

OPPOSING OR RESISTING THE “TECHNOLOGY STORM”

By
Jim Stewart,
Director, Center for Lifelong Learning, Western Seminary,
frequent contributor to *Global Missiology*.

Introduction

The great majority of the damage to New Orleans left in the wake of hurricane Katrina was not the result of the storm’s category 3 winds. As we all know very well, the city was devastated largely because of the enormous storm surge that overwhelmed the levees surrounding the city, breaching some and over-topping others. The protections that had been set in place with such confidence to resist the force of winds and water were inadequate for the task and simply could not stand.

Since the early days of the personal computer age in the 1980s, the “technology storm” has been forming. With the “warm waters” of the Internet fueling its growth, “hurricane” Digital today almost-certainly approaches category 5 strength and seems ready to overwhelm every obstacle in its path. It will pass over, under or through every obstacle; nothing and no one seems able to resist its power. What have we become as a culture when someone decides that refrigerators need to e-mail their owners when a light bulb burns out? Is nothing sacred? Is nothing able to resist the power of the “technology storm” of our time?

In recent days, there are signs that an increasing number of our fellow citizens, noble men and women of strong heart and character, are moving to the barricades to protect that which they value deeply. Pockets of resistance are forming, some individual and some institutional, to challenge the dominant notion that to resist the force of technology is, to call upon the wisdom of Senor Don Quixote, to “fight the unbeatable foe.”

For full disclosure, I am an admitted, unrepentant technophile. I love my “tech toys;” but am critical technology-based business resources. With very little effort – to my wife’s eternal chagrin - I can almost always find some reason to believe that new products and systems improve our lives. They help us to work faster, to do things we could not do previously, or impart to us a welcome sense of empowerment. What is not to love?

For several of my honored colleagues and cherished friends, quite a bit! In small ways and large, they are moving to the levees to challenge the sense of technological determinism. “We are mad as...anything...and we don’t have to take it anymore,” they cry fiercely as they fill the next sandbag. Microsoft Outlook? “Doesn’t work as well as my desk calendar,” they say, “Cell phone conversations in the car? Over my dead body.”

It would be easy for those of us who tend to welcome new technologies with enthusiasm to consider such sentiments to be unfortunate, misguided or incredibly anachronistic for anyone living in the 21st century.

But that would be a terrible mistake. These are good and thoughtful men and women, most of whom have good and rational reasons for their viewpoints. They have taken time to see the warning signs along the way that many of us either do not see or that we knowingly ignore. For example, here are just two of the many reasons they have cited for rethinking, and in some instances opposing, the technology storm.

The Impact on Today's Church Ministry

Too many churches are devolving, some might say, from neighborhood congregations emphasizing worship and preparation for personal ministry into technology-driven corporations. One could be forgiven for thinking that a growing number of churches are more reminiscent of entertainment centers than traditional Christ-centered houses of worship.

On a broad scale, few can argue that new church facilities do not typically emphasize advanced, and extensive, technologies for worship and communication. Enormous LCD screens often turn Sunday-morning services into something resembling an IMAX movie. Select worship teams equipped with wireless microphones and in-ear monitors have, in many instances, replaced the inclusive, but far less dramatic, church choir. Community evangelistic efforts are being supplanted by Internet website marketing, phone calls or personal visits are yielding to e-mail contacts, and powerful pulpit preaching in too-many churches has surrendered to the obligatory PowerPoint presentation.

Is the impact of technology on the way we do ministry today necessarily bad? Is it necessarily good? For many of those who are choosing to resist the doctrine of technological inevitability, it is neither and both. The point they are making, I believe convincingly, is that church leaders most certainly would benefit from serious reflection as to whether the technology "can" equals a technology "should" before changing the essential nature of the way we do ministry.

The Impact on Today's Family

The images of children tossing the ball around the backyard, or a father and son fishing down at the creek are approaching fantasy status in many homes. Going out to play after school has been replaced by relentless hours of surfing through hundreds of cable channels, playing online or console video games, browsing the Internet, or cell phone text messaging. Conversation has become all but a lost art as dinners are eaten on tray tables in front of the television and personal headsets endlessly deliver the listener's choice of thousands of MP3 songs. The cohesive, caring families we have always cherished are quickly becoming little more than clusters of independent life-units.

Make no mistake: Technological de-socialization is not limited to the digital generation. Those of us in our 40's and 50's buy the big toys. Why would anyone want to limit TV consumption in favor of family time when you have 60" of high definition plasma with Dolby 5.1 surround sound? Recently an acquaintance who is firmly in his "mature" years expressed extraordinary frustration that his anniversary dinner with his wife would pre-empt an online gaming session with a colleague. Incredible!

There is no earthly structure more important to God than the family. It was divinely established in the second chapter of Genesis and has been a major focus of His attention ever since. As parents, and as men and women in ministry, we must value that which God values. Anything that could potentially jeopardize the health and vitality of the family obligates us to a careful, temperate approach. With the negative impact of technology no longer merely potential, we must have the courage to do whatever is necessary to protect our families.

Wrapping It Up

If we are honest, there are clearly other concerns about the unthinking acceptance of all things technological. Do we really want our wilderness areas and our waterways overwhelmed by all-terrain ATVs or personal watercraft? Do we look forward to sitting in the midst of a busload of people who, each outfitted with their Bluetooth headsets, carry on loud, inane conversations with unseen friends? And don't even get me started when it comes to barely-competent drivers juggling a cell-phone in one hand and a Slurpee in the other while attempting to steer with their knees. Is this a good thing?

And honestly, why isn't "I just don't want to use e-mail" as an acceptable answer for my 79 year old mother? Should the fact that millions of us enjoy and promote the use of emerging technologies create an imperative for everyone else?

The "technology storm" shows no sign of relenting and it will certainly never reverse course. In twenty years all of this angst will be a distant memory. Technologies that are considered innovative today will integrate so fully into our lives that they will be the technology equivalent of a light switch or thermostat. Nothing, however, justifies their unthinking acceptance today.

It is likely that I will remain an unabashed technophile. It is in my chromosomes. To fail to heed the counsel of my colleagues who express thoughtful concerns about the impact of the unfettered appropriation and application of technology on ministry, our families and our culture, however, would be both arrogant and unwise. Then I would be little more than an aging geek with a Blackberry. And who would want that.