

Technology and Humanity: What the Digital Age is Doing to Our Soul

With digital technology accelerating ever faster, with more and more of us living our lives plugged 24/7 into the web, how is technology changing how our friends and neighbours think about life and humanity? What are the challenges for the gospel? How can Christians engage well with the questions that technology raises?

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I. Introduction: The Road to Heaven is Paved With Good Inventions

- A. The 'Second Machine Age'?
- B. The growing belief that technology can solve every problem.
*"When given to capable technologists, the exponential power of Moore's Law [digital technology] makes even the toughest problems tractable."*¹
- C. Three examples:
 - 1. Self-driving cars
 - 2. IBM's Watson
 - 3. Wearable technology (the "quantified self")
- D. The questions raised by technology:
 - 1. Why are we addicted to technology?
 - 2. Why do we need to monitor and quantify everything?
 - 3. In a digital age, what does the good life look like?
*"When you start wondering about your own busyness, pretty soon you're pondering much deeper questions, such as, Is this the kind of life I really want? From there it's just a short hop to the big-league existential stumpers: Why are we here? And who am I?"*²

II. History Means More Than a List of Website Visits

- A. Our culture increasingly assumes the answer to any-and-all questions is "more technology"

¹ Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2014) 55.

² William Powers, *Hamlet's Blackberry: Building a Good Life in the Digital Age* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010) 10.

- B. There's nothing new about romanticised views of new technologies
1. Examples from history of naïve views of what technology can achieve:
 - a. The telegraph
 - b. Radio
 - c. Television
 - d. Computers
 2. In each case, the technology brought benefits but also costs
*Technology leads a double life, one which conforms to the intentions of designers and interests of power and another which contradicts them—proceeding behind the backs of their architects to yield unintended consequences and unintended possibilities.*³
 3. We are following the same pattern when it comes to digital technology: we haven't learnt the lessons of history yet...
"The Goliath of totalitarianism will be brought down by the David of the microchip." (Ronald Reagan)
"Imagine if the Internet took hold in China. Imagine how freedom would spread." (George Bush)
"[The Internet] is powerful because the more freely information flows, the stronger society becomes, because then citizens of countries around the world can hold themselves accountable. They can begin to think freely for themselves. That generates new ideas. It encourages creativity." (Barack Obama)

III. To Infinity and Beyond (or Near Enough That It Makes No Difference)

- A. Digital technology is especially compelling because it has changed the world so incredibly fast
- B. Three characteristics that have caused the rapid growth of the computer age:
 1. Exponential
 2. Digital
 3. Combinatorial

IV. Being Human (and Why We're Tempted to Forget How to Be)

- A. Who's in the driving seat? (Is technology deterministic?)
 1. Living with progress
*Technology changes, and it changes more quickly than human beings change ... our software and our robots will, with our guidance, continue to find new ways to outperform us—to work faster, cheaper, better.*⁴

³ David Noble, cited in Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011) 283.

⁴ Nicholas Carr, *The Glass Cage: Automation and Us* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2014) 40-41.

- B. All play and no work? (What does the good life look like?)
 - 1. Not all problems can be solved by technology
 - 2. Maximal happiness \neq maximal screen time
 - 3. The problem of “miswanting”
 - 4. Our ambivalent relationship with work

- C. What does it mean to “be human” in a digital age?
 - 1. Are we just “meat computers”?

 - 2. The deceptive nature of our metaphors

*“[The confusion begins] with the way we talk about machines ... we don’t smile with disbelief when we are told that a camera ‘sees’ a scene; radar ‘searches’ for the enemy; a ‘smart’ bomb ‘hunts down’ its target; a photoelectric cell ‘detects’ the background luminance and ‘instructs’ the camera shutter to open up or close; an electronic probe ‘reports’ the presence of something or other. We are all perfectly aware that none of these devices would do these things—seeing, searching, hunting down, detecting, instructing, reporting—in the absence of (conscious) human beings ... We start imagining that machines that help us to carry out certain functions actually have those functions. This is particularly likely to happen when the machines in question are computers.”*⁵

 - 3. The Chinese Room thought experiment (and other reasons computers cannot “think”)

V. Questions for a Digital Age

- A. The nature of personhood
 - 1. Are we just biological “programming”?

*[I]f you look at your programming, your DNA, it’s about 600 megabytes compressed, smaller than any modern operating system, smaller than Linux or Windows ... and that includes booting up your brain. So your program algorithms probably aren’t that complicated; [intelligence] is probably more about overall computation.*⁶

 - 2. The temptation to flatten and be reductionistic

- B. Depth and space
 - 1. Doing apologetics in this kind of culture

- C. “Come to me and find rest” — unpacking Jesus’s promise in an “always on” age

⁵ Raymond Tallis, *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (Durham: Acumen, 2012) 185.

⁶ ‘Google at work on AI?’, CNET News, 16 February 2007.

For Further Reading

Bostrom, Nick, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

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Schuurman, Derek C., *Shaping a Digital World: Faith, Culture and Computer Technology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013)

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