Finding Our Way with Technology

Jim Stewart

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My Confession

I am a technophile. I admit it. I love gadgets of every sort, and eagerly search the popular and professional literature for the next generation of technologies that will change our lives, perhaps to a degree and in a direction yet unimagined.

But my general enthusiasm is counter-balanced with deep and growing concerns about the cumulative impact of technology in general, and of certain technologies in particular, upon the way we perceive ourselves, our culture, and our God.

I was reminded of my evolving misgivings recently while watching a basic cable program on the world's largest commercial port, the port of Rotterdam. The narrator told of how enormous container ships navigated the relatively-narrow channel into the port where they would be unloaded by a complex automated system of towering cranes and robotic transport vehicles. Using time-lapse photography, the producers then accelerated the action to create a beautifully-choreographed dance of machines. It was truly hypnotic.

Still, what was missing from the port, or at least from the discussion? People. There was not even a glimpse of the men and women who must surely chaperone the dance. Clearly, the thoughtful viewer would not think that all this had developed absent a human cause or functioned each day without human oversight. Nevertheless, the message of the video was powerfully anthropomorphic. Unreasoning machines were given personality, sentience, with human agency subordinated to the point of inconsequence.

Technological Explosion

In the mid-twentieth century, the Christian philosopher and historian Francis Schaeffer proposed a hierarchical structure that begins with God, then man, animals, plants and machines. Schaeffer was concerned primarily with the blurring of lines between God and man, and between man and animals. Being forward looking and prophetic in his pronouncement/publication, a technological tsunami took place and literally inverted Schaeffer's hierarchy not long after his death in 1984.

In my opinion, the ocean of technological explosion began to engulf contemporary culture at the time when change occurred: from Digital Research's Gary Kildall to Bill Gates and the Microsoft Corporation for a disk operating system to drive its new personal computers. Others might place the time marker at a different point. Some might say that

it was the advent of radio or television that truly served to differentiate our modern concept of technology from the mechanical age. Others might say it was the introduction of the telephone, or the electrical light bulb (both of which were critical in the connecting of homes and businesses to a technology source), or perhaps the invention of the transistor that would quickly lead to the development of the microchip.

Regardless of where the marker of major shift might be placed but the fact is there has been a technological explosion. My choice of the popularizing of PC by Microsoft as a clear shift for henceforth a powerful interactive technology was placed on the corporate desktop. It was Bill Gates' vision of the ubiquity of personal computers that fueled the "IBM compatible" revolution and which would soon spread into every aspect of our lives. And, again in my opinion, it has been the conceptual platform upon which virtually every other major medical, educational, industrial or communications advancement has been based on and facilitated by it.

In just 25 short years we have moved technologically from the first few clunky personal computers to a cascading torrent of systems that could not have been imagined for all the preceding centuries of man's history. To mention just a few below:

- A network that has virtually implanted a cell phone in the ear of every child, grade school and beyond;
- The creation and expansion of the internet as a global information network;
- The creation and expansion of the internet as a global communications network;
- Medical testing systems such as Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), and Computed Axial Tomography (CAT) scans;
- The mapping of the human genome and genetic engineering;
- Global positioning, tracking and mapping systems that unlock the world;
- Embedded computer systems that provide "smart" functions to everything from toasters to cars, and to satellite technologies.

Impact on Culture

Yes, it is pretty cool. I am incredibly thankful that I was, by the grace of God, born into this era of transition and technological advancement. My earnest regret is that I will not be around 50 or 100 years from now to see what the impact of our enthusiastic and unquestioning acceptance of these technologies will be and their impact on culture.

Recent events demonstrate a pressing need to construct a theology / philosophy of technology to establish the intellectual and ethical frameworks within which science and its resulting technologies should be viewed and employed properly.

For example, this past month (November 2005) a court decision in Kansas stated that intelligent design could not be taught in public schools because it is an unconstitutional endorsement of religion. Intelligent design, the court determined, was not "science." More important in the decision is the judge's statement that he was not making any determination as to whether intelligent design was true, just that it was not science. And

so we have yet another example when truth is neither a consideration nor a defense. Science (and by extension, the scientific community which includes applied technologies) by way of legal pronouncement is the judge of truth and perceived to be superior to truth. Science has moved from the bottom of Schaeffer's hierarchy, to the top. Science then became the judge of God.

Biological advances in technology also lack a sound philosophical framework. Fetal viability (read baby) is often a critical factor in the decision to abort. As Planned Parenthood acknowledges "Abortions after fetal viability are extremely rare. Half of the 1.5 million abortions in the U.S. each year take place within the first eight weeks of pregnancy; nine in 10 occur within the first 12 weeks. Less than 1 percent are (sic) performed after 20 weeks. Some 300-600 abortions -- or up to four one-hundredths of 1 percent -- are performed after 26 weeks.[1]"

Further, they state that "In COLAUTTI, the Supreme Court defined viability as occurring 'when, in the judgment of the attending physician on the particular facts of the case before him, there is a reasonable likelihood of the fetus' sustained survival outside the womb, with or without artificial support. [2]'" Typically, that is set at no earlier than 23 to 24 weeks gestation.

So life and death decisions are subject to the ability of technology to sustain a newborn outside of the womb. If technology changes, then our perception of who is a child changes? Does…or should…technology be the determining factor in deciding what is life…who is human and who is not?

At the other end of the continuum, with the possibility that embryonic stem cells could treat and cure presently terminal conditions, is it appropriate to use newly-developed technologies to extend life by sacrificing what many consider to be yet-unborn life?

Certainly, there are men and women behind each of these decisions. Technology in its purest form would, in many respects, be mute. I believe it is true, however, that absent a coherent, consistent and accepted ethical understanding, technology is perceived by those with an agenda to be the dispassionate trump card to any moral argument. As investigator Gil Grissom of CBS' *Crime Scene Investigation* might say, "Science can't lie. Science doesn't take sides." In the minds of many, if science, and its operational technologies, can, then it should. If morality and ethics divide, then science should govern.

Implications on Ministries

The appropriate role of technology extends into the church and ministry. Several weeks ago I had a wonderful conversation with mission historian Dr. Mary Wilder. She talked of the great men and women of faith who have answered the call of God to service in some of the most difficult regions of the world. Their stories encourage hearts and testify

to the power of God often generations later. When I studied for missions service almost thirty years ago, the discussion always returned to people…both those who needed to hear the Gospel and the men and women who were training for faithful service wherever He might lead.

In many of the ministry discussions in which I have been involved in recent years, however, much of our time has focused on how technology might reduce our dependence on personnel assets. Can we use technology to replace the face-to-face recruiter with a web site? What communication and administrative tools are available to reduce the infrastructure demands of the mission? Can we use technology to extend our field ministry without increasing the number of deployed personnel? Admittedly, some of the discussions might be weighted because of my participation. Discussions often turn to technologies when I am involved; don't know why.

It is clear that I am neither a philosopher nor a historian. I am certainly not a prophet. I am one who welcomes change, loves the potential that new technologies represent, but recognizes that we still have much to learn about how to integrate new systems into our contemporary cultural context. Has it not always been so? I imagine that following the discovery of fire, more than one person was burned until we learned to harness its power and control its safe use.

And so I conclude with some questions for your consideration:
How do we in ministry, as citizens of our time, help to develop a philosophy / theology of technology? Where do we begin? What is an appropriate role for technology in ministry? I invite your comments and suggestions. Please e-mail me at jstewart@westernseminary.edu or call me at 503-517-1898.

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[1] http://www.ppacca.org/site/pp.asp?c=kuJYJeO4F&b=139571

[2] ibid.