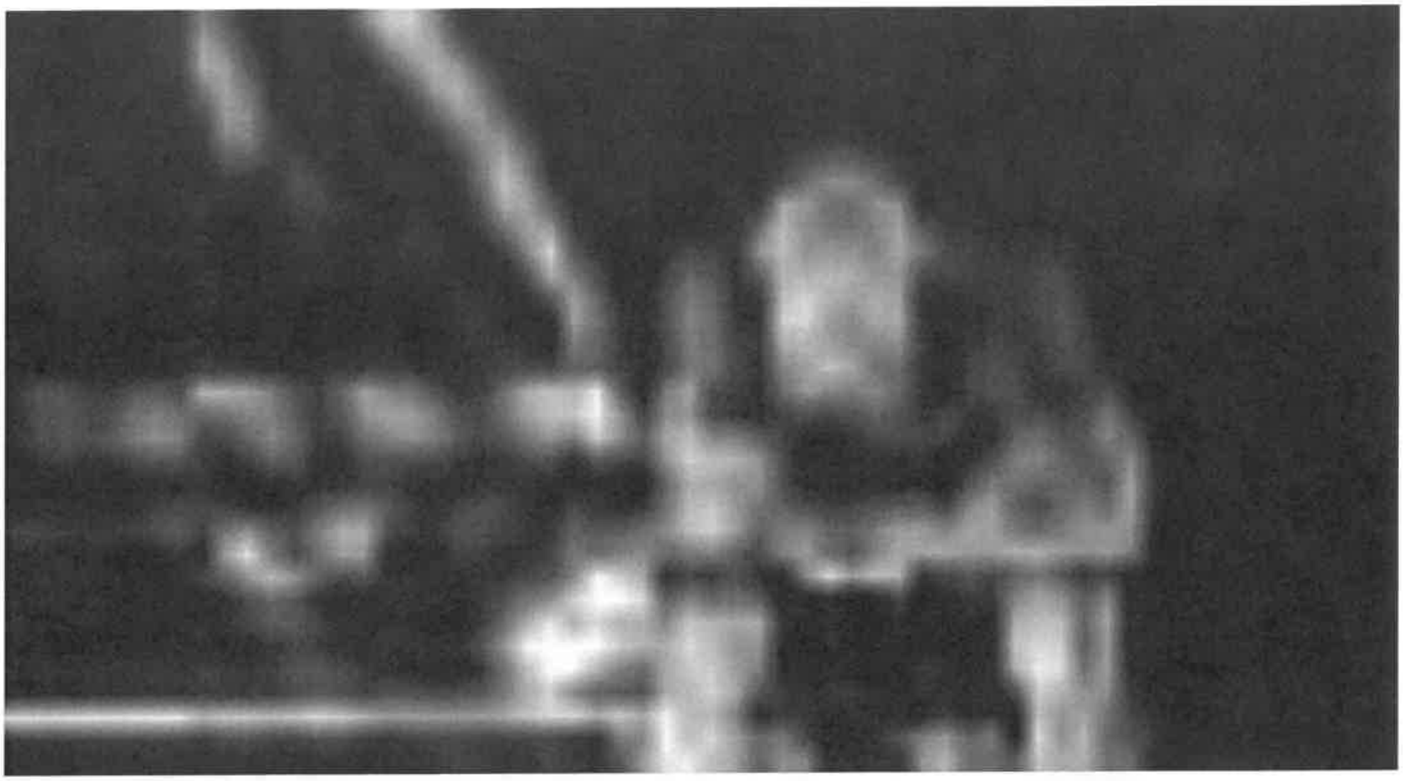

Photo by Courtney Clayton on Unsplash

Aside from your attention, your time is also being hijacked. What starts out as checking social media for 5 minutes quickly turns into 15 minutes, which then turns into 30 minutes. Before you know it, you have to rush to make it on time to work, starting your day hurried and stressful.

Instead, use the morning to improve yourself, work towards your goals, and prepare yourself for a successful day. Train your brain to be okay with lesser stimulating — *yet more beneficial* — activities such as reading, meditation, journaling, prioritizing your tasks, scheduling your day, or taking the time to make a healthy breakfast.

Unlike checking your smartphone, these activities decrease stress, help you become more focused & productive, and provide clarity of thinking. That's a much better start to the day.

Reason #3: You Prime Your Brain For Distraction

For The Rest of The Day

By starting the day distracted, you set the tone for a distracted day. Most people assume they can smoothly go from distraction to intense focus, but that's not the case. According to Dr. Nikole Benders-Hadi, *"The information overload that hits [you] before you're fully awake interferes with your ability to prioritize tasks."*

In other words, throughout the day, we get distracted much quicker and mess up our productivity by checking our smartphone first thing in the morning.

Photo by Boudewijn Huysmans on Unsplash

Julie Morgenstern, author of the book Never Check Email In The Morning, agrees. According to Julie, when you check your email or notifications first thing in the morning, *"you'll never recover. Those requests and those interruptions and those unexpected surprises and those reminders and problems are endless... there is very little that cannot wait a minimum of 59 minutes."*

In other words, your ability to focus is heavily decreased when you start your day by being glued to your smartphone. Let's dive a bit deeper into why that is the case.

Smartphones, Dopamine, and The Brain

When checking social media or email, the brain releases a lot of dopamine — a neurochemical that makes you feel rewarded. The brain craves dopamine like an eight-year-old craves candy, so **it will stimulate the repetition of behaviors that led to the dopamine release in the first place.**

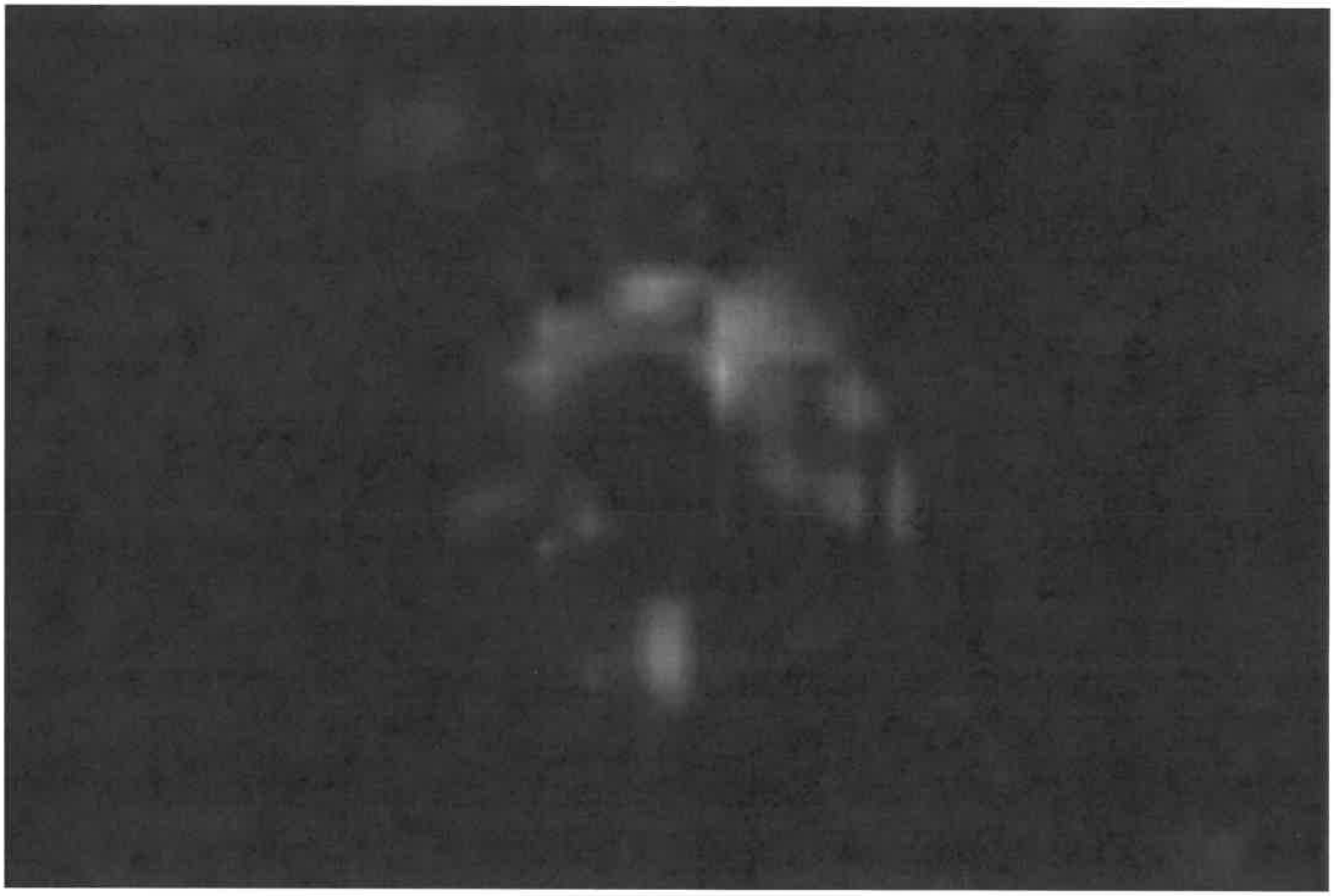

Photo by Josh Riemer on Unsplash

In other words, when you start your day by mindlessly scrolling through email or social media, your brain will **stimulate you to repeat this behavior throughout the day**, as it knows it will quickly and easily feel good *(especially when your work is less stimulating or gets challenging)*.

All in all, you're fighting a battle against the cravings of your brain — which isn't an easy battle to win.

So, stop checking your smartphone right after waking up if you want to avoid priming your brain for distraction. Instead, start your morning relaxed and calm. Train your brain to get used to lower levels of stimulation.

Two Methods To Stop Checking Your Smartphone

In The Morning

Before I share some of the methods I used to stop checking my smartphone, I want to emphasize that I'm not a saint. On some days, it still happens that I check my smartphone in the first 60 minutes after waking up. My biggest weakness is checking business statistics such as Medium views, sales, new email subscribers, etc.

However, the methods that I'll share here helped get better at avoiding my smartphone for the majority of the mornings — and that's already worth a lot.

Method #1 is to put your phone on flight mode before you go to sleep. This way, when you wake up, you're not immediately confronted with new messages and notifications.

Personally, I use my phone as my alarm clock, so it's essential that I put it on flight mode. If I don't do that, I'll immediately be confronted with new notifications on my screen, making it ten times harder to resist the urge to check it.

> *You could also try to use a classic alarm clock instead of your smartphone. This way, it will be much less tempting to check your phone first thing in the morning.*

Method #2 is to make sure you have **replacement activities** for checking your smartphone. If you don't have anything to replace your smartphone habit with, you'll quickly feel bored and be pulled towards checking social media or email again.

Therefore, make a list of at least 7 things you *could* do instead of checking your smartphone. For example, you could use the extra free time for things like:

- Exercising
- Meditating
- Reading
- Journaling
- Listening to a podcast
- Making a healthy breakfast
- Connecting with your kids or spouse
- Scheduling your day
- Writing
- Prioritizing your tasks
- Setting goals
- Making a cup of coffee

Then, every morning, pick one or more of these activities and follow them instead of checking your smartphone.

Personally, I've experienced that starting my day like this makes me feel calm and in control. I also don't experience as much stress and anxiety anymore. On top of that, my days are much more focused and productive when I start them well.

Now Do It

Change only happens from taking action. Therefore, I encourage you to follow the tips above and avoid your smartphone for the first 60 minutes of your day. Remember, the way you start your day sets the tone for the rest of the day — so make sure you start it well.

Let me know in the comments if you're going to try it!

To Your Personal Growth,

Jari Roomer

Founder Personal Growth Lab

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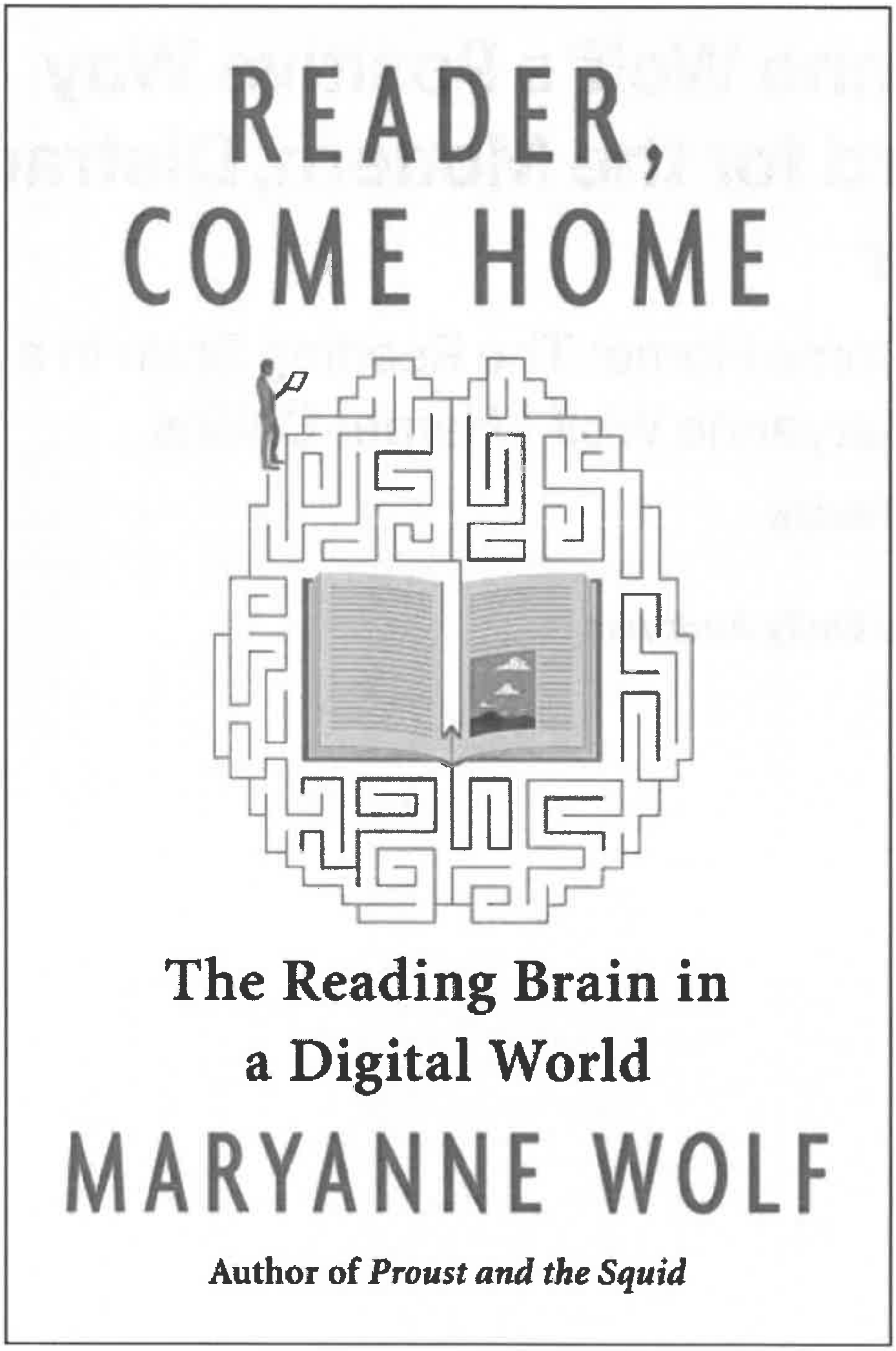
Maryanne Wolf's Positive Way Forward for the Modern, Distracted Reader

Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World | Maryanne Wolf | Harper Collins

The FORMA Review

Reviewed by Emily Andrews


READER, COME HOME
The Reading Brain in a Digital World
MARYANNE WOLF
Author of *Proust and the Squid*

Perhaps this has happened to you: Finally finding a minute to settle in with a good book, you curl up on the sofa and crack open the cover of a book you have been eagerly looking forward to reading. At first, the sensation of the text in your hands and the smell of the crisp, new pages feels, oh, so good. You savor the first few paragraphs. But before long, a panicky twitch starts in your gut and works its way up to your brain. The desire to turn your eyes away to something else becomes irresistible. The window, the next room, your phone. You can no longer bear to pay attention to the words on the page, forgetting most of what you have just read. To dedicated bibliophiles, the sensation is alarming. What happened to those long hours of quiet bliss?

If this isn't something you experience, I am truly happy for you. But for the rest of us who live in the digital age, a shift has begun to take place in the way we interact with words. Our brains have been rewired to require a constant stream of new information. We are physically hindered in our attempts to read well.

Where did our focus go and how can we reclaim it? Cognitive scientist Maryanne Wolf (*Proust and the Squid*) is out to answer these questions in her latest title: *Reader, Come Home*. The argument for unplugging is hardly a novel one. Perhaps the most renowned advocate for a return to print, Neil Postman made his case over 30 years ago. But Wolf's ability to look under the hood of the human brain is her special contribution to the conversation, giving us laymen a glimpse into how digital media is changing our physical makeup.

Wolf begins by demonstrating the miracle of reading. Lest we forget, she reminds us that human beings are not born with the ability to read. If we are lucky, it is something we train our brains to do over the course of many childhood years. During this process the brain must build new pathways so that countless signals can fire across the multiple areas of cognition. Her description of the activity required to register a single letter is awe-inspiring. And strangely, our neurology adapts even though there is no immediate, practical benefit to this function. In Wolf's words, "the act of reading embodies as no other function the brain's semi-miraculous ability to go beyond its original, genetically programmed capacities such as vision and language." Reading surpasses the basic senses required for survival. It is apparently unnecessary, and yet it has the power to entirely revolutionize an individual life.

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But what does this science have to do with the discussion surrounding modern, digital culture? Wolf outlines three major concerns with the way digital media affects the malleable neurology of our reading brain. The first is the way in which it encourages our *novelty bias*. Already wired to give primary attention to new signals in our environment, a feature which protects us in the event of danger, it takes concentrated effort and time to teach the brain to focus on letters and words. However, the scrolling and constantly updating sound bytes of the internet split our attention. As Wolf describes it, "In multitasking, we unknowingly enter an addiction loop as the brain's novelty centers becomes rewarded for processing shiny new stimuli, to the detriment of our prefrontal cortex, which wants to stay on task and gain the rewards of sustained effort and attention." As we give into this rhythm of reading, we lose what she calls *cognitive patience*. Not only do we struggle to focus our attention on the page, but we fail to spend time with the content of our reading. The digitally-trained brain has a harder time pausing to digest the meaning and implications of what has been read. In this way, the highest purposes of reading, self-reflection and the pursuit of wisdom, are lost. WE LOST WHAT WE'RE MEANT TO GAIN FROM WHAT WE [illegible]

Her second concern addresses the substantive nature of the page. The physical dimension of print provides readers "a knowledge of where they are in time and space" and "allows them to return to things over and over again and learn from them." She calls this the *recursive dimension* of reading. Screens do not have quite the same "thereness" as hard copy. The words disappear as we scroll, and we therefore lose the sense of their permanence. In early years the recursive dimension is especially important as children experience repeat encounters with a book. Wolf says, "It involves their whole bodies; they see, smell, hear, and feel books."

DIMINISHING ALL A BOOK IS WHEN WE READ IT IN A DIGITAL FORMAT

Such repetition allows them to develop the quality which comprises her third concern: background knowledge. Human beings can only acquire insight by comparing new concepts with those they already know. Wolf recounts her attempt to read Ethiopian children a story about an octopus. They had never seen or heard of such a creature and could not comprehend the context in which the story took place. For modern children of the West, Wolf sees a similar problem: "That environment is providentially rich in what it gives, but paradoxically today, it may give too much and ask too little."

DIMINISHING THE APPROPRIATION OF KNOWLEDGE AS WE SATISFY OURSELVES WITH THE BROWSING OF IDEAS

When our world is oversaturated with knowledge, we often fail to grapple with information in a way that makes it ours. We prefer seeking new information to retaining the old. Whether it be an octopus, Achilles, or Ebenezer Scrooge, failure to stockpile cultural background knowledge impedes a reader's ability to think analogically. Without analogy, a human being cannot formulate a new thought. And more than simply providing background information, reading gives us experiences. For those who have read the ending of *Anna Karenina*, Wolf claims, "In all likelihood the same neurons you deploy when you move your legs and trunk were also activated when you read that Anna jumped before the train." Books truly do allow us to become a thousand men and yet remain ourselves, as C.S. Lewis argued long ago.

Wolf's fears about the effects which these neurological changes will produce in humanity are no surprise. The loss of cognitive patience, the recursive dimension, and background knowledge are sure to diminish the quality of the reading experience, thereby severing future generations from humanity's long heritage. She laments the loss of deep reading, which produces joy and wisdom responsible for carrying sufferers of all kinds through unspeakable tragedy. She worries for a narrow-minded society that fails to "welcome the Other as a guest within ourselves" through deep reading. As many before her, she cautions us against how easily we have given up slow, reflective reading.

Yet Wolf's optimism for the future is surprising and is what sets her work apart. Recognizing that it is unadvisable to leap unthinking into new technologies, but also futile (even undesirable) to escape our digital present, she imagines a third way forward. Building on research done on the bilingual brain, Wolf hypothesizes a similar binary approach to reading education. Just as a child may easily develop separate neural pathways for English and Spanish language processing, she believes we can develop separate pathways for print and digital reading. A good reader then becomes a "code switcher," toggling between modes of "light" and "deep" reading as the situation demands. Furthermore, she expands these hypotheses to include not just the training of new readers, but the restoring of adult readers as well. Advances in neurology have shown us how the plasticity of the brain provides a way to reverse negative neural patterns. Wolf suggests that this is also possible for the reading brain.

THERE IS A WAY BACK.
THE KEY IS AN UNDOING
OF WHAT WE'VE
BUILT.

Whether or not Wolf has landed on the answer, her hopeful outlook is a breath of fresh air. We have no lack of alarmists voicing the dangers of technology today. However, if we only remain alarmed, longing for days gone by, we will soon give way to isolation and despair. Wolf instead searches for a solution that will safeguard tradition while simultaneously embracing the benefits of our digital present. This willingness to thoughtfully occupy her own place in history is a timely example to all anxious readers. She looks forward in good faith to a development we have not yet reached. Thus *Reader, Come Home* successfully calls its audience into what Wolf proclaims as the goal of good reading: to know what we do not know.

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In Praise of Boredom

James K.A. Smith | Issue 99

IN HIS BOOK *The World Beyond Your Head*, Matthew Crawford talks about what he calls "ecologies of attention"—the social infrastructure that shapes and channels the way we attend to the world. In an earlier age, quiet spaces cultivated the sort of attention that freed you up to read *War and Peace*. In the frantic ecology that is now our default, you can't pump gas or ride an elevator without some corporation trying to steal your attention.

We need the arts to imagine the world otherwise. But such an invasion of the imagination, such an invitation to another world, has to overcome its competitors. This has always been the case, of course. The long human grind of mere survival, still a daily reality in too many places, has always threatened to consume any time or energy for play. Plato's philosopher-kings banish poetry from the city, while consumerism's corporate-kings are more sly, turning every endeavor into a commodity. Fascists shut down the theater while the gods of stem shut down the music program.

But human longing has always managed to overcome such threats in order to make art that limns the beyond. Somehow our ancient forbears, exhausted by hunting and gathering, made time to create the ancient beauty that adorns the walls of caves in Lascaux. A Hebrew shepherd, and the poor of Appalachia, made stringed instruments sing. Those oppressed by slavery bequeathed to us jazz and the blues. We don't deserve *A Love Supreme*. Out of the unspeakable horrors of the Shoah, *Night* appeared.

Every work of art that is true or beautiful is, one might say, a pièce de résistance, telling the truth about how the world really is and offering us a portal to what we're called to be. Such art resists lies, apathy, and all the forces that would diminish us to mere consumers or enemies or copulating pieces of meat. Such imaginative works are at once disconcerting and enticing. They remind us that we're not as good as we think we are, and they call us to so much more than this. As in Terrence Malick's *Thin Red Line*, a dappled light finds its way through the cathedral of palms while war rages below, making us look up and wonder. And hope.

But how to overcome *distraction*? How to break through the bedazzling glare of our screens, the latest threat to parade as an angel of light?

The problem isn't simply that the technologies of distraction prevent us from making or appreciating art. This isn't simply a competition for attention. The concern is more egregious: our distraction demeans us. Like the dreaded Entertainment in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, our social media feeds are dopamine dispensers. In a way that Wallace couldn't have imagined, we carry in our pockets the possibility of unceasing jolts of novelty. We just have to open Facebook or Instagram. There's always something new in our feeds: some tantalizing delight, some new outrage, and most of all, some new affirmation—a like, a fave, a comment, like an intravenous shot of recognition.

If I've learned anything from Saint Augustine, it is an eyes-wide-open realism about our tendency to ruin things. And so, unsurprisingly, even our distractions have been hijacked by the worst angels of our nature. Now we turn to these devices over and over again looking for that peculiar joy of late modernity: the joy of outrage. The delight we take in recognizing what is detestable. The twisted bliss of offense. The haughty thrill of being aghast at the latest transgression. We can't believe he said *that*, and we secretly can't wait for it to happen again. Like love's negative, the joy of outrage is expansive: it only grows when it is shared.

And so we spend our days shrinking not only our attention but our souls' capacities. In some cosmic attic, our collective portrait, like Dorian Gray's, is absorbing all the effects of our habits. With each hungry "refresh" and mocking retweet and smug dismissal, this portrait of our soul is shriveling beyond recognition. We are better than this.

What is the calling of art in such a world? And how can the arts disrupt these habits, perhaps even teach us to be disappointed by distraction? Who will sing the song that transports us?

I won't pretend the answer is simple, or that I have figured this out. Heaven knows how much time I've lost to Twitter, and how many times I've had to apologize. I have no plans to delete my account in a quest for purity.

But I know at least this: Instagram won't save us, and tweeted verse will not undo what we've done to ourselves. But neither is there any special enchantment to reading in print. So this is not the Luddite's redoubt, nostalgically canonizing codex or canvas as if history had come to an end in some glorious past. Every medium now reaches us *inside* the ecology of attention masterminded by Silicon Valley. We take pictures of our books and coffee, for heaven's sake. The point isn't platform but *desire*: what do we want when we pick up our phones? We don't need better media, or to romanticize old media. We need to change what we want.

In a world of incessant distraction, the way out might look like learning how to be bored. A little ennui could go a long way; it could be the wardrobe we need now. We need to learn how to be bored in order to wean ourselves off distraction and open ourselves to others and the Other—to make ourselves available for irruptions of grace.

In a recent conversation with Terry Gross, the filmmaker Paul Schrader made a provocative observation: "People don't leave church because they're bored," he suggested; "they go to church to *be* bored." (The resonance this has for me personally might stem from our shared formation in Reformed churches.) But what Schrader means by "boredom" here is something more like *stillness*, the quiet that is the condition for contemplation. The quietude that is a prelude to reverence. To listening. To maybe even hearing.

For a culture jacked up on diverting entertainments, such stillness is going to look and feel like boredom. And it will be indescribably difficult—as impossible as a Holstein landing a grand jeté.

But what if art—paradoxically—could teach us how to be bored? It's no accident that Schrader's affinity for holy boredom parallels his devotion to transcendental style in film and his appreciation for "slow cinema" (even if he insists on a difference between the two). In the new edition of his book, *Transcendental Style in Film*, Schrader discusses boredom as an aesthetic tool. It is the cinematic manifestation of a principle: "Deny the viewers what they seek. Deny, deny, deny." (Why am I thinking of Calvinism again?)

"Why would a viewer put up with such abuse? Such boredom?" Schrader asks. "Well, most viewers don't," he admits. And there may be a broader truth for us to consider there. But he goes on to note another possibility. Slow films, he says, can "hook the viewer." Masters of slow cinema, he points out:

use boredom as an aesthetic tool. Boring morphs into mesmerizing. These are the truly important films. Why do we take it? The boredom. The distance. ...[B]ecause effective slow cinema filmmakers are masters of anticipation. Employing striking visuals and auditory tricks and bits of activity, the slow film director keeps his viewer on the hook, thinking there is a reward, a "payoff" just around the corner. It's adroit blackmail. If I leave, I'll miss what I've been waiting for. Even the seasoned viewer of slow cinema anticipates *something*. Some moment. Some unexpectation. The wait will be worth it.

We need artists with the courage to teach us how to be bored. Who tease us with anticipation even when we're befuddled by the poem. Whose prose demands an attention that we want to give because of promises laden therein. Whose sculpture arrests us and frustrates us and jackhammers into our soul and unsettles us with recognition. The creators who teach us to be bored will be cultivating in us habits of stilled attention in which we might finally hear our creator.

Sitting on the corner of the Tuileries Garden, on the bank of the Seine, is the remarkable Musée de l'Orangerie, a gem that displays 145 paintings collected by Paul Guillaume. The collection is a who's who of early twentieth-century French painting, featuring works by Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, Modigliani, Renoir, and many others.

But on a recent visit I was taken with the role played by Claude Monet's famous *Nymphéas*—the eight massive canvases of water lilies painted especially for the museum's space. Before you descend to the main collection, you are invited into two oblong rooms where muted natural light falls gently from skylights. Taking up almost the entirety of the walls are swelling images of Monet's gardens at Giverny. In the first room, you inhabit the garden through time—from darkness to rising sun to the golden hour of twilight and the spooky beauty of dusk. In the second room we are invited to see—or perhaps better, *sense*—the ponds and lilies and willows from different angles, to get lost in the garden, as it were, to float on its ponds.

There is a hidden intentionality behind all of this, a partnership between the artist and the museum. Monet made the promise to donate his work the day after the Armistice in 1918. He wanted to create a monument to peace and give a gift to the people of France. But he also knew something about the world in which they lived—the fog of war; the doldrums of a dirty, demanding city; the exhaustion of work. So as he envisioned his work and its role in this space, he was conscious of a desire to create a sanctuary. Conceiving the installation early on, Monet wrote, "Nerves strained by work would relax in its presence, following the restful example of its stagnant waters, and for he who would live in it, this room would offer a refuge for peaceful meditation in the midst of a flowering aquarium."

Not everyone will be able to achieve such peaceful meditation ("most viewers don't," Schrader reminds us). Monet imagined all of the competition *outside* the gallery—the specter of war, the burdens of industry and commerce. He couldn't have imagined all the competitors that would make their way *inside*: the demanding tour-bus drivers clapping to keep their customers on schedule; the selfie sticks and preening postures of those who reduce his work to a backdrop. It's not easy to be bored. It's harder than ever to float.

Teach us, artists, how to be bored again. Invite us into the boredom that is the antechamber to the mesmerizing. Tease us with some unexpectation. Bore us so that God can bore into our souls and we can find ourselves again.

The *Image* archive is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

My technology habits

February 07, 2019

Developing good technology habits is one of the driving motivations of my daily life. Particularly since I surrendered and got a smart phone (only three years ago), combined with having children (the oldest is six) and getting a job (now in my second year), the possibility for the internet and screens to overtake my every waking moment has never been greater. A little less than two years ago I read Andy Crouch's *The Tech-Wise Family*, which galvanized and organized my approach to disciplining technology's role in my life. Here's where things stand at the moment.

Phone

I still have an iPhone, though an older and increasingly outdated model. When I read Crouch I realized I was spending more than 2 hours a day on my phone (adolescents average 3-6 hours—some of my students more than that!), and I followed his lead in downloading the Moment app to monitor my usage. Since then I've cut down my daily screen time on my phone to ~45 minutes: 10 or so minutes checking email, 10-20 or so minutes texting/WhatsApp, another 20-30 minutes reading articles I've saved to Instapaper.

I changed my screen settings to black and white, which diminishes the appeal of the phone's image (the eyes like color). My home screen consists of Gmail, Safari, Messages, WhatsApp, Calendar, Photos, Camera, Settings, Weather, Google Maps, and FaceTime. That's it. I have no social media apps. On the next screen I have, e.g., the OED, BibleGateway, Instapaper, Podcasts, Amazon, Fandango, and Freedom (which helps to manage and block access to certain websites or apps).

When we moved to Abilene in June 2016, we instituted a digital sabbath on Sundays: no TV (for kids or us), and minimal phone usage. Elaborating on the latter: I leave my phone in the car during church, and try to leave my phone plugged into the charger in the bedroom or away from living areas during the day. Not to say that we've been perfectly consistent with either of these practices, but for the most part, they've been life-giving and refreshing.

Oh, and our children do not have their own phones or tablets, and they do not use or play on ours, at home or in public. (Our oldest *is* just now experimenting with doing an educational app on our iPad instead of TV time. We'll see how that goes.)

Social Media

Currently the only social media that I am on and regularly use is Twitter. I was on Facebook for years, but last month I deactivated my account. I'm giving it a waiting period, but after Easter, or thereabouts, unless something has changed my mind, I am going to delete my account permanently. (Reading Jaron Lanier's most recent book had something to do with this decision.) I don't use, and I cannot imagine ever creating an account for, any other social media.

Why Twitter? Well, on the one hand, it has proved to be an extraordinarily helpful and beneficial means of networking, both personally and professionally. I've done my best to cultivate a level-headed, sane, honest, and friendly presence on it, and the results have so far wildly exceeded my expectations. Thus, on the other hand, I have *yet* to experience Twitter as the nightmare I know it is and can be for so many. Part of that is my approach to using it, but I know that the clock is ticking on my first truly negative experience—getting rolled or trolled or otherwise abused. What will I do then? My hope is that I will simply not read my mentions and avoid getting sucked into the Darkest Twitter Timeline whose vortex has claimed so many others. But if it starts affecting my actual psyche—if I start anxiously thinking about it throughout the day—if my writing or teaching starts anticipating, reactively, the negative responses Twitter is designed algorithmically to generate: then I will seriously consider deactivating or deleting my account.

How do I manage Twitter usage? First, since it's not on my phone, unless I'm in front of my own laptop, I can't access it, or at least not in a user friendly way. (Besides, I mostly use Twitter as I once did checking blogs: I go to individual accounts' home pages daily or every other day, rather than spend time scrolling or refreshing my timeline.) Second, I use Freedom to block Twitter on both my laptop and my phone for extended periods during the day (e.g., when writing or grading or returning emails), so I simply *can't* access it. Third, my aim is for two or three 5-10 minute "check-ins": once or twice at work, once in the evening. If I spend more than 20 or 30 minutes a day on Twitter, that day is a failure.

Laptop

I have four children, six and under, at home, so being on my laptop at home isn't exactly a realistic persistent temptation. They've got to be in bed, and unless I need to work, I'm not going to sit there scrolling around online indefinitely. I've got better things to do.

At work, my goal is to avoid being on my laptop as much as possible. Unless

I *need* to be on it—in order to write, email, or prepare for class—I keep it closed. In fact, I have a few tricks for resisting the temptation to open it and get sucked in. I'll use Freedom to start a session blocking the internet for a few hours. Or I begin the day with reading (say, 8:00-11:00), then open the laptop to check stuff while eating an early lunch. Or I will physically put the laptop in an annoying place in my office: high on a shelf, or in a drawer. Human psychology's a fickle thing, but this sort of practice actually decreases the psychic desire to take a break from reading or other work by opening the laptop; and I *know* if I open it, Twitter or Feedly or Instapaper or the *NYT* or whatever will draw me in and take more time from me than I had planned or wanted.

[Insert: I neglected to mention that one way I try to read at least *some* of the innumerable excellent articles and essays published online is, first, to save them to Instapaper then, second, to print out the longest or most interesting ones (usually all together, once or twice a month). I print them front and back, two sides to a page, and put them in a folder to read in the evening or throughout the week. This can't work for everyone, but since I work in an office with a mega-printer that doesn't cost me anything, it's a nice way to "read online" without actually being online.]

One of my goals for the new year has been to get back into blogging—or as I've termed it, mezzo-blogging—which is really just an excuse to force myself to write for 15-30 minutes each day. That's proved to require even more hacks to keep me from going down rabbit holes online, since the laptop obviously has to be open to write a blog post. So I'll use Freedom to block "Distractions," i.e., websites I've designated as ones that distract me from productive work, like Twitter or Google.

I've yet to figure out a good approach with email, since I don't like replying to emails throughout the day, though sometimes my students do need a swifter answer than I'd prefer to give. Friday afternoons usually end up my catch-up day.

I should add that I am a binge writer (and editor): so if I have the time, and I have something to write, I'll go for three or six or even nine or more hours hammering away. But when I'm in the groove like that, the distractions are easy to avoid.

Oh, and as for work on the weekends: I typically limit myself to (at most) Saturday afternoon, while the younger kids nap and the older kids rest, and Sunday evening, after the kids go to bed. That way I take most or all of the weekend off, and even if I have work to do, I take 24+ hours off from work (Sat 5pm–Sun 7pm).

TV

In many ways my worst technology habits have to do with TV. Over many years my mind and body have been trained to think of work (teaching and reading and writing) as the sort of thing I do during the day, and rest from work after dinner (or the kids go to bed) means watching television. That can be nice, either as a respite from mentally challenging labor, or as a way to spend time with my wife. But it also implies a profoundly attenuated imagination: relaxation = vegging out. Most of the last three years have been a sustained, ongoing attempt at retraining my brain to resist its vegging-out desires once the last child falls asleep. Instead, to read a novel, to catch up with my wife, to clean up, to grab drinks with friends, to get to bed early—whatever.

If my goal is less than 1 hour per day on my phone, and only as much time on my laptop as is necessary (which could be as little as 30 minutes or as much as 4+ hours), my goal is six (or fewer) hours per *week* of TV time. That includes sports, which as a result has gone *way* down, and movies (whether with the kids or my wife). Reasonable exceptions allowed: our 5-month-old often has trouble getting down early or easily, and my wife and I will put on some mindless episode of comedy—current favorite: *Brooklyn 99*—while taking turns holding and bouncing her to sleep. But otherwise, my current #1 goal is as little TV as possible; and if it's on, something well worth watching.

Video games

I don't have video games, and haven't played them since high school. We'll see if this re-enters our life when our kids get older.

Pedagogy

I've written elsewhere about the principles that inform my so-called Luddite pedagogy. But truly, my goal in my classes is to banish technology from the classroom, and from in front of my students' faces, as much as is within my power. The only real uses I have for it is PowerPoint presentations (for larger lecture courses to freshmen) and YouTube clips (for a certain section of my January intensive course on Christianity and Culture). Otherwise, it's faces looking at faces, ears listening to spoken words, me at the table with the students or up scribbling on the white board. For 80 minutes at a time, I want my students to know what it's like *not* to constantly be scratching that itch.

Spiritual disciplines

All of this is useless without spiritual disciplines encompassing, governing, and replacing the time I'd otherwise be devoting to technology. I note that here as a placeholder, since that's not what this post is about; perhaps in another post I'll discuss my devotional regimen (which makes it sound far more rigorous than my floundering attempts in fact amount to).

I have been helped so much by learning what others do in order to curb and control their relationship to technology. I hope this might be helpful to others in a similar way.

Smartphones and How They Change Us: An Interview with Alastair Roberts

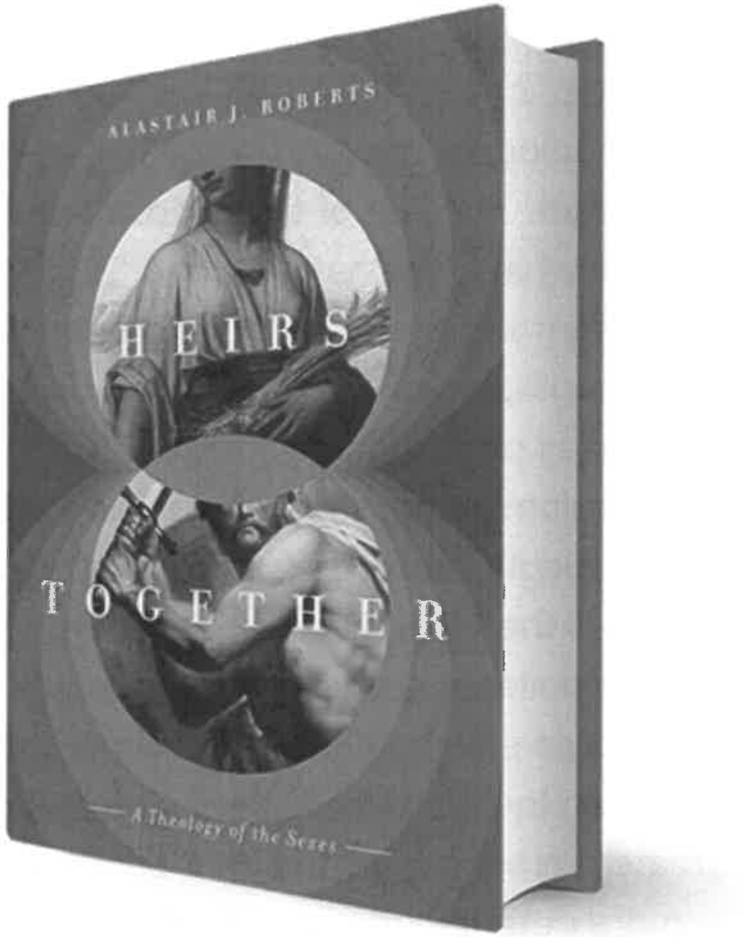
January 7, 2017 Tony Reinke Smartphones, Social Media (Twitter/Facebook)

Smartphones are changing our daily behaviors in just about every way imaginable. The changes are often subtle, but sometimes apparent. They change how we self-project and how we self-interpret. They enable us to create and sustain digital-only relationships, as they build (and sometimes corrode) our face-to-face relationships. Smartphones make it easier for us to engage in public discourse, and they provide a safe and convenient buffer between ourselves and all our other relationships.

So how do our smartphones shape and pattern the Christian life for better or worse? For three years I looked at this question from every conceivable angle as I researched and wrote *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (April 2017).

But all my research was incomplete until I interviewed Alastair Roberts, 36, an avid reader, podcaster, methodical theologian, and fluent longform writer who labors in the fields of biblical theology and contemporary ethical issues, including our relation to developing technologies. He lives in Durham, England.

Roberts's thoughts on technology, scattered here and there online, are deep and well-reasoned. About a year ago, he was generous enough to take a short break from writing his forthcoming book on the theology of sexual difference (*Heirs Together: A Theology of the Sexes*) to talk with me about the impact of smartphones on the Christian life.



Skimmers beware. What follows is the full 9,000-word interview.

Alastair, thank you for taking a break from your book writing to answer some of the most common issues and questions I have coming out of my research on smartphones. Let's start here: What is the smartphone and what does it represent?

We should not let its name deceive us: the smartphone is not just a glorified phone. That we use the term 'smartphone' is an accidental result of the path taken by its technological evolution. The smartphone is in fact a personal mobile device that is at once a camera, computer, calculator, gaming platform, means of sending mail, GPS, PDA, phone, reading tool, miniature music and video player, window onto a neighborhood and connected world, and many, many other things besides.

As a device, the smartphone as it typically currently exists must also be understood as a technological counterpart to two key developments in the character of the Internet. The first of these developments is the rise of the social web (related to what some have termed 'Web 2.0'), resulting from the shift of the Internet from a less structured and open realm populated by a more distinctive demographic of creators and publishers to a heavily colonized realm of mass participation, social networking and interaction, and sharing, which is dominated, shaped, and policed by powerful companies such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter. The second and later of these developments is the rapid rise of the app. Our connection to the online world on our mobiles is now overwhelmingly dominated by the use of apps — chiefly within an environment established and managed by Google or Apple — rather than by mobile browsers. The app represents a wider diffusion and greater immediacy of the connected realm into our lives. Rather than the more determined process of 'going online' by opening a browser on our mobiles, through mobile apps we are always connected: being connected functions less as a purposeful action than as a continual state, part of the unconsidered and ubiquitous wallpaper of our contemporary existence. The app-based experience of the online world is localized, personalized, and a continual background to our experience. The smartphone is a landmark development in the process that Marva Dawn has termed the 'technologizing' of our intimacy and the 'intimatizing' of our technology. Keeping all of this in mind is essential as we continue this conversation.

Good, yes. Smartphones, and all their apps, are now ubiquitous. If a young Christian adult came to you, wondering about whether his or her personal smartphone habits were healthy, what are some preliminary diagnostic tests you would offer?

If we are to assess whether our smartphone habits are healthy or not — and this is hardly a question that should be exclusive to young Christian adults! — perhaps a helpful place to start is by challenging the underlying cultural script that typically drives our adoption of new technologies. This script is one that rests heavily upon choice and potential as such and the notion of freedom *from* — upon the removal of constraints, limitations, and restrictions — and is much less attentive to the reality of freedom *for* — to our being liberated to become more fully and faithfully human in communion with God and each other. The familiar cultural script is that *more* is typically better — more interactive, faster, more efficient, more connected, more fluid, more integrated, more social, more intimate, more inclusive, more 'user-friendly', etc.—and that the further our limitations are rolled back, the freer we become. Yet many of us are rediscovering the truth of Edmund Burke's dictum that many of the restraints upon us, and not merely our liberties, should be reckoned among our rights and the grounds of our freedom. Pursuing unguarded liberty with things puts us in very real danger of having those things 'take liberties' with us (1 Corinthians 6:12). The loss of natural limitations often doesn't leave us better off and many struggle to re-establish these broken barriers in the far less certain form of sanity-restoring disciplines.

The diagnostic tests that we should run — and should continually be running — ought to be informed by a clearer concept of what our freedom is *for* and the sorts of shapes that it takes. The bigger questions that we need to address are as follows: Do our particular uses of our smartphones, and our use of a smartphone more generally, have the actual effect — not just hold the theoretical possibility — of making us better servants of God and of our neighbors? Are our smartphones tools that facilitate our commitment to the central purposes and values of our lives, or are they — and our habitual modes of using them — constantly distracting, diverting, or obstructing us from them?

More specific diagnostic questions could include such as the following:

1. Is my smartphone making it difficult for me to give the activities and persons in my life the full and undivided attention and self-presence that they require and deserve?
2. Do I habitually use my smartphone as an easy escape and distraction from the difficult task of wrestling through the experience of lack of stimulation and boredom to the rewarding reality of true engagement?
3. Is my smartphone use squeezing out my inner life, encroaching upon time that would otherwise be given to private contemplation, reflection, and meditation? Do I use it as a way to distract myself from unsettling truths and realities that can slowly come into focus in moments of silence and solitude?
4. Am I using hyper-connectedness to substitute a self unthinkingly immersed in a shallow and amniotic communal consciousness and its emotions, for the difficult task of developing my own judgment, character, disciplines, resolve, and identity?
5. Are my uses of my smartphone arresting and hampering my processes of deliberation and reflection, encouraging reactive judgments and premature decisions?
6. Is my use of my smartphone mediating my relationship with and understanding of myself in unhealthy ways?
7. Is my smartphone a tool that I use, or has it fettered my attention and time to other persons and activities that are wasteful and overly demanding of them?
8. Are my uses of my smartphone preventing me from developing and maintaining healthy patterns and routines in my life, disrupting my sleeping patterns, interrupting my concentration upon my work, habituating me to the fragmentation of my time and attention?

9. Is my smartphone usage consuming time that I used to or could potentially devote to worthier activities? Do I use my smartphone to 'kill time' that I could otherwise fill with prayer, reading, writing, edifying conversation, face-to-face interactions, etc.?
10. Are my uses of my smartphone conducive to the faithfulness and freedom of others? Am I using my smartphone in ways that create unhealthy demands and pressures upon them?

Of course, as they are the epitome of multipurpose devices, our uses of our smartphones are complex and varied and their effect upon our lives in the aggregate is often difficult to assess for this reason. Consequently, it is important to attend both to particular uses of our smartphones and the space that they occupy in our lives more generally. Alan Jacobs's article in *The Atlantic* on abandoning his smartphone for a 'dumbphone' is a good example of the benefits of 'disaggregating' the purposes and uses of our smartphones and determining which of them truly enrich and equip our lives' purposes and values and which do not. One of the things that Jacobs observed, for instance, was that his smartphone represented a highly intimatized device for him in a way that his dumbphone could not. I suspect, however, that even a dumbphone would be intimatized for many of my own and younger generations, for whom intensive texting has represented a means of maintaining a persistent low-level hum of sociality throughout our day-to-day lives and activities (and significantly different patterns and levels of mobile phone uses and addictions can often be observed between the sexes in these respects).

These diagnostic tests are tests that we need to perform upon ourselves. We should beware of issuing general condemnations of devices or media more generally and of the communities that use them. Although there are common patterns of dysfunctional usage, these patterns of usage, while often *encouraged* by our media and devices and even more so by communities of users, are seldom straightforwardly *determined* by them.

Very helpful. Digital communications technology is *disembodied*. Life in the local church, on the other hand, is *embodied*, and it properly grounds us bodily. In the church we gather for fellowship, baptism, communion, and preaching. We are the Body (how could it get more embodied?!). If we ignore all this in favor of "digital fellowship," what do we lose?

I would like to quibble slightly with the statement with which you open this question. Although I have often used the term myself, 'disembodied' is a term that might distract us from or render us forgetful of some issues that merit closer attention. Perhaps the most important of these is that we are constantly bodily engaged when go online, yet engaged in a way that consistently exalts one of our organs and senses over all of the others. The Internet is chiefly ordered around the eye and its mode of perception. The Internet renders the world as a unifying spectacle and its users as spectators and image projectors (a reality that Guy Debord presciently predicted in his 1967 book, La societié du spectacle). This 'spectacle' increasingly mediates and intermediates our relationships with ourselves, our world, and each other, and detaches us from the immediacy of human experience, relationship, and our natural lifeworlds. The contemporary person, for instance, may not feel that they have truly *had* their foreign holiday before that holiday has been rendered in the form of Instagram pictures, tweets, and Facebook status updates. The Internet becomes a sort of mirror within which we incessantly regard ourselves, establishing a cosmetically enhanced presentation of our selves and our personal realities. While not dismissing the possibility entirely, I would highly caution anyone who trusts too heavily in a reality encountered through the mediation of the 'specious' realm of the spectacle. While the Internet can be of great service to real world communities, it is a poor substitute for them.

Our digital communications revolution also ultimately rests upon a physical infrastructure (from our massive data centers with their high environmental impact to the tactile immediacy of our mobile devices). For instance, particularly when we are talking about our mobile devices, we need to give consideration to just how intensely they are developed with our bodies in mind and how seamlessly and intimately our bodies learn to relate to them (most of us have experienced "phantom vibrations" from our smartphones at some point). Many people sleep with their mobile devices and keep them on their persons at all times. Most of our mobile devices now operate using the finest flicks and lightest strokes of our fingers and, especially with the advent of devices such as the Apple Watch, are increasingly designed to relate ever more closely to our bodies.

While they may engage our bodies, in addition to the 'speciousness' I have already mentioned, it is the 'frictionlessness' of these devices and the world that they open to us that is most notable, the ways that they dispense with the resistance of materiality. While the materiality of what some have termed 'meatspace' bounds and binds us by such naturally differentiating factors as physical distance and locality, the physical distinctions and separations of our bodies from each other's, and the structural and relational givenness of families, communities, and societies into which we arrive, such bounds and bonds disappear online.

Communities that arise within 'frictionless' conditions operate very differently from traditional communities, much as substances like water behave peculiarly in zero gravity. The appeal of digital fellowship often arises from the lack of friction either keeping people together or holding them at a remove from each other. Without the friction of obvious bodily difference intervening, for instance, many people find it much easier to experience or project a sense of oneness of mind with others. Without the friction of spatial distance holding me within my immediate locality and apart from people in other parts of the world, it is much easier to abandon difficult relationships with my neighbors for easy and undemanding ones with people very similar to me. However, by holding me in relation with people who are dislike me and often opposed to me, the friction of materiality forces me to grow in healthy ways that I might not otherwise choose.

'Digital fellowship' has a tendency to be a lot more homogeneous and homogenizing than its material counterparts. For instance, I recently remarked upon the dulling of our sense of generational difference and the honor due to our elders in the online world, where we all learn to address each other as peers and contemporaries. Similar observations could be made about office-holders and authority figures: many of our social media networks encourage an unhealthy over-familiarity, informality, and intimacy in our relationships with persons that God has placed over us. The structures of our social media almost universally represent society in the form of detached and self-defining individuals who chose their own affiliations, relationships, and preferences. I am struggling to think of any that truly reflect the givenness of our identities, the unchosenness of most of our relations, the significance of differences between different people's statuses in life, and the ways in which we are subject to authorities and the claims of wider communities. Our differences are reduced to the level of indifference and society is flattened out.

It is easy to forget online, for instance, that our pastors are not just persons with theological opinions and dispensing spiritual counsel, but that they have been placed over us to watch over our souls and represent an authority exercised by our congregations more generally, an authority to which we are called to be subject. No theological blogger or online Bible teacher can take that place.

Yes, great point. Alastair, on this theme you wrote what I think is one of the most important paragraphs I have ever read on social media. It was in a blog comment from you, which will not surprise your friends (you write some epic blog comments). You said this:

The Internet can enable us to form connections with people with whom we have extremely particular things in common, making possible highly stimulating, enriching, and deepening interactions. I wouldn't be where or who I am today were it not for online interactions sustaining and helping me to develop a perspective that often bears little relation to my immediate contexts over the years. This said, while I have undoubtedly gained an immense amount from these, I have frequently found them to be a retreat from the challenge of actual relationships with Christian neighbors with whom I differ, a temptation amplified for me by virtue of the fact that I can naturally be an extreme introvert, prone to reclusiveness. When you know that there is a place where everyone largely agrees with and values you, one can develop a reluctance to go to a church where you are not so valued, understood, or appreciated. The narcissism that can be characteristic of romantic ideals, romantic ideals that can actually drive us away from our real partners into escapist and emotionally comforting reveries, can also cause us to replace the concrete relationships of our given contexts with idealized communities in which we can forgo the struggles associated with the transformation of actual communities and the need to adapt to and be vulnerable to others.

So how do you break free from the constant lure of online likemindedness in order to benefit from online friction? And what helps you not neglect those awkward offline relationships?

I tend to think through argument so excessive likemindedness, while initially enjoyable, gradually leaves me feeling dissatisfied and unstimulated. This natural instinct, for which I am immensely grateful, has encouraged me to seek out difference and argument online and to give thought to ways in which we can argue faithfully and to mutual benefit. In resisting the lure of online likemindedness I have been spurred by a recognition that homogeneous communities tend to have exaggerated blindspots and unaddressed weaknesses. Exposure to the challenge of people who perceive, experience, inhabit, and understand the world differently is a necessary spur to growth. To the extent that online communities are homogeneous or homogenizing, it robs us of this.

I have also come to appreciate that the problem isn't solely with the 'likeness' dimension of likemindedness, but also with the 'mindedness'. Social media is an abstract realm that consistently privileges the mind over the body. However, the Christian faith has always been grounded in the life of the body. As Christians we don't just share beliefs, open up about our feelings, and give opinions: we share meals and open our houses to others, we give to those in need, we meet together, and are physically present to each other. A 'community' that lacks these elements is hardly worthy of being called a community at all. This doesn't mean that online relationships can't be deeply and often surprisingly enriching. However, when they are they are straining towards something that can't be achieved within the confines of the virtual itself.

Embodiment goes far beyond encountering people with different beliefs and opinions. Embodiment involves intense exposure to the friction of the world, myself, and other people in their obstinate and frustrating reality. Developing a carefully managed online representation of myself is relatively easy; living as a faithful Christian in the unobserved moments of my life is considerably harder. There is a constant danger of substituting an online representation of myself for the lived reality of my life, living vicariously through the former in a way that papers over the failures and corruption of the latter. This isn't just true of my own self, but also of social reality. In the egalitarian uniformity of our social media profiles and the exclusivity of our walled social network neighborhoods, realities such as poverty, disability, and age and the people who live with them are largely invisible to us.

Living our lives vicariously in the realm of the online spectacle to the neglect or dissembling of reality is a structural form of hypocrisy. If I am to obey the calling of one who desires truth in the inner parts, it is imperative that I address and wrestle with the self I dare not project, that I engage with the social reality that lurks behind the façade, and that I am present to the people who are invisible in our society's spectacle.

Back to the quote, speak to the person who has a strong presence in social media, and then they show up to church on Sunday where they feel undervalued, misunderstood, and perhaps overlooked. What advice do you have for them to know that, yes, they are likely where God wants them to be?

I have been struck by how distorted an impression of social reality online media can give. The sharp sense of dissonance between our 'strong presence' in social media and our seeming lack of 'presence' in the Sunday morning meeting can be illuminating of this. When we experience this sense it is perhaps a sign of our excessive self-regard that our first thoughts run to our supposed right to be more appreciated, rather than to the fact that so very many of the people we worship with in our churches have little or no presence in our privileged and exclusive circles on social media.

Our online contexts are dominated by relatively affluent, cosmopolitan, Western, highly educated, literate and articulate, young, middle class persons. Children, the elderly, the poor, those with less education or lower levels of literacy, and persons from less cosmopolitan and non-Western contexts are largely invisible. That is, the majority of the human race.

James counsels the rich hearers of his epistle to glory in their 'humiliation', because they and their riches will pass away as a flower of the field. When we experience a sense of invisibility in our local churches, it may be God's way of teaching us something about the superficiality and ephemerality of our privileged online statuses. It may also be that God wants us to attend, not to our own sense of entitlement, but to other people's lack of visible presence in realms where our education, wealth, connections, articulacy, and level of access grant us a high profile and a hearing. Perhaps we may think more deeply about how we can serve others; our gifts and statuses have been given to us for the sake of our brothers and sisters in Christ, not merely for our own, and we should employ them in light of this knowledge.

So, our digital profile is plastic and malleable — we can edit and project ourselves as we please. Our physical profile exists in a much more fixed state — we are largely the product of biological factors we cannot control. For most people, do you think social media is an attempt to disguise our physical limitations, or a way to express the sort of control we wish we had over our physical selves?

I don't think that most people are alert to the ways in which their profile in various social media has come to shape the way that they relate to themselves. I don't think that our use of social media is initially an attempt to gain control over ourselves. It does tend to become such an attempt very quickly, though, simply through the sort of reflexivity of self-understanding that the habitual practice of self-representation encourages. In an earlier response, I remarked upon the manner in which the Internet functions as a spectacle and that this spectacle mediates our relationships, not merely with others, but also with ourselves. The projected representation of ourselves within this shared spectacle can be a means of vicarious or idealized self-realization. This occurs as my personal sense of self becomes increasingly dependent upon and represented in the 'self' that is represented in my Facebook profile, Instagram account, Twitter feed, Tumblr, and other such media.

The advent of social media and mobile connected devices is, in certain respects, a development akin to the movement from a world without any clear mirrors to one where highly reflective surfaces are ubiquitous. Just as the physical mirror image powerfully mediates my sense of my bodily self, the virtual mirror of social media now powerfully mediates my sense of who I am as a relational and social being. If the physical mirror feeds many anxieties and obsessions with our bodily appearance, the mirror of social media has a similar effect for our sense of our selves within our communities and society more broadly.

Of course, although they can have a similar relation to our increasingly reflexive senses of self, our self-projections on social media are not perfect mirror images, but representations involving an element of control, as you observe. Our careful curation of our virtual representations is not unlike the application of cosmetics to conceal unattractive blemishes. Online we also have the advantage of highly selective self-representation, choosing to present only our most attractive angles and exclude much else from view.

In speaking about 'control', however, it is important that we recognize the degree to which our self-projections in the shared spectacle of social media are experienced as disempowering, alienating, and anxiety-producing by many. Our practice of 'control' may feel less like an act of taking charge than one of mitigating a new threat. Just as the mirror can torment people with the awareness of themselves as objects to the gaze of a judging other, the mirror of social media can come with a terrifying sense of exposure to social judgment (or a disorienting sense of alienation from the representations of ourselves that we see there). Also, while the mirror merely allows us to see what others could already see, social media pressures us to share with others something altogether more intimate, and not previously publicly visible: our self-representations.

As Christians, I believe that it is important that we wrestle with the struggles, crises, and distortions of self-relation that can afflict us in the environment of new media. There are unhealthy dynamics present here that we need to be alert to and which require us carefully to negotiate and consider our use of online social media. We must also give thought to the ways that the gospel can bring light and hope to experiences of condemnation and judgment that are more peculiar to our hyper-connected age.

Speaking of this, in social media, why do you think it is so likely two people to go after each other's throats in angry debate, but it is so unlikely that those two people will find humble resolution in the end? What does online hostility say about the limits of digital media in resolving serious disagreements?

Debates can serve important purposes even when the immediate participations arrive at no resolution. They hone our thinking by stress-testing our positions and they also serve to reveal to spectators the relative strength of different positions. In debate I don't usually set out to persuade my opponent, but to persuade the third party who is watching. I also aim to sharpen my own understanding and case, to discover its strengths and weaknesses, and to provide myself with a clearer sense of where I need to improve or change it. Thought can be strengthened through certain forms of conflict.There is a difference between the 'agonism' of a good debate and the 'antagonism' of vicious and angry argument. In agonism, we struggle together because the struggle has the potential to be rewarding for both of us. Agonism is typically marked by mutual respect and admiration: we value those who can strengthen and cause us to grow through their challenge to and conflict with us, even when differences between us remain.

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Social media is not a place where healthy agonism thrives. Its pathological forms of relations, however, do not come merely in the form of violent antagonisms but also in the other — and closely related — extreme of the intense conflict-averseness characteristic of many online communities, where challenge, criticism, and disagreement are fiercely resisted and hyper-conformity expected in stiflingly intimate contexts. I have commented on these dynamics in detail, where I discuss the phenomena using the foil of Jane Austen's depiction of the community of Meryton in *Pride and Prejudice*. Why is healthy agonism so rare online and why does conflict, where it occurs, so typically take the form of angry antagonism? Here I believe that the 'frictionlessness' I remarked upon earlier is a significant factor. Social media are often far too highly 'conductive' and bring us too close together for effective argument.

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I have found the insights of both Edwin Friedman and René Girard very helpful in understanding the dysfunctional dynamics of Internet argument. In their different ways, both Friedman and Girard appreciated the danger of and the potential for violence in communities that are related *too closely together*. Such dangers are not usually recognized or taken seriously: people presume that community and forces such as empathy are inherently and uniformly good things and that we just need more of them. However, Friedman and Girard both draw attention to the fact that undifferentiated communities — communities whose members are too closely related to and identified with each other — tend to produce violent and reactive herd-dynamics. Such communities act through collective instinct rather than through considered response. They stampede like startled herds of cattle and emotions whip through them like firestorms. The way that we speak of the movement of ideas, emotions, advertising, cultural products, and pieces of information online using the language of ‘memes’ and ‘virality’ is very telling. Our agency is diminished as we merely react to and become the bearers of mass movements of emotion and interest that have taken on a life of their own.

The dangerously undifferentiated character of social media is part of the appeal for many. It is this undifferentiation that enables people to feel such an intimate connection with other people online, to experience such a high level of emotional resonance. Being caught up in shared feeling, a common sense of outrage, or being collectively drawn to a shared focus of interest produces a pronounced and addictive feeling of togetherness and belonging. Yet becoming creatures driven by the reactive instincts of the herd is dangerous. The herd doesn’t deliberate. The herd doesn’t reflect and then respond. The herd runs according to the immediacy of impressions, rather than through the responsible act of interpretation. The herd can't negotiate difference with maturity.

Social media breaks down many of the means by which we are capable of developing a self distinct from the herd and by which we are enabled to respond rather than react. Social media moves exceedingly fast, breaking down the differentiating factor of *time*. Online the natural differentiation established by *physical distance* no longer exists. With more delay in time comes more of an interval for reflection and less of a drive to arrive at conclusions and responses prematurely. The density of relations in social media often denies us the emotional and personal *space* in which we can act and think for ourselves without experiencing crippling peer pressure. Social media obscures the differences between *social and personal location*. On social media people are typically anonymous and interchangeable account users: their backgrounds and histories, families, neighborhoods, places in society, and psychologies are invisible to us, often leaving us unmindful of these realities. Social media also dulls our awareness of differences in *social status*, placing the voices of elders, leaders, authority figures, experts, and professionals on much the same level as that of the opinionated man on the street. Social media breaks down the distinctions between *public and private spaces*, bringing the disagreements of public spaces into those realms to which we would retreat and where we are more likely to feel threatened. Disagreements on Facebook feel more threatening to people for whom Facebook is their realm of connection and close relation and they are more likely to react instinctively rather than respond thoughtfully as a result. Social media collapses contexts, forcing different groups of persons who would otherwise be able to enjoy friendly relations at a healthy distance into close contact with each other's threatening and stifling differences, rather than giving us all the space and the places within which to be distinct. Social media disguises the differentiation of bodies, diminishing our sense of other people in their 'full-bodied' personhood and difference from us.

The result of all of this is that we become exceedingly close to each other. Creating the differentiation that enables us to have well-defined selves with a genuine inner life is a huge challenge in such contexts. Differentiation is like the skin that enables us to draw a boundary between one self and another, marking out the place where one self begins and another ends, preventing selves from fusing in some shared 'emotional plasma'. Where such differentiation is lacking things can get 'under our skin' far more easily where they are experienced as immediate threats to our selves and identities. Agonism requires the development of 'thick skins', which enable us to engage closely with things that are alien to us in a way that protects us from their infecting us and initiating our natural reactive and defensive mechanisms. However, a well-functioning agonistic society isn't merely formed by individual virtue, but by structures that maintain healthy differences and distances between us and others. This, I contend, is something that social media is actively undermining.

In society, debates and conflicts are typically bounded and mediated. In our parliamentary chambers we may have speakers. In our courtrooms we have judges. In our debating chambers we have moderators. On our playing fields we have umpires and referees. The purpose of such contexts and figures is to bound, mitigate, and keep under control the dangerous tendencies of conflict, to seek to maintain the ordering of agonism to ends and its submission to laws and rules beyond itself. Where such mediation is lacking, conflict can easily devolve into pure antagonism, our sole purpose being the subjugation of our adversary, the conflict itself consuming our entire attention. Mediating and bounding factors are minimal on social media. We do not have separate contexts for engaging in healthy conflict, but it bleeds into all areas of our online lives. We do not have a clear sense of a broader reality that exceeds and bounds our conflicts. In the world of interchangeable and relatively undifferentiated social media profiles, the fuller social and personal reality of our opponents is largely invisible to us, so they are easily reduced to the dehumanizing level of pure and mere adversaries. We do not have robust and well-designed institutional structures and third parties to mediate and manage our conflicts (online culture widely exhibits a distrust of institutional and traditional structures over the individual). Unsurprisingly, the result is the widespread presence of antagonisms that become more and more totalizing, making it harder for us to enjoy friendship amidst disagreement.

If we are to debate effectively online, we will have to be very mindful. We need to establish through determined creation and personal resolution the structures and conditions of healthy discourse that online media tend to deny us. Effective debate is a product of well-crafted institutions and structures as much as it is a product of intellectual virtue. As Christians we need to forge contexts that restore healthy forms of differentiation.

As individuals within an environment hostile to healthy debate, however, there are also steps that we can take ourselves. One of the most helpful things I have found in sharp online disagreements is to ensure that my relationship with my opponent is mediated in a healthy manner by thanking God for them and praying for their good and that of the people in their lives. This forces me to remember what the online environment obscures to me: that my interlocutors are multi-faceted persons created and loved by God, that I should be concerned with their well-being and not merely allow our differences to consume all of my attention. Consistently praying in such a manner in the midst of disagreements is important. A further thing I have found important is regularly to go out of my way to practice friendship with people with whom I have sharp differences, situating our differences within a context of mutual respect and appreciation. Doing this, one soon realizes that, far from merely serving to improve one's manner of debate, such relationships can profoundly enrich one's life.

As we have mentioned already, the web is increasingly a place of image and video. Christians are called to live by faith and not by sight. Where should Christians feel the tension between endless visual delights on their phone with living by eternal realities that cannot be seen?

Earlier I remarked upon the connection between the online world and the apotheosis of the eye and its mode of perception. It is noteworthy that in Scripture it is often the ear that seems to be the privileged organ, particularly prior to the eschaton. Living by sight is contrasted with living by faith in the heard Word. While our culture based around the eye positions us as those gazing upon, bewitched by, and projecting ourselves into a shared spectacle, the Scriptural emphasis upon the ear is less absorbed in such a spectacular immediacy (here I ought to note that the sharp disjunctions between sonic and visual cultures in the works of such as Walter Ong or Marshall McLuhan need to be handled with caution: subsequent research has called into question many of their bolder claims).

The limit of sight, as Don Ihde has observed, is not darkness but invisibility, while the horizon and background of sound is silence. The act of listening is a gesture towards this horizon — 'Shhhhh!! I'm trying to listen.' In careful listening we make ourselves more vulnerable and open to our environment and to the movements within its silence. In sound we encounter, not merely surfaces, but also unseen interiors and depths, the living 'voices' of things, the world, and others. The horizon of silence is an open one from which voices previously mute might emerge. In listening we can attend to that which is invisible, to the living and personal depths of persons, not least myself. In relating and gesturing to the openness of the horizon of silence in focused listening we can experience something of the presence of the invisible. The association of the presence of God, not merely with the voice of his Word among his people, but with silence and stillness is not accidental.

I wonder whether, in the intensity of the audio-visual world of the Internet, with its clamor and its spectacle, we dull our awareness of a depth beyond its surfaces or of a reality beyond the immediate and the visible. As we enjoy a rich wealth of background music on tap, the unsettling reality of an open horizon of silence, with its intimations of the silent and invisible presences it may possibly contain, is far less commonly encountered. When this is coupled with the hypnotic dazzle of a visually diverting online realm, our preoccupied senses can leave our attention inured to any reality that might exceed the immediate and visible. I fear that our hyperkinetic, cacophonous, and riotous audio-visual environments erode the art of silent and attentive listening and with it our sense of the presence of the invisible.

I want to carry this same theme over to the data deluge of our online world. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman contrasted George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Postman writes, "What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much information that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared that the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance." Was Huxley right?

Huxley's fear was not without justification. That said, however, I am not sure that the problems that we face should be narrowly attributed to the *quantity* of 'information' we possess. The information as such is not the issue so much as the pathological relationship that we have developed with it. We feel overwhelmed, not primarily on account of the quantity of information in our society but on account of the failure or lack of functional processes for dealing with it. In the past I have compared our relationship to information with our relationship with food. The rise of the health problem of obesity is not merely a result of the *quantity* of food in our societies, but is also affected by our changing cultural relationships with food and practices surrounding food production and consumption. Similar things can be said about information.

Terms such as 'information' or 'data' can be unhelpful in their vagueness. Speaking of 'information' as such tends to detach it from the processes to which it belongs. Instead of speaking of the problem of 'information', we need to take a step back and ask about, for instance, the nature of our processes of deliberation, reflection, and social connection and how information has come to function within these. When we do this, I believe that we may discover that the culprit is seldom information itself but the dysfunctional social processes that drive us to produce and consume it excessively.

For instance, what exactly are we looking for when we spend an hour scrolling through tweets or Facebook posts? Information? Why do we share small details of our day-to-day lives, feelings, impressions, and opinions obsessively? To 'inform' people? Here it can be helpful to reflect upon what some have termed 'phatic communication,' speech whose purpose is not to *inform* (although 'information' may be contained within it) but to *connect* or to *socially groom*. Much of the 'information' in which we are deluged is of such a kind. On closer examination, even the 'information' that may seem to apprise us of significant realities formerly unknown to us in our world frequently bears much in common with the information within phatic communication; it envisages or initiates no responsive process of reflection, deliberation, or action in the hearer. The information isn't given to us and we do not seek it out primarily in order to become wiser or to act more responsibly, but in order to feel connected, 'informed' (the consuming of information being an end in itself), and up to date. The sense of connection being sought may be with our wider online social environment or with the pressing national political conversations and our chosen tribe's part within them, but it is the quest for connection that often drives our appetite for information.

Oliver O'Donovan insightfully diagnoses this:

There is a folly of *opinion*, which finds satisfaction, as the proverb says, not in understanding but in expressing one's mind (Proverbs 18:2). Unlike the inconsiderate folly, this has exposed itself to the dialectic of social interrogation. But driven by a dread of having nothing to contribute to the social exchange, it allows society's exchanges to direct it, rather than the realities that they should be communicating. 'Where we are now' becomes the sole measure of truth — always 'we,' never 'I,' for the voice is that of the immanent collective, not of a formed judgment.

Here is the 'simple' of the Proverbs, who 'believes everything' (Proverbs 14:15), and here is the 'scoffer,' who 'does not like to be reproved' (Proverbs 15:12), the suggestible and the counter-suggestible, one echoing the current views and the other reacting against them, both wholly creatures of them, forming no judgment and offering no dialogical resistance. Opinion gains no coherence, and so has no prospect of growth. It is neither accumulative nor critical but reactive, a series of discontinued beginnings.

A self too weak to interrogate or argue with the successive new reports of reality that reach it makes no contribution to communications by reporting its own experience or questioning others' reports. The mind is lively enough — images of the world and its doings and constantly formed and re-formed — but it is no more than a screen onto which public reflections are projected. . . .

The passions aroused by the news have a purely representative character, like those aroused by tragedy on the stage. Sharpening our arrows of opinion and firing them off at actors they will never reach, pronouncing judgments that involve us in no actual responsibility, we go through the motions of playing a part in the great communicative drama and so work off surplus active impulses before turning to the tasks that actually lie before us. We may, perhaps, feel more resolute about those tasks as a result of the exercise, but this is not the result of anything we have learned. (2014: 86–87)

The problem that O'Donovan identifies is not an excess of 'information', but our ungoverned appetite for connectedness with the immediacy and insistent urgency of the 'great communicative drama' of our society. This ungoverned appetite produces a world where instant opinions and ever hotter 'takes' are the bellowing noise that drowns out any voices of seasoned reflection and patient deliberation, which will always be several steps behind the immediacy of the current issues that are absorbing the collective consciousness.

The more time we give to reading Christian classics, for instance, the more we may fear falling out of touch with the supposed pressing matters of the moment. This urgency, of course, is a false one that we must resist, one produced by our own misplaced anxiety. The problem is not in the 'onslaught of digital media' but in the ungoverned appetites of our own hearts. Our sense of a lack of connection may well be real, but it will not best be met in drinking from and adding to the firehose of social media updates and takes on the latest events, but in giving our lives in service to our neighbors and in seeking the face of God.

As we learn to resist the excesses of our appetite for connection and the addiction to the production and consumption of trivialities and information divorced from healthy processes of reflection and deliberation, the better we will be prepared to restore such processes in our lives and communities. Once again, differentiation is an important factor here. We must learn to wrench ourselves away from the magnetic pull of the 'immanent collective' that O'Donovan describes, to differentiate ourselves from the opinionating herds on all sides. As we create space apart and distance away from these it will be possible to restore the solitude, the silence, and the time that mature reflection and deliberation demand. In so doing we will once more be prepared to reap the harvest of wisdom that such disciplines yield.

Next, a question for Alastair the online creator. I find it nearly impossible to perceive the influence of my writings online. And of course the ultimate value of our work is left for God to adjudicate. But you've been blogging and engaging social media for fifteen years or so. You're engaged on Twitter and you publish a constant stream of longform pieces. How do you weigh the power of influence on Twitter and Facebook with your longform articles? From your vantage point, when it comes to influencing others, how do you weigh the return on your time investment in social media vs. articles vs. book writing? Can you quantify that?

For most of my time as a writer online and even down to the present, my primary purpose has not been the influencing of the minds of others so much as the formation of my own. Blogging, when I first started, was a more communal medium, with different blogs engaging in an aerated and challenging conversation, sharpening their thinking in dialogue. I joined this conversation less to influence than to be influenced by thinkers I admired. Furthermore, it has always been my personal experience that the best way to improve one's thinking is to go to the effort of putting one's thoughts into writing. My blog has for many years served as a tool for me to learn and to make up my mind in public. When I assess the return on my time investment in blogging it is this that weighs most heavily. That I have been able to share my journey of theological discovery with others and influence readers along the way are added benefits.

Twitter has served slightly different purposes for me (and many of my followers might complain that I employ an inappropriately 'longform' style there too!). Twitter has been like a vast and bustling corridor onto different rooms, each holding the promise of different conversations and discoveries. I have appreciated Twitter as a source of links and a window onto different worlds of knowledge and experience. It has also been a benefit to enjoy the sorts of conversations that one might have in a corridor with many friends there. Many such conversations have been fortuitous sparks that have ignited my interest in new areas of inquiry. As in any busy corridor, it has also yielded many serendipitous encounters with people with whom far deeper friendships have subsequently been forged.

Writing a book is a rather different sort of process to all of these things. A blog is a more provisional and ephemeral form of publication, thought suspended in the waters of a moving mind that has yet to be completely made up. By contrast, a book represents a degree of closure and sedimentation of thought. Writing a book demands a far greater level of responsibility and accountability. As a practice it is also more driven by the concern to serve and influence others than blog writing has ever been for me.

In my decade online, living among reformed Christians in America, I

have seen a sharp rise in the number of Christians who closely track daily news cycles. Ever-emerging online is something of a Christian news cycle (featuring the breaking news from within the church). Our phones can light up to the next emerging breaking story. At what point does our ability to know everything happening in the world and in the church go wrong for the Christian?

In a far more perceptive reflection on some of the themes raised by this question than I could ever hope to provide, Oliver O'Donovan observes:

> If "new every morning" is the tempo of divine grace and the tempo of our personal responsibilities, it is because the morning is a time when one can look back intelligently and look forward hopefully. It is the tempo of practical reason. The media's "new every morning" (quickly becoming "new every moment") is, one may dare to say, in flat contradiction to that daily offer of grace. It serves rather to fix our perception upon the momentary now, preventing retrospection, discouraging deliberation, holding us spellbound in a suppositious world of the present which, like hell itself, has lost its future and its past. (2014: 237)

A desire to feel connected to the immediacy of current events and the conversations that surround them is a trap that many of us — myself most definitely included — have often fallen into. As O'Donovan recognizes, our obsession with the new, with the 'roar' of the 'breaking wave' privileges first impressions over considered reflections, the immediacy of the present moment over the broad sweep of historical context. His remark upon our peculiar obsession with the news is worthy of reflection:

> Every culture concerns itself with news-bringing in one form or another; most other cultures have been more relaxed about it. Perhaps simply because we have the power to communicate news quickly and widely, we

are on edge about it, afraid that the world will change behind our backs if we are not au fait with a thousand dissociated facts that do not concern us directly. It is a measure of our metaphysical insecurity, which is the constant driver in the modern urge for mastery. (2014: 234)

In an age where news can travel around the world in a matter of seconds, it is easy to forget how peculiarly novel the urgency our swift moving news instills in us actually is (the news of the fall of the Alamo didn't reach London for over two months). In the age where news travelled exceedingly slowly, time given to deliberation and reflection would feel considerably more natural. With an addiction to the news cycle we are in danger, not only of losing the natural 'tempo of practical reason' O'Donovan identifies, but of disengaging the process of practical reason more generally. For how many of us is the news cycle really material for practical deliberation, rather than an addiction to feeling 'informed' and engaged in the national conversations?

So do you retreat from social media? If so, how? And for how long?

I do, usually in a manner that discriminates between various social media. I joined Facebook in 2005 and left it in 2010, concerned at the sort of place it was becoming and the ways my use of it was affecting me. Over Lent I will often abandon Twitter and sometimes also blogging, taking the opportunity to re-establish my sense of priorities and fortifying my core commitments. When I return to social media after such a period, I am better able to keep things measured and controlled. Last week I shuttered my personal Twitter account for the rest of the year to give me more time to concentrate on reading and writing and also to take a step back from a context that I have been finding increasingly oppressive and antagonistic. At the moment I am unsure if I will return. Being off social media, giving myself the space to act responsibly apart from the crowd, leaving behind the constant practice of self-representation and the immediacy of the hypnotic spectacle, learning to be in silence again, and rediscovering space for reflection and deliberation beyond the stifling urgency of the Internet has been tremendously rewarding.

Amen, thank you for your time and thoughts, Alastair.

P.S. Roberts returned to Twitter in 2017.

10 TECH-WISE COMMITMENTS

1. We develop wisdom and courage together as a family.
2. We want to create more than we consume. So we fill the center of our home with things that reward skill and active engagement.
3. We are designed for a rhythm of work and rest. So one hour a day, one day a week, and one week a year, we turn off our devices and worship, feast, play and rest together.
4. We wake up before our devices do, and they "go to bed" before we do.
5. We aim for "no screens before double digits" at school and at home.
6. We use screens for a purpose, and we use them together, rather than using them aimlessly and alone.
7. Car time is conversation time.
8. Spouses have one another's passwords, and parents have total access to children's devices.
9. We learn to sing together, rather than letting recorded and amplified music take over our lives and worship.
10. We show up in person for the big events of life. We learn how to be human by being fully present at our moments of greatest vulnerability. We hope to die in one another's arms.

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