



The Next Story

Life and Faith After the Digital Explosion

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Many other books tell us what the digital world is doing to us. Challies does this, and also suggests some action steps.

He considers the convergence of technology, theology, and experience and asks:

- Am I becoming a tool of the very tools that are supposed to serve me?
- What is "the next story" that will direct the way we live?
- How can Christians live in this new reality with character, virtue, and wisdom?

PART I

1. Discerning Technology

In a fallen world, technology, like everything else, it is subject to the curse and it will try to become an idol to us. "We give technology the power to shape and change and fashion us, remaking ourselves in its image." (27) Our idols are hidden from us, yet we can't imagine life without them. Anything you deem as essential to your life is an idol.

2. Understanding Technology

Every technology has some embedded ideology and inevitable consequences. We are naturally drawn to the benefits but rarely foresee the risks. For example, TV values immediacy, not history, images, words, and emotions or reason. The "message" of a show is not the content itself but the change in our attitude or thinking after watching it. "The challenge with a given form of technology is that we must seek to anticipate the changes that may result and respond to such changes with wisdom and discernment before they overtake us." (39)

"A technology changes the entire environment it operates in." (40) Technology often introduces great shifts in power. The printing press for instance, took power from the clergy and put it in the laity. "We are molded and formed into the image of whatever shapes us." (45)

3. A Digital History

In 1800 nothing moved faster than it did in Jesus' day--the speed of a horse. For those born after 1980 there may be no great distinction between life *online* and *offline*.

The Internet has democratized information. We can both download *and* upload; read *and* write, consume *and* create. It dwarfs even the printing press in its impact on human culture.

PART II

4. Speaking, Truthing, Loving, Living (Communication)

Social mores are quickly changing. Communication, the tie that binds us all together, lies at the heart of all these great new devices. Interactivity is the defining characteristic. Content is created and commented on by amateurs. We experience much of life through social media. "You can tell a lot about a person by what he carries with him at all times and in all places. You can tell a lot about a culture by what its people carry in pockets or purses." (71)

"A technology wears its benefits on its sleeve--but the drawbacks are buried deep within." (74) One sign of idolatry is that we feel a strong need for it and feel less than complete without it. For example, a growing number of people find their need so powerful that they cannot sit through a movie without checking their cell phone.

Many people find their online relationships more satisfying, with greater depth, than their real-world relationships. "In a strange way, we now find that *more* communication actually leads to *less* communication..." (77) These new devices are all extending the tongue. The words are an expression of the heart. "We are to be the speaking followers of the speaking God."(81) "Truth and love are the twin pillars that should uphold all of our communication." (85)

5. Life in the Real World (Mediation/Identity)

Life is mediated by the screen. It stands between the creator and the receiver. We are rapidly reaching the point where our screen time will exceed our non-screen time. Face-to-face contact is inherently richer. *Immediate* is direct. Adam and Eve *walked* with God. Imagine! "We are created with an innate desire for *unmediated* contact and communication with God." (93)

Communication technologies seek to overcome some kind of limitation. They extend our abilities, but they also tend to disembodify information. Mediated communication involves less of us. We need to move toward true intimacy and avoid distancing ourselves from each other.

"There are confusing new issues related to mediated reality ... the self threatens to become disconnected, disengaged from the body. We become digitally disincarnated, people who can live and *be* online, present only in a virtual, mediated sense. Increasingly who we are is no longer the person people meet face-to-face, but the mediated identity we have created."(99)

6. Turn Off and Tune In (Distraction)

Devices tend to draw us away from the important things in life. We become a distracted people of shallow thought and shallow living. We must discipline ourselves to think deeply. Digitization has imposed on us the identity of constant activity. We try to keep up with our devices, thinking speed is a virtue in itself. "While we think we are multitasking, we are actually task switching, doing a little bit of one thing and then doing a little bit of another. Our brains just won't allow us to perform two complex operations at the same time with the same skill. Quality necessarily suffers, as does depth." (125) "We force our brains into a state of continuous partial attention ... without giving focused attention to anything."(125) This produces *stress*. Productivity and efficiency become ends in themselves. Efficiency is a dangerous mindset for worship. If our mode of reading is skimming, how does this affect our meditation on Scripture? "If we are to live deep lives, lives that truly matter, we must first fill our hearts and minds with deep thoughts, thoughts that truly matter. Distraction is the enemy of deep thinking..."(131)

Steps: Discover and destroy your distractions. Cultivate concentration and seek solitude.

7. More is Better (Information)

Christians pursue wisdom. Information seems to be much more popular than wisdom. We have an information glut. We are devoted to seeking information. Our digital technology creates and demands it. But we don't have time to ponder it, analyze it, meditate on it. We are a mile wide in information but an inch deep in knowledge. We know *about* things but we don't *know* things. Heart knowledge is minimal. "To know is to leverage information to accomplish instrumental goals ... It's immediate, but it's fleeting." (149) We outsource our memories to the internet. Our ability to make information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom is compromised. "Empty minds will beget empty hearts and empty lives." (151) "As Christians it is imperative that we live in ways that are marked with wisdom born of deep knowledge ... lives marked by God's wisdom." (154)

8. Here Comes Everybody (Truth/Authority)

"Wikipedia takes the view that by democratizing the creation of content, they can have far more than 4,000 experts involved who can fact-check, who can verify both quality/accuracy. If I notice a typo, I can immediately edit it on my own; if I notice a fact I disagree with, I can immediately change it (and so, too, can my ten-year old son). Experts or those with academic credentials are given no extra weight or authority ... Of course, an encyclopedia is only as good as the accuracy of the information it contains."

Our understandings of truth and authority are changing. Truth matters, and therefore we must be careful about how we choose the sources of our knowledge. Truth in the digital world (Wiki) comes to us primarily by consensus. Search engines (eg Google) incline us to associate truth with relevance. "Wikis measure truth by consensus, while search engines measure truth by relevance." (168) "As Christians we know what is true because we know *WHO* is true." (169) "New digital technologies function as a great leveler, reducing the authority of the expert and elevating the authority of the amateur." (172)

9. Seeing and Being Seen (Visibility and Privacy)

We ARE under constant surveillance. We leave a trail of evidence. We need to recognize our lives are now very public and behave accordingly. It is amazing what can be inferred about a person's life from a series of web searches - all of which are stored forever. "Our searches are a penetrating window into our hearts. We tell search engines what we would not tell anyone else; we ask them what we would be far too embarrassed to ask in any other context." (186) "More people than ever before are watching us, keeping tabs on us through our data. They are sorting through this data to discover a picture of who we are." (186) More importantly, let us be reminded that we live our entire lives before the all-seeing eye of the Lord.