# Technology in the life of faith
### A call for critical engagement

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**T**o understand technology's formative power and reflect on its role in the life of faith, it helps to know that the word *technology* is formed by a combination of two Greek words, *techne* and *logos*. In Greek, the word *techne* refers to the use of a tool, or the implementation of a craft or skill, and *logos* refers to a word or conversation about a particular topic, or the concept of reason or logic.[1] The combination of these two words reveals to us what we mean when we talk about technology.

Technology is a combination of a kind of knowing and a kind of making, and technology happens at the crossroads of tool use and human communication. This description of technology comes from the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler, who suggests that human beings and technology mutually invent each other.[2] He writes about "the invention of the human," in the sense that technology is invented by humans and humans themselves are formed by their technology.[3] This description shows us how technology includes things that we would not normally think of as being technological, such as writing and language.[4]

The point is that the history of humankind is inextricably linked to the history of technologies, from the beginning of tool use to the present digital age. For Anabaptist groups and other Christians for whom maintaining boundaries around use of technology remains important, it is essential that we grapple with this view of technology. The power of technology, its problems and potential, deserves our intentional reflection.

## Technology as spiritual formation
While technology is often taken to refer only to mechanical and instrumental things (a computer or cell phone, for example), contained within the definition of technology is also a statement about how humans communicate and live life. Technology points

to something more significant than mere objects, and it is not necessarily a neutral force in the world.

Although it is tempting to think that we are in charge when we use technology, the opposite tends to be true. We do not simply use and control technology; it also shapes us. And we are formed by technology not just on the level of our day-to-day experience but also on the level of our spirituality, in our relationship with God.

Particular technologies, from the automobile to the cell phone to the Internet, encourage particular kinds of uses. Technologies are oriented in certain ways, and those ways are not always commensurate with the gospel's ways of being and doing. Part of the life of faith, then, is to adopt a critical stance toward technology, recognizing that too often technology teaches us to want things that do not lead to rich and valuable relationships with others.

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Technology can be a help or a hindrance for our personal and communal spiritual formation, directing our desires and affecting our experience of time. For example, the agenda that technology promotes is often characterized by speed and efficiency, by the promise that our lives will be made easier because we can move and communicate faster and more effectively. These promises are value laden and assume that ease is better than difficulty, and speed is better than slowness. Technologies that emphasize speed and efficiency can prevent us from valuing experiences that take time and energy, that are only rewarding when accomplished slowly and through difficulty.

The loving relationships and the type of community that Christ promotes are not in line with this emphasis on ease and speed. Theologian and philosopher Chris Huebner writes about how effectiveness and speed can become violence and therefore go against the grain of Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition in its espousal of nonviolence. For Huebner, speed is a way that technology promotes a sort of violence.

Through a reading of another French philosopher, Paul Virilio, Huebner argues that "violence has come to organize the very way

we think" and furthermore that "violence is primarily a function of speed."[5] The speed of technology stands against the patience needed for Christian faith, in a way similar to how an emphasis on effectiveness can get in the way of faithfulness.

Instead of giving way to the technological impulse to prize speed and effectiveness, in Christian community we should encourage one another to slow down and disconnect from technology in order to invest time in people. We should also expect that community and relationships will not always be easy, and that our efforts will not always be effective. When we release ourselves from the pressure of needing to pay attention to a screen, we can become vulnerable to others, we can ground our lives in a particular place and time, and we can we orient ourselves in relationship with others.

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What we find in Christian community is a depth and richness that stands in stark contrast to the fragmentation and disconnection that we risk when we look for fulfillment in technology. The church needs to remind itself that on its own, technology is not a place to find meaning and fulfillment. Technology may or may not be helpful, and we will not always see immediately whether it is beneficial or harmful.

We need to take care that technology does not become another idol or another way of being complicit in the purposes of empire. Media, television, advertisements, and popular films each deserve critical treatment for the ways they form us.

### Technology and attention

One major way technology affects us is in the area of our attention; it affects both our attention span and the things that we spend time doing and thinking about. Our attention spans have been retaught and reshaped by the speed of our digital technology and by our instantaneous access to information.

We began by defining technology as the combination of *techne* and *logos*, but another ancient Greek term can also help us understand technology: *pharmakon*, which means both poison and cure, something that both helps and hinders. Google's search engine,

for example, helps us see technology as *pharmakon*: it increases the availability of valuable information and also diminishes our attention span.

Stiegler diagnoses this problem in contemporary culture by describing our "attention economy."[6] Our attention to advertisements and other formative forces—such as cultural narratives about the good life—is now a commodity. As a significant part of the attention economy, technology directs our attention toward certain places and therefore away from other places. Companies promoting their products seek our attention. Those who stand to profit by forming our lives toward commercial ends buy and sell advertising space and the human attention that comes with it. In a society inundated by media, what we pay attention to is a valuable commodity for those who gain by getting our attention.

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The church should be keenly aware that young people (I write this as a twenty-four-year-old) are being formed by aspects of mass culture that are more compelling and hold attention more effectively than the formative forces of the church.

## Technology and time

One example of the conflict in values between technological culture and the religious culture of the church is our experience of time. Technology deeply affects our experience of the passage of time. Even a writing implement such as a pencil is a kind of technology. A consequence of the development of this technology is that humans could create calendars and record the passage of time. In our tracking of the passage of days and weeks and months and years, technology puts us into a mode of being in which we risk focusing more on measurement and consistency than on the quality and depth of our experiences in time.

The Greek distinction between two kinds of time, *chronos* and *kairos*, is helpful here. Where *chronos* is measured and quantitative time, *kairos* is immeasurable and qualitative time. We can illustrate the difference by pointing to the experience of watching the clock as the end of the workday draws near, in contrast to the

experience of worshipful meditation or contemplation. The church needs to take care lest technology's formative power eclipse the formation provided by Christian practices.

Technology tends to encourage people to experience time as *chronos* (in a measurable and predictable way), and in response the church must enact a sort of counter-formation that promotes the experience of *kairos* time, perhaps in the context of worship, prayer, and meditation. If technology is a part of our spiritual formation, then we need to pay attention to how technology conditions our experience of God. If we are to be people who experience God in God's time, then we must cultivate practices of resistance that teach attention to God.

### Reflecting on technology

I believe that the church must critically assess the role of technology in the formation of people (young and old, within and outside the church), and then develop approaches to discipleship that are able to counter the negative influences of technology while also reinforcing the positive influences of technology.[7]

Education about and discussion of technology are good first steps in addressing the issue of technology for the church. This education could take the form of teaching congregation members about the negative ways technology can influence their relationships. Specific issues that could be addressed include partisanship in the news media, pornography addiction, changing definitions of friendship (given Facebook), and the role of technology in congregational worship.

I cannot overstate the importance of having explicit conversations about technology in the church. Intentional conversation about the role of technology in our lives can give birth to new practices of attention such as restricting cell phone use in order to facilitate experiences of connection in the present moment, or practicing attentiveness and presence of mind during worship as an act of formation countering the ways technology diminishes our attention spans.

Critical conversations on technology must also address the positive roles that technology can play, especially in the areas of communication. Recognizing the value as well as the limitations of e-mail communication is an important example. Where e-mail

reaches people quickly and efficiently at any time of day, it also risks reducing human and qualitative aspects of communication such as facial expressions and gestures.

The church needs to become attuned to the importance and the ambivalence of technology so that we can be wary of the negative potential of technologies and take advantage of their positive potential. An understanding of technology as *pharmakon*— poison and remedy—reminds us that we are called to be discerning and careful in our acceptance and our rejection of technologies.

As we learn about and negotiate our relationship with technology, my prayer is that we will seek an understanding of our human place in the universe: finite and situated in space and time, yet called to be in relationship with God, who is infinite and outside time and space—all through the incarnation of Christ, who straddles the finite and the infinite, the limited and the limitless.

## Notes

[1] The *logos* that is a part of the word *technology* reflects a more general understanding of the Greek term than the more specific Christ-*logos* that is found in John 1:1.

[2] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, trans. George Collins and Richard Beardsworth, vol. 1, *The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[3] Ibid, 134.

[4] Ibid, 155.

[5] Chris Huebner, "Patience, Witness, and the Scattered Body of Christ: Yoder and Virilio on Knowledge, Politics, and Speed," in *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2006), 116, 119.

[6] Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

[7] See James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 106–7.

## About the author

Maxwell Kennel has served in ministry at Steinmann Mennonite Church and Crosshill Mennonite Church in Ontario, Canada, and recently completed a master's degree in theological studies at Conrad Grebel University College. His master's thesis examined the concept of the secular and the seventeenth-century Dutch Collegiant group. He is author of a booklet on continental philosophy, *Dialectics Unbound* (Punctum Books, 2013). Parts of this article were presented as "The *Pharmakon* of Technology for Theology: On the *Chronos/Kairos* Distinction in Bernard Stiegler's Technics and Time, Volume 1," at the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts conference, Kitchener, Ontario, September 23, 2011. In October 2013 an earlier version of this paper was presented as a working paper for the Mennonite Church Canada Future Directions Task Force (FDTF).