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The Moral Impact of Digital Devices

Marcus Mescher

LIFE IN AMERICA IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY DEPENDENT on digital tools and networks. Nearly everyone owns not just one but several devices: ninety-six percent of Americans own a cellphone (a smartphone for more than eighty percent of Americans), plus three-quarters have a desktop or laptop computer, and roughly half also own a tablet.[1] This comes with a considerable expense, as Americans spend more than two thousand dollars a year for home internet, cell phone plans, and streaming services. This adds to financial strain in many households, considering that forty percent of Americans have zero money in savings and have to work more than one job to make ends meet, one in four Americans make less than $10 an hour, and nearly two in five U.S. adults would have difficulty coming up with enough cash to cover a $400 emergency.[2]

Despite this monetary burden, life without access to digital technology seems unimaginable. Screens mediate an increasing amount of our time awake, as most recent figures show that Americans spend at least eleven hours a day with a computer, tablet, phone, or television screen.[3] As we touch our phones about 2,617 times a day[4] while three in ten adults report being online "all the time," do we examine the formative effect this has on our well-being and relationships?[5] Nonetheless it is true that our screens become ever more indispensable for a variety of activities that include completing tasks for school and

[1] "Mobile Fact Sheet" *Pew Research Center*, June 12, 2019, www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/mobile/. More than half of children age eleven and older own a smartphone. See the 2019 *Common Sense Media* report available here: www.commonsensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens-2019.

[2] United States Federal Reserve, "Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2018," May 2019, www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2018-report-economic-well-being-us-households-201905.pdf.

[3] "Time Flies: U.S. Adults Now Spend Nearly Half a Day Interacting with Media" *Nielsen*, July 31, 2018, www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2018/time-flies-us-adults-now-spend-nearly-half-a-day-interacting-with-media/.

[4] Michael Winnick, "Putting a Finger on Our Phone Obsession," *dscout*, June 16, 2016, blog.dscout.com/mobile-touches.

[5] Clay Routledge, "What are the Social and Psychological Costs of our Computer-Mediated Lives?" *Institute for Family Studies*, August 15, 2019, ifstudies.org/blog/what-are-the-social-and-psychological-costs-of-our-computer-mediated-lives.

work, acquiring information, enjoying entertainment, enhancing creativity, and connecting with others near and far.

In addition to the abundant usefulness linked to these technologies, there are also problematic effects, including questions about privacy and oversharing; information overload and deceptive content; commodification and exploitation of individuals; distraction and addiction; isolation and radicalization. Taken together, these and other effects on human well-being become examples of how digital tools and networks deform human identity, character, agency, relationships, and society as a whole. Screens cause moral injury even as it becomes harder to imagine life without them.

While some of those in the field of technology warn of the effects of "human downgrading," there is not enough discussion in Christian moral theology about how these digital devices and networks can cultivate vice and induce people to sin.[6] Bracketing the more helpful aspects and promising possibilities of these digital tools and networks, this essay confronts the way that screens enable vicious attitudes and habits as well as normalize sinful actions and systems.[7] Although it is not a comprehensive treatment of the moral impact of screens, this essay addresses several key pedagogical functions that result from using digital devices, the effect this has on moral identity, character, agency, and relationships, and some possibilities for a more virtuous response to these digital tools and networks.

LIFE WITH A SCREEN: CONSIDERING FIVE TRENDS

Digital devices (hereafter collectively referred to as "screens") provide instant access to an incredible amount of content and any number of contacts. In many cases, screens are valuable tools for education, entertainment, and empowerment. Screens serve as a gateway to explore diverse content, forge connections across distance, and more freely express one's identity and values. They are very often used to increase efficiency, making more time available for other pursuits. Screens shape our sense of what it means to be human, which evolves

[6] Tristan Harris, a former tech designer at Google, has coined the phrase, "human downgrading," to describe the way digital technology hacks our brains and corrodes our culture. See Nicholas Thompson, "Tristan Harris: Tech is 'Downgrading Humans.' It's Time to Fight Back," *Wired*, April 23, 2019, www.wired.com/story/tristan-harris-tech-is-downgrading-humans-time-to-fight-back/.

[7] There are too many ethical issues to adequately address here, including the discrimination written into how digital technology is designed. On this topic, see Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019).

as technology develops.[8] Even more than a matter of habit or convenience, screens are important if not essential tools for school and work, innovation, communication, and collaboration. For those who experience self-doubt, social anxiety, or difficult relationships, screens can be a lifeline to affirming interactions and supportive relationships. For these and other reasons, almost ninety percent of Americans say the internet has been mostly good for them, while seventy percent say it has been mostly good for society.[9]

Still, the screens, apps, and networks we use also produce some troubling effects for persons, relationships, and our contemporary culture. It is too simplistic to cast screens as a double-edged sword, bearing both blessings and curses. Screens are not inherently good or bad; their moral value depends on how they are used, the user's intention and circumstances, as well as the impact of their use. Yet neither are screens morally neutral, since they are tied to a social context that can positively and negatively influence users' identity, character, agency, and relationships. When screens are considered as part of digital structures (or hybrid social-digital environments), we can recognize at least five trends that tempt users to vice and sin: the loss of privacy and problem of oversharing; information overload and deception; commodification and exploitation; distraction and addiction; isolation and radicalization.

Loss of Privacy and Problem of Oversharing

Online activity is tracked like a user's "digital footprint," providing data to be analyzed for companies to cater web content, social media posts, and advertisements to each user's interest and likelihood for engagement. Personal data functions as the currency exchanged for free services online. Most users consent to being observed but do not consent to being identified, although the latter becomes an increasing risk due to the frequency of hacking activity, ransomware, and data breaches.[10] Despite the threat of having their personal information accessed by unknown individuals, corporations, or governments, most users do not consider the impact of data tracking, harvesting, and targeting. As the Cambridge Analytica scandal illustrates, data mining and social media algorithms pose a serious threat to personal freedom

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[8] Joanna Stern, "First, the Smartphone Changed. Then, Over a Decade, It Changed Us," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 17, 2019, www.wsj.com/articles/first-the-smartphone-changed-then-over-a-decade-it-changed-us-11576618873.

[9] Aaron Smith, "Declining Majority of Online Adults Say the Internet Has Been Good for Society," *Pew Research Center*, April 30, 2018, www.pewinternet.org/2018/04/30/declining-majority-of-online-adults-say-the-internet-has-been-good-for-society/.

[10] Andrew Burt and Dan Geer, "The End of Privacy," *The New York Times*, October 5, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/opinion/privacy-rights-security-breaches.html.

and democratic integrity.[11] To date, data rights are not protected human rights. Because user data is largely invisible to us, we fail to recognize how data is gathered and the power data wields, especially when used against us.[12] Personal data is collected and assessed for more than selecting product ads for a particular user to see; it helps software anticipate users' motivation and behavior. Serious ethical concerns arise as Facebook designs technology not only to predict brain activity but read it.[13] Even if they are not technically screens, voice assistants like Alexa encroach on a sense of privacy in one's home: what *isn't* being overheard when such a device is on?[14] Governments have been slow to hold to account tech companies like Facebook and Google. While there are some measures in place, the typical approach (through encouraging transparency, providing some government oversight, and assessing fines as a corrective measure) has not served as a sufficient deterrent to collecting and marshaling personal data, even without users' knowledge and consent.[15] Screens may well be the harbingers of the end of privacy for human society.[16] Because privacy is often linked to stability, safety, and security, the loss of privacy can warp what we expect from government and companies, organizations, and relationships. It can also force individuals to cope through a more defensive or aggressive posture, creating a culture of anxiety at what others may learn about ourselves without our knowledge.

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[11] For the way that Facebook targeted impressionable voters in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and Brexit resolution, see Alex Hern, "Cambridge Analytica: How Did It Turn Clicks to Votes?" *The Guardian*, May 6, 2018, www.theguardian.com/news/2018/may/06/cambridge-analytica-how-turn-clicks-into-votes-christopher-wylie.

[12] The Netflix documentary "The Great Hack" (2019) compellingly illustrates how Facebook employs "weapons grade" technology. The hashtag #OwnYourData collects news about the prevalence of data collection and manipulation.

[13] Sigal Samuel, "Facebook is Building Tech to Read your Mind. The Ethical Implications are Staggering," *Vox*, August 5, 2019, vox.com/future-perfect/2019/8/5/20750259/facebook-ai-mind-reading-brain-computer-interface.

[14] Sidney Fussell, "People Are Starting to Realize How Voice Assistants Actually Work," *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2019, www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/08/facebook-paid-contractors-listen-messenger-audio/596143/.

[15] The most recent fine, a record-setting $5 billion against Facebook in July 2019, was more than 200 times the previous high, $22.5 million against Google in 2012. But Facebook's stock went up even after the fine was announced, and the fine amount is still less than Facebook's quarterly profits. Facebook is unlikely to change its policies; to protect human dignity and the common good will require more than warnings and fines. See Emily Stewart, "A $5 Billion Fine from the FTC is Huge—Unless You're Facebook," *Vox*, April 25, 2019, www.vox.com/2019/4/25/18516301/facebook-earnings-ftc-fine-mark-zuckerberg-stock.

[16] Kashmir Hill, "The Secretive Company That Might End Privacy as We Know It," *The New York Times* (January 18, 2020), www.nytimes.com/2020/01/18/technology/clearview-privacy-facial-recognition.html.

On the level of interpersonal interactions, privacy is threatened by the fact that anything that a person shares with others can be recorded and forwarded to others without their knowledge or consent. Screens are portals to "networked publics" that operate in a "public-by-default framework" exercising some degree of control over users.[17] The threat of constant surveillance by unseen others and the danger of having an unflattering image or exchange made public can disincentivize people to be transparent and honest. To deal with this, some users set up multiple accounts on the same social media platform to curate profiles for specific audiences.[18] Manipulating digital profiles in this way creates a false dualism that undermines integrity, vulnerability, and trust. It can also intensify insecurity within and between users, adding pressure to carefully manage their profile and "clean up" their digital presence by removing anything that might make them appear less impressive, entertaining, or popular.[19] Using the screen-shot function to preserve and disseminate text messages, emails, photos, and social media interactions jeopardizes whether any digital interaction is ever truly private. A message that might have been temporary, tentative, or reserved for a select set of eyes can be recorded and distributed as an image for any number of others to see. Once an image enters the public domain, it becomes impossible to recall it.[20] The absence of privacy on digital devices makes some users more selective and guarded about what they share, as the loss of privacy warrants concern about being exposed, exploited, and excluded. This concern can muzzle or sideline individuals, making them feel as though they have less agency or status, contributing to social marginalization.

Alternatively, others embrace freedom from privacy and use it as a reason to share indiscriminately, a habit of "oversharing" and flooding digital interactions with banality. One illustration of this trend is Snapchat—a photo and video sharing app popular among those thirty-five and younger—which boasts three hundred million users (188 million per day), who create three billion images and view ten billion videos

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[17] danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 205-206.

[18] For example, some people distinguish between their "finsta" and "rinsta," terms for their "fake Instagram" and "real Instagram" accounts. Incidentally, the "finsta" account typically is a more honest and unfiltered self-representation. See Lara Williams, "Rinstagram or Finstagram? The Curious Duality of the Modern Instagram User" *The Guardian* (26 September 2016), www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/sep/26/rinstagram-finstagram-instagram-accounts.

[19] Donna Freitas, *The Happiness Effect: How Social Media Is Driving a Generation to Appear Perfect at Any Cost* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 48.

[20] For example, even deleted tweets can be screen-shotted and accessed via Google images. "Likes" are even harder to hide. See Paris Martineau, "Tweets Can Be Ephemeral, But Your Likes Are Forever," *Wired*, August 5, 2019, www.wired.com/story/tweets-ephemeral-likes-forever/.

each day. Insofar as the average Snapchat user has exchanged anywhere between ten thousand and four hundred thousand photos with friends, it can easily become a tool of distraction, to say nothing of pushing the boundaries of what should remain private. When people become accustomed to screen life without privacy, it makes it more challenging to establish boundaries, discern what should be "sharable," or unplug altogether.

Information Overload and Deception

Snapchat also reflects a second problem of screen life: the sheer volume and velocity of content online. Information overload can create more than dissonance or distraction, as it too often results in deception. Without any verifiable authority or system of governance for the digital world and because screens provide access across national borders, nation states cannot adequately monitor and enforce the practices and policies of what is posted or shared online. Moreover, multinational corporations responsible for software and digital connections can wield even more power than some countries. Absent any centralized digital supervision, it seems like anything goes online. Companies like Twitter have been reluctant to rein in users, wary of litigation over free speech rights.[21] This social trend reflects what Emile Durkheim called "anomie," an attrition of moral authority because "the moral system which has prevailed for centuries is shaken, and fails to respond to new conditions of human life."[22] This produces a breakdown of social bonds and loss of moral norms. In the absence of moral guidance, a laissez-faire approach often becomes the default setting. The vast quantity of information, webpages, networks, images, and videos makes it impossible to police what should be permitted and what should be intolerable.

Information overload can be taxing, but it can also have grave moral effects. Tolerance seems like the only way to deal with so many views and voices, but it can too easily devolve into permissiveness, a moral lethargy that eschews personal and social virtues. For example, even as more Americans express weariness with the silencing effects of "political correctness,"[23] data shows that Americans report higher

[21] Louise Matsakis, "Twitter Releases New Policy on 'Dehumanizing Speech,'" *Wired*, September 25, 2018, www.wired.com/story/twitter-dehumanizing-speech-policy/.

[22] Émile Durkheim, *L'éducation morale* (Librarie Félix Alcan, 1925), 47-49.

[23] Emily Ekins, "The State of Free Speech and Tolerance in America," *Cato Institute*, October 31, 2017, www.cato.org/survey-reports/state-free-speech-tolerance-america.

tolerance for hate speech than Europeans.[24] This is the result of a dominant paradigm expressed by "I do me, you do you" or "you stay in your lane and I'll stay in mine." This essentially means enduring vicious attitudes and sinful actions and being fearful of appearing judgmental or intolerant. But the consequences of radical tolerance and nonjudgmentalism can be dire: "live and let live" can just as easily become "live and let die" or at least "live and let suffer." Information overload and invoking tolerance can foster an outlook of narrow self-concern and social cowardice. It creates and maintains a toxic culture online where too often hate and deception stand on equal footing with respectful and accurate speech. Indiscriminate tolerance surrenders morality to a form of relativism that is indifferent to and complicit with what is evil or false.[25]

As a result, fake news and deception find havens in many corners of the internet. When it is easy to copy-and-paste words, images, and sounds out of context, distort statistics, and make claims without evidence, it becomes ever more difficult to distinguish fact from opinion, and some viewpoints from total fabrication.[26] There is little motivation on the part of web designers to corral the distribution of unreliable material. Companies obsess over increasing their page views, which they can use to attract advertisers and thereby boost their profit margin. In a similar way, the goal of media organizations is to increase their audience, which sometimes comes at the expense of reporting the facts. Celebrity guests are treated like experts, which may generate interest in a topic but can also lead to widespread misinformation.

A prime example is the platform given to Jenny McCarthy—an actress without any background in science—who popularized lies linking vaccinations to autism.[27] As a result, a growing "anti-vaxxer" movement has put children and other vulnerable adults (who may not be able to receive vaccinations due to other medical conditions) at risk of contracting and spreading disease, including some diseases that had

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[24] Richard Wike, "5 Ways Americans and Europeans are Different," *Pew Research Center*, April 19, 2016, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/19/5-ways-americans-and-europeans-are-different/.

[25] See, for example, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 210-214.

[26] It surely does not help that the President of the United States makes deception a routine habit. As of April 2020, he has made false or misleading claims more than 18,000 times. See the Washington Post Fact Checker website: www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/?noredirect=on. Trump's Politifact scorecard shows his campaign claims were true or mostly true only 16% of the time: www.politifact.com/personalities/donald-trump/.

[27] Hilary Brueck and Julia Naftulin, "From Autism Risks to Mercury Poisoning, Here Are 10 Lies Anti-Vaxxers Are Spreading about the Measles Vaccine," *Business Insider*, April 9, 2019, www.businessinsider.com/lies-anti-vaxxers-spread-about-measles-vaccine-debunked-2019-1.

been previously considered eradicated.[28] When media treats vaccinations like a debate—rather than settled science—truth becomes reducible to personal opinions, even ones warped by ignorance and fear. On web forums, people assert opinions without having to provide supporting evidence, which can lead others astray. We can recognize a similar pattern in the wake of the media's typical approach to climate change, where two "experts" appear on screen to debate the veracity of global warming or the danger of habitat loss and species extinction. In fact, however, ninety nine percent of climate scientists agree that climate change is a real and present threat to human and nonhuman creation.[29] There is no room for doubt or debate on this issue; arguing over it delays and discourages action for environmental protection and sustainable development. Fake news and social media accounts that intend to distract and deceive people illustrate how screens can become instruments to distort truth, erode trust, generate cynicism, and foment despair.

The practice of "clickbaiting"—that is, using sensational headlines or images to drive traffic to a website and encourage sharing through social media—feeds on impulsive emotional reactions, hijacking people's brains to increase audience size and advertising budgets. Clickbaiting is troubling not only because it steers people to questionable content but also because it can be manipulated by those with a nefarious intent. For example, Russian Twitter bots and Facebook news stories influenced potential voters in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, including, with some effectiveness, senior citizens who are more susceptible to reading and sharing "fake news."[30] Disinformation is rampant and relies on emotional manipulation to help "spin" pass as fact.[31] Nearly sixty percent of the time, people share articles without reading them, and web traffic trends show that false stories are shared more

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[28] Jorge L. Ortiz, "Anti-Vaxxers Open Door for Measles, Mumps, and Other Old-Tme Diseases Back from Near Extinction," *USA Today*, March 28, 2019, www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2019/03/28/anti-vaxxers-open-door-measles-mumps-old-time-diseases/3295390002/.

[29] Jonathan Watts, "'No Doubt Left about Scientific Consensus on Global Warming, Say Experts," *The Guardian*, July 24, 2019, www.theguardian.com/science/2019/jul/24/scientific-consensus-on-humans-causing-global-warming-passes-99.

[30] Gabe O'Connor, "How Russian Twitter Bots Pumped Out Fake News During the 2016 Election," *NPR*, April 3, 2017, www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2017/04/03/522503844/how-russian-twitter-bots-pumped-out-fake-news-during-the-2016-election; Niraj Chokshi, "Older People Shared Fake News on Facebook More Than Others in 2016 Race, Study Says" *New York Times* (10 January 2019), www.nytimes.com/2019/01/10/us/politics/facebook-fake-news-2016-election.html.

[31] Darren Linvill and Patrick Warren, "That Uplifting Tweet You Just Shared? A Russian Troll Sent It," *Rolling Stone*, November 25, 2019), www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/russia-troll-2020-election-interference-twitter-916482/?fbclid=IwAR0XPrHcvvYgQVEwVC6uhDOcEcoWRbDwvR7fyeS-6Ld543FdrouSuOgORJs.

than true ones.[32] Not only does this mean that people cooperate with misinformation, but they also become victims to the habit of sharing without verifying. Popular images, quizzes, and surveys shared on Facebook and elsewhere collect user data and can become "trojans" to spread viruses and other malware, including to steal users' passwords. And while concerns grow about "deepfake" videos using CGI technology to deceive people en masse, the alarmist hype may be just as worrisome as the actual potential to distort reality.

When misinformation, deception, and manipulation become more and more normalized, it makes it impossible to establish norms for agreement and accountability. Mutual respect and trust seem more naïve than tenable. The *Catechism* teaches that lies are always sinful because they intend to deceive others, robbing them of the truth and leading to false judgments (nos. 2477, 2482). Lies lead people farther away from God, do violence to truth, and undermine right-relationships between neighbors. Those who sow slander, fear, hate, and blame foment suspicion and division, obstacles to a flourishing community life and the common good. In addition to these social threats, Pope Francis warns that exposure to misinformation and deception "can end up darkening our interior life." Lies can consume us, he adds, and disrespect for the truth can easily lead to disrespect for self and others.[33] If we cannot agree to value the truth and hold each other accountable to it, then on what can we agree to value at all?

Commodification and Exploitation

A third concern is related to the links between screens and a capitalist system that often relies on commodification and exploitation. Screens function as windows for consumption and vehicles for production. Free access online relies on garnering web traffic, collecting user data, and selling advertising. Digital tools and networks may be helpful for enhancing efficiency, enriching creativity, and maximizing profit, but they also operate as a formation system that can degrade human personhood. People become convinced that their value is measured by what they buy, create, enjoy, or share, reinforcing a compulsive cycle of production and consumption. Measuring value by the number of views or followers one generates violates the inherent human dignity witnessed by Scripture (e.g., Genesis 1:26, Psalm 139:14), reducing persons to functions. On Instagram, "influencer" ac-

[32] Laura Sydell, "Can You Believe It? On Twitter, False Stories Are Shared More Widely than True Ones," *National Public Radio*, March 12, 2018, www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2018/03/12/592885660/can-you-believe-it-on-twitter-false-stories-are-shared-more-widely-than-true-one.

[33] Pope Francis, "World Communications Day Message," January 24, 2018, w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20180124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html.

counts are rewarded for drawing traffic, sponsoring products, and distorting reality by filtering out anything unpleasant. The more time people spend on this platform, the harder it might be to recognize that social media does not consistently reflect "real life."[34] Screens, in many ways, help sustain a culture of "depersonalization."[35] Persons are cheapened into commodities and often exploited for what is most convenient, pleasurable, or profitable. The pursuit of popularity through increasing status can make us aggressive, overly reliant on the opinions of others, ignore their needs (especially those who lack prestige), and leave us feeling insecure and unfulfilled.[36] Therapists report that screens are responsible for some of the most commonly addressed issues in therapy.[37]

Social media and other dimensions of screen life contribute to the externalization of the human person: one who is observed and measured, quantified and manipulated, "the most suitable cognitive tool for dealing with the producing, buying, and selling of commodities."[38] This trend feeds into a competitive mentality that fixates on carefully curating a particular self-image, a digital profile that will make me ever more likable. It can be a harrowing experience to tweak one's pictures and posts to win the approval of others and think that one's self-worth is dependent on the level of digital engagement they garner. This outlook prizes conflict more than cooperation and domination over shared empowerment; attention online is treated like a scarce commodity, so sharing posts can function as a competition to be noticed.

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[34] To make this point, style and beauty "influencer" Rianne Meijer shared several side-by-side polished pictures with outtakes. Her posts went viral, as people needed the reminder that Instagram posts are not always accurate reflections of the human experience. See Darcy Shild, "An Influencer Turns Her Instagram Outtakes into Hilarious Side-by-Side Photos to Prove That Social Media Isn't Real Life," *Insider*, August 16, 2019, www.insider.com/influencer-rianne-meijer-expectation-vs-reality-photos-2019-8.

[35] The classic work on this topic remains John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: A Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981). Kavanaugh explains that "When consumerism becomes a full-blown philosophy and way of life, all social depersonalization, whether in violence or degradation, carries a common theme. Women and men are reduced to the status of means and instruments, whether for profit, for 'enlightened' self or national interest, or for pleasure" (*Following Christ*, 19).

[36] Mitch Prinstein, *Popular: The Power of Likability in a Status-Obsessed World* (New York: Viking, 2017). Prinstein discusses several stages of popularity: moving from elation to feeling overwhelmed to resentment to addiction to split personas to loneliness and depression to wishing for something else. The antidote is personalization generated by genuine human connection.

[37] Jenna Birch, "The Most Common Issues People Brought Up In Therapy In 2019," *Huffington Post*, December 27, 2019, www.huffpost.com/entry/most-common-issues-therapy-2019_l_5dfbe11be4b01834791ddaa3.

[38] Kavanaugh, *Following Christ*, 47.

Almost a decade ago, psychologist Sherry Turkle warned about the temptation that people begin to think of their identity and value through the credo, "I share, therefore I am." Such a perspective generates a more delicate sense of self, one that demands unceasing validation from others.[39] Turkle cautioned that digital technology and networks would produce higher rates of narcissism, as people would become less patient with the complex dimensions and needs of other people. The volume of content and contacts at our fingertips makes it easy to keep swiping or clicking past anything dull or demanding. When we get used to having endless options on-demand, we can become "modern Goldilockses" who expect everything tailored to our precise preference.[40]

On the flip side of this, when users know that they have to stand out in order to catch and maintain others' attention, it produces pressure to be "constantly on" in order to enhance their social status. The burden to stay active in a "cycle of responsiveness"[41] on social media, email, texting, or private messaging apps can produce anxiety (or guilt for failing to respond promptly) called "technostress."[42] If "I share, therefore I am" becomes the norm, it can diminish one's identity, character, and sense of belonging offline. Some people joke, "pics or it didn't happen" or "if it's not on Instagram, it's not real life," but this kind of mentality has pushed people to compulsive and overly revealing selfies—and sometimes such brazen selfies that have caused hundreds of injuries and deaths.[43] This raises an important question: do we share on social media for self-expression or self-validation?

Social media can impact friendships by habituating the exchange of simplistic or superficial updates or sharing only what will ensure gaining recognition and approval. This can make it more difficult to practice sharing authentic and vulnerable thoughts and feelings, including when someone is struggling. Without the time or space to talk at length with friends and read their facial expressions and body language, it becomes harder to cultivate empathy. Unsurprisingly, empathy rates have declined forty percent as compared to the rates among college students a few decades ago.[44] The transactional nature of so

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[39] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 302.
[40] Turkle, *Alone Together*, 15.
[41] This refers to nonstop availability and activity. See Leslie A. Perlow, *Sleeping with Your Smartphone* (Cambridge: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 7.
[42] "Technostress" signifies the psychological and physical effects of constant connectivity, sometimes manifested through decrease of appetite, insomnia, and suppressed immune activity. See John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (New York: Basic, 2008), 190.
[43] See, for example, Kathryn Miles, "Cause of Death: Selfie," *Outside Online*, April 16, 2019, www.outsideonline.com/2393419/selfie-deaths.
[44] Jamil Zaki, "What, Me Care? Young Are Less Empathetic," *Scientific American*, January 1, 2011), www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-me-care/.

many exchanges online can make people expect to be used by others and lament when no one wants to use them. This warps people's understanding of friendship and what they expect and endure from friends. Some young people report tolerating toxic friendships because they think it is necessary for salvaging their social status or sense of belonging. After friendships fall apart, to cope with feeling left out, they "creep" and "binge" on others' posts, which does not fulfill the desire for a quality connection. In other cases, friends give and receive blunt criticism via text, as people often communicate more harshly through a screen than they would in person.[45] This kind of treatment—especially from those considered "friends"—can make someone question their worth and support system, especially when they are looking for help in challenging times.

Screens also affect how people explore a romantic interest. Tinder and other dating apps make it easier to find prospective dates, but the emphasis on how people appear (the basis for whether a user swipes left or right) has also been forewarned as ushering the "dawn of the dating apocalypse" because it trains users to think "there's always something better" to find.[46] Sexual encounters are treated like a trial for a gym membership or streaming service, reduced to a transaction or experimentation. When hookups replace dating, and communication and commitment are viewed as optional or even burdensome, people lose practice at the kind of skills necessary to maintain mutually respectful, responsible, and meaningful relationships. Young people contend with movies and TV shows that glamorize casual sex—especially in college—even though most students do not have anything positive to say about their experience of hookup culture in college.[47] Some evidence suggests that students today have many fewer intimate

[45] See, for example, Kaylen Ralph, "How Social Media Can Prolong Toxic Friendships," *Rewire*, November 20, 2017, www.rewire.org/love/social-media-toxic-friendships/ and Katie Moritz, "How Unbalanced Relationships Affect Your Brain" *Rewire*, May 24, 2017, www.rewire.org/love/brain-unbalanced-relationships/.

[46] Nancy Jo Sales, "Tinder and the Dawn of the 'Dating Apocalypse,'" *Vanity Fair*, August 6, 2015), www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/08/tinder-hook-up-culture-end-of-dating.

[47] For example, in Jason King's ethnographic research of college students, he found only four students out of 145 who used positive or enthusiastic language to describe hookup culture. See *Faith with Benefits: Hookup Culture on Catholic Campuses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6. Jennifer Beste reports that 90% of student ethnographers found their peers were unhappy with college party culture and the "vast majority" of ethnographers believe their peers are "dissatisfied and unhappy as a result of partying and hooking up." See Jennifer Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics: The Lives and Longings of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 104–8.

encounters.[48] But because of the sexual images and messages that pervade so many screens, students feel compelled to lie about hooking up, creating a social environment where everyone thinks they are the only ones not having sex, when that is far from the truth. In fact, students estimate their peers are having sex almost once a week, when in fact it averages out to twice a year.[49]

Perhaps the most blatantly exploitative use of screens is pornography, as viewers become desensitized to the objectification of bodies and the physical and verbal abuse that fill the vast majority of pornographic film scenes.[50] Pornography is now viewed more on tablets and phones than any other device, and it is saved to a quarter of all smartphones. Pornographic websites like Pornhub attract about thirty billion visits per year, one hundred million visits per day, roughly a thousand visits per second, with more than forty percent of traffic coming from the United States. Given its prevalence among adults and even many children (the average age of first exposure is eleven years old), porn is a public health crisis: rates of addiction are steadily climbing, porn is commonly cited as an obstacle for intimacy between couples, and increasingly a reason to file for divorce. It deforms sexual identity and intimacy; it poisons our attitudes about sex.[51]

Take, for instance, the words that we use to talk about sex in an informal setting. These words—for example: "screwing," "banging," or "piping" among many others—are aggressive if not explicitly violent terms. They shape our sexual imagination in a way that transforms a loving act into an antagonistic transaction, something you *do* to someone (or have done to you) or *get* from someone (or have taken from you). This kind of rhetoric is unsurprising, given the violence depicted in the vast majority of internet pornography, the main source for sex education among young people. More to the point, however, is the fact that words create worlds of meaning: the violent images and words we associate with sex do more than degrade human sexuality;

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[48] Kate Julian, "Why Are Young People Having So Little Sex?" *The Atlantic*, December 2018, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/12/the-sex-recession/573949/ .

[49] Lisa Wade, *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017), 17.

[50] Gail Dines argues that most Americans' idea of pornography is "twenty years out of date." Most people might think of images of naked bodies or the act of sex, when in fact, most pornography is aggressive if not violent, and usually depicts women as passive participants—in ecstasy, no less—to the advances of more than one man at a time, who are often verbally and physically abusive. One study found nearly ninety percent of scenes contained at least one aggressive act, with an average of twelve aggressive acts per scene. See Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), xviii–xxii.

[51] Kat Lonsdorf, "What We (Don't) Talk About When We Talk About Porn," *National Public Radio*, May 25, 2019, www.npr.org/2019/05/25/723192364/what-we-dont-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-porn.

they normalize the link between sex and violence. A recent study found that a quarter of women felt scared during sex. One culprit? Popular porn showing women being choked during sex.[52] More women are being choked and hit, raped vaginally and anally by sexual partners and significant others because these actions have been normalized in pornography. When the abuse of women is tolerated on screens, it not only reflects the "social sin of rape culture" but deforms sexual identity and intimacy.[53] For example, even though many people consider college hookup culture to be characterized by casual and consensual sexual encounters, hookups are in fact the setting for the majority of gender-based violence on college campuses, as men coerce women for oral, anal, and vaginal sex.[54]

While screens typically depict sex as a violent act, idealize casual sex and binge drinking, and distort what to expect from oneself or one's partner during sex, social media too often covers up any doubt, regret, or pain associated with sex. This exacerbates what is called "pluralistic ignorance," described as "conformity based on the widespread misperception that one's preferences concerning a particular behavior or practice are different from the beliefs of almost everyone else."[55] People become convinced that everyone else is happier than they are and willingly ascribing to these social norms. Consequently, they question their value and belonging. Out of the fear of not being valued or belonging, they conform to the script they see on the screen, which too often reinforces harmful gender and sexual norms. One example of this is the prevalence of toxic masculinity, a mentality that trains men to believe they are invulnerable, free to be aggressive without being held accountable for the impact of their words and actions, and entitled to women's bodies.[56] Websites like Barstool Sports do more than normalize brash or boasting talk; they make light of cyberbullying and misogyny.[57] Loyalty to sports teams and to other men

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[52] Olga Khazan, "The Startling Rise of Choking During Sex," *The Atlantic*, June 24, 2019, www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/06/how-porn-affecting-choking-during-sex/592375/.

[53] Megan K. McCabe, "A Feminist Catholic Response to the Social Sin of Rape Culture" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 4 (2018): 635-657.

[54] Donna Freitas reports that in one study of sexual assault on college campus, "90 percent of unwanted sex took place during a hookup." See Donna Freitas, *The End of Sex: How Hookup Culture is Leaving a Generation Unhappy, Sexually Unfulfilled, and Confused About Intimacy* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 49.

[55] Jennifer Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics*, 121.

[56] See, for example, Michael Kimmel's discussion of the culture of entitlement, silence, and protection that perpetuate toxic masculinity in *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 59-67.

[57] Robert Silverman, "Inside Barstool Sports' Culture of Online Hate: 'They Treat Sexual Harassment and Cyberbullying as a Game,'" *The Daily Beast*, March 14, 2019, www.thedailybeast.com/inside-barstool-sports-culture-of-online-hate-they-treat-sexual-harassment-and-cyberbullying-as-a-game.

become bonds that overlook degradation and division, an example of how Barstool is one way screens become a tool of vice, deforming the attitudes and actions of viewers.

Distraction and Addiction

Screens impact other relationships, too. This trend illustrates a fourth area of concern: the tendency of screens to be a source of distraction and addiction. Friends and family can use screens to share files and articles, use apps to coordinate schedules and plans, or stay in contact across distance, but screens can also be a portal to content and connections that can make it harder to be physically, mentally, and emotionally present to their loved ones. Screens are becoming like a security blanket we use to cope with a fear of boredom. When we go looking for a distraction or escape, therapists warn that screens make it easier to connect with old flames, explore new relationships with others who share similar interests, or spend time doing other things—reading, shopping, watching entertainment programs, or gaming, among other possibilities—instead of connecting with their partner or spouse. In fact, some researchers point to screens in the bedroom as the culprit for the current "sex recession" that includes single as well as married adults.[58] In addition to screens serving as a gateway to more opportunities for diversion (scrolling endlessly through social media, consuming countless videos on YouTube, or spending hours playing Fortnite), they can become obstacles to practicing fidelity to our most intimate ties.[59] To illustrate this point: parents now spend more time watching Netflix than they do bonding with their children.[60] For many, screens can be like a reliable babysitter for their children to stay out of trouble, but families with less financial security and access rely on screens much more than do affluent families. This can disproportionately expose poor children to harmful images and messages, deprive them of longer connections with their family, and make them more susceptible to screen addiction.[61]

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[58] Belinda Luscombe, "Why Are We All Having So Little Sex?" *Time*, October 26, 2018, time.com/5297145/is-sex-dead/.

[59] Photographer Eric Pickersgill's photo series "Removed" depicts everyday scenes with phones removed to show how they often become obstacles to connect with friends and family nearby. See Steve Mollman, "Photographer Removes Our Smartphones to Show Our Strange and Lonely New World," *Quartz*, August 28, 2019, qz.com/523746/a-photographer-edits-out-our-smartphones-to-show-our-strange-and-lonely-new-world/.

[60] Chris Brantner, "We Spend Twice as Much Time Watching Netflix as With Our Family," *Streaming Observer*, September 11, 2018, www.streamingobserver.com/time-spent-watching-netflix/.

[61] Daily screen use for eight to eighteen year olds from families making less than $35,000 was nearly two hours more than from their peers in families with incomes over $100,000. See "The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens,

Screens can help with parenting, but they can also impede healthy relationships between parents and children. Parents and kids are equally susceptible to being distracted by all their screens offer, making it more difficult to be intentional about carving out opportunities for meaningful interactions offline. Screens can also become a battleground for difficult decisions and power struggles between parents and children. While young people see screens as vital for information and entertainment, connecting with friends, and marking their digital presence, parents have to navigate how much or how little access is appropriate for their child's well-being. Screens can be useful to keep track of children as they experiment with increasing independence; apps like "Find My Phone" and parental control programs like "Net Nanny" provide the ability for constant surveillance while raising questions about whether this encourages or undermines trust between parents and children. Screens—especially when spent with social media—can turn children's focus more to the views and actions of their peers, eclipsing the strong attachments between parents and children where unconditional love and acceptance are first experienced and sustained over time. Physician and psychologist Leonard Sax points to screens and social media as dominated by the conditional and contingent nature of peer relationships, which can exacerbate a young person's sense that their value or belongingness is conditional or contingent. Sax points to this trend as a root cause of the growing rates of loneliness, anxiety, and fragility among young people today. He asserts that it is the job of parents to supplant screens, peer relationships, academics, and other activities to reclaim as central the parent-child relationship.[62]

Screens can also take a toll on relationships between siblings. The same issues with distraction can make it harder for siblings to connect, converse, and play together. Screens can be a way for younger siblings to be exposed to content more appropriate for older siblings. The way to solve this problem is to give each child their own screen, which can ensure that everyone is able to engage the content or connections of their own choosing. However, when each child is glued to their own screen—in transit, in a restaurant or store, or at home—this is a lost opportunity to engage the same material together, and it becomes something less than a shared experience. It might be nice to avoid a fight over what to listen to in the car or watch on the weekend, but, when everything is catered to individual preference, there is less communication across differences and there are fewer opportunities to compromise, negotiate, and practice conflict-resolution. Siblings—

2019" www.commonsensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens-2019.

[62] Leonard Sax, *The Collapse of Parenting: How We Hurt Our Kids When We Treat Them Like Grown-Ups* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 105–13.

just like friends and other family members—can get lost in their own digital worlds and miss out on the conversations and experiences that form shared identity and sense of belonging. This tendency to cater everything to personal taste or fill every lull with a screen not only confirms Turkle's warning about "modern Goldilockses" but becomes a threat to relationships and our commitments to each other.

Although there are apps that can help us limit our time with a screen, the fact that we rely on technology to limit our use of technology might serve as yet another example of becoming ever more dependent on digital tools and networks. The impulse to check our phones for notifications or text while driving is so strong that people struggle to break the habit, even though it is well-known that texting while driving is unsafe. A quarter of all car accidents in the United States are caused by texting and driving. Screens rewire brain circuitry to a great variety of effects—from decreasing curiosity to increasing anxiety—including among children as young as two years old, an age group where screen time has doubled of late.[63]

Scientists observe a "disturbing" impact of screens on children's mental health and social skills, warning that even those under age five are showing signs of addiction to screens.[64] Scans show the brain responds to screens as it would cocaine, with elevated dopamine levels similar to what is experienced during sex.[65] Firsthand accounts relate the demons of "distraction sickness" that render people into screen-obsessed zombies. Some people might not recognize their deteriorating health and happiness. They might deny the way screens too often replace—rather than supplement—offline interaction. But sometimes it takes being separated from screens to realize our dependency and the diminished humanity that results.[66] Screens are compared to a "digital heroin," a habit-forming drug that people are finding hard to break; when users are separated from their phones, many report withdrawal symptoms.[67] Addictions to social media and gaming grow in

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[63] Sam Blanchard, "Smartphones and Tablets Are Causing Mental Health Problems in Children as Young as TWO by Crushing Their Curiosity and Making Them Anxious," *Daily Mail*, November 2, 2018, www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-6346349/Smartphones-tablets-causing-mental-health-problems-children-young-two.html.

[64] Denis Campbell, "Children Aged Five and Under at Risk of Internet Addiction," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2019, www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jun/11/children-aged-five-and-under-at-risk-of-internet-addiction-barnardos?CMP=share_btn_tw.

[65] Nicholas Kardaras, *Glow Kids: How Screen Addiction is Hijacking Our Kids—And How to Break the Trance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016).

[66] See, for example, Andrew Sullivan, "I Used to Be a Human Being," *New York Magazine*, June 2016, nymag.com/intelligencer/2016/09/andrew-sullivan-my-distraction-sickness-and-yours.html.

[67] Julian Vigo, "Online Addictions: A Symptom of the Times," *Forbes*, August 16, 2019, www.forbes.com/sites/julianvigo/2019/08/16/online-addictions-a-symptom-of-the-times/#541e8f7a7fee.

number and are even responsible for instances of abuse, neglect, and death.[68] A study conducted by Brigham Young University found that parents' greatest fear—more than bullying, drugs, alcohol, sex, or safety—is the overuse of digital technology and social media.[69] Some parents hire coaches to help their children moderate screen time, but this requires a kind of financial privilege that few families share.[70] While this might work for families with the means to do so, outsourcing the decisions and habits to find a prudent approach to digital tools and networks fails to practice the kinds of virtuous attitudes and actions that are needed to resist the vicious and sinful effects of life with a screen.

Isolation and Radicalization

Finally, a fifth and final cause for concern is the isolation and radicalization that festers online. People create and express their identity, initiate and maintain relationships in a hybrid of online and offline interactions. Given that most of the world has some kind of digital presence, we are no longer limited to connections based on geographical proximity. People used to talk about connecting the entire world across "six degrees of separation," but, because of screens, the number is now closer to three degrees of separation.[71] We can connect with others wherever we are and wherever they are, bringing new meaning to William Wordsworth's phrase from 1807: "The world is too much with us." Ironically, however, even though these digital tools and networks are designed to connect us at any time and in every place, research shows that more screen time leads to higher rates of feeling insecure, isolated, and lonely.[72]

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[68] Nicholas Kardaras, "Our Digital Addictions are Killing our Kids," *New York Post*, May 19, 2018, nypost.com/2018/05/19/our-digital-addictions-are-killing-our-kids/.

[69] Sara Israelsen-Hartley, "Why Parents Fear Tech More than Drugs, Alcohol, and Sexual Activity for Their Teenagers," *Desert News*, November 27, 2018, www.deseret.com/2018/11/28/20659673/why-parents-fear-tech-more-than-drugs-alcohol-and-sexual-activity-for-their-teenagers.

[70] Nellie Bowles, "Now Some Families Are Hiring Coaches to Help Them Raise Phone-Free Children," *New York Times*, July 6, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/07/06/style/parenting-coaches-screen-time-phones.html.

[71] Jonah Engel Bromwich, "Six Degrees of Separation? Facebook Finds a Smaller Number," *New York Times*, February 4, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/02/05/technology/six-degrees-of-separation-facebook-finds-a-smaller-number.html.

[72] Jean Twenge, "More Time on Technology, Less Happiness? Associations Between Digital-Media Use and Psychological Well-Being," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 28, no. 4 (2019): 372–79.

This is not just an observation about the correlation between social media and decreased mental and emotional well-being; there is mounting evidence of a causal link.[73] Emergency rooms across the country have seen a forty-two percent increase in psychiatric treatment over the last three years. Mental health experts warn of a "sudden, cataclysmic shift downward in life satisfaction" as "only the tip of the iceberg" when it comes to the emerging mental health crisis that is linked to screens.[74] Social media too often leaves people feeling left out, fragile, and afraid to fail. These platforms are even harsher on girls than on boys,[75] a reason for higher rates of anxiety and depression among girls, as well as a growing number of suicides.[76] Teens' "depressive symptoms have skyrocketed" since 2011, a tidal wave of feeling inadequate, anxious, and alone.[77] Meanwhile, Snapchat makes users feel like everything has to be fun or silly, and Instagram filters out anything not deserving of a highlight reel, making it harder and harder to admit when they are struggling, suffering, sad, or alone.[78] People who think they cannot measure up are less likely to feel like they are valued, cared for, and that they belong.

Loneliness is a growing problem, and screens seem to be making it worse. An upward trend of nearly thirty percent of Americans report feeling lonely. The number of those living in the United States who feel they have no one to talk with has tripled in the last thirty-five years. Among older adults, this rate reaches over forty percent, almost three times higher than was the case in the 1970s. Social isolation is widespread among young people, who seem like "digital hermits," glued to their screens, but feeling alone. Scientists at the University of Chicago are working on a pill to combat loneliness, a condition now

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[73] Melissa G. Hunt, Rachel Marx, Courtney Lipson, and Jordyn Young, "No More FOMO: Limiting Social Media Decreases Loneliness and Depression" *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 37, no. 10 (2018): 751–68; Elroy Boers, Mohammad H. Afzali, and Patricia Conrod, "Temporal Associations of Screen Time and Anxiety Symptoms Among Adolescents," *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 65, no. 3 (2020): 206–, doi: 10.1177/0706743719885486.

[74] Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria, 2017), 96.

[75] Jamie Ducharme, "Social Media Hurts Girls More Than Boys," *Time*, August 13, 2019, time.com/5650266/social-media-girls-mental-health/.

[76] Brian Resnick, "Teen Girls Are Now Poisoning Themselves at Alarming Rates. There Are Ways to Help," *Vox*, May 1, 2019, www.vox.com/science-and-health/2019/5/1/18523881/teen-suicide-poisoning-how-to-help.

[77] Twenge, *iGen*, 99-101.

[78] For example, Madison Holleran was a college athlete who portrayed an ideal life on Instagram even while she struggled with mental illness. Her tragic story is described in Kate Fagan's book, *What Made Maddy Run: The Secret Struggles and Tragic Death of an All-American Teen* (New York: Hachette, 2017).

considered worse than obesity.[79] Screens have created a "culture of elsewhere," directing our attention to other people and places, producing "painful feelings of not-belonging and disconnectedness from and abandonment by others."[80] Feeling lonely is desolation; it is related to feeling unworthy, unimportant, and unloved. It contributes to poorer health, including illness and early death. For this reason, doctors now highlight that relationships are as important to health as diet and exercise.[81] Loneliness can creep into marriages and despoil relationships between families and friends. Digital connections can reinforce relationships offline by providing more opportunities to share life together in the digital public sphere. However, in light of some of the temptations and damaging effects described above, screens are causing serious harm to relationships and social bonds.

Online, people are forced to endure malice and schadenfreude as some are exposed to public dragging and shaming without much resistance from individuals, groups, or the very platforms or networks being used to spout dehumanizing speech. Freedom of speech is often used as license to tolerate disrespectful speech. Screens are used over and again in a manner "devoid of grace," tools used to shame and shun.[82] People are made to feel unlikeable, ridiculed, or victimized, a damaging cycle that can leave people mentally and emotionally wounded, socially stunted, and more likely to target others for abuse in an act of vengeance. Even when these digital tools and networks are not intentionally being used to humiliate or deceive, they still manage to generate social separation. Social media algorithms are designed to confirm users' worldviews by presenting them with content and connections they are inclined to "like" and "share," reducing the likelihood that they will be exposed to views and voices that differ from their own.[83] This makes it possible for life with a screen to become an echo chamber, making it harder to understand and appreciate the perspective of others who look, think, and live differently, reinforcing an

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[79] Randy Rieland, "Can a Pill Fight Loneliness?" *Smithsonian*, February 8, 2019, www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/can-pill-fight-loneliness-180971435/.

[80] Gerald Arbuckle, *Loneliness: Insights for Healing in a Fragmented World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018), xi-xiv.

[81] Elahe Izadi, "Your Relationships Are Just as Important to Your Health as Diet and Exercise," *The Washington Post*, January 5, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2016/01/05/your-relationships-are-just-as-important-to-your-health-as-exercising-and-eating-well/?noredirect=on.

[82] David French, "America Is Intolerably Intolerant," *National Review*, December 12, 2018, www.nationalreview.com/2018/12/kyler-murray-helen-andrews-shame-mob-america-intolerance/.

[83] David Robert Grimes, "Echo Chambers Are Dangerous—We Must Try to Break Free of Our Online Bubbles," *The Guardian*, December 4, 2017, www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2017/dec/04/echo-chambers-are-dangerous-we-must-try-to-break-free-of-our-online-bubbles.

"us versus them" tribalism that threatens solidarity and a shared commitment to the common good.

This is not to ignore the ways that screens play an important role in civic society. Screens have proven to be powerful tools for advancing democracy, capable of changing the landscape of social and political imaginations. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube can and often do raise the social and ecological consciousness of their users. Hashtags collect posts from all over the world, uniting people by shared cause. #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo have burst the bubbles of those oblivious to racial injustice and gender-based violence. Even more than raise awareness, these trends have resulted in actual policy and legal changes.[84] The #IceBucketChallenge raised more than $115 million for ALS research, resulting in a medical breakthrough. Hashtags can galvanize support for a range of causes, from mental health to human rights, from environmental protection to interfaith solidarity.

Still, activism on social media is often reduced to what is currently trending and rarely lasts past the daily news cycle. The half-life of online empathy undermines sustained commitment to any cause.[85] Laudable as it is to become more informed, awareness does not automatically generate commitment to creating change. For these reasons, this "hashtag activism" or "clicktivism" is more aptly described as "slacktivism," a simplistic and superficial level of engagement compared to what is required by social or environmental "activism."[86] Because it caters to a person's interests and does not really require them to change their behavior or social location, this temptation to click "like" or "favorite" or "share" falls well short of our responsibility to the common good and solidarity.[87] In some cases, "slacktivism" hurts more than it helps since it convinces people they have fulfilled their

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[84] Janell Ross, "How Black Lives Matter Moved from aHashtag to a Real Political Force" *The Washington Post*, August 19, 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/08/19/how-black-lives-matter-moved-from-a-hashtag-to-a-real-political-force/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.8fcd8d568331; Brittany Packnett, "Black Lives Matter Isn't Just a Hashtag Anymore," *Politico*, September/October 2016, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/09/black-lives-matter-movement-deray-hacknett-politics-protest-214226; Rebecca Beitsch, "#MeToo Has Changed Our Culture. Now It's Changing Our Laws," *Pew*, July 31, 2018, www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2018/07/31/metoo-has-changed-our-culture-now-its-changing-our-laws.

[85] Caitlin Dewey, "The Tragically Short Half-Life of Online Empathy," *The Washington Post*, November 17, 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/11/17/the-tragically-short-half-life-of-online-empathy/?arc404=true.

[86] Shaunacy Ferro, "Just Liking a Cause Doesn't Help: Internet Slacktivism Harms Charities," *Popular Science* November 8, 2013, www.popsci.com/article/science/just-liking-cause-doesnt-help-internet-slacktivism-harms-charities.

[87] Marcus Mescher, "Resisting Slacktivism, Reclaiming Solidarity," *Daily Theology*, November 7, 2016, dailytheology.org/2016/11/07/resisting-slacktivism-reclaiming-solidarity/.

social duty by adding a filter to their profile picture or sharing an article or petition without taking more time to listen to and learn from people who are poor or marginalized and work with them for systemic change.

Screens can be portals to connect, but they can also become escape pods for avoidance. Just as screens are prone to be used to cope with the fear of boredom, they can also become vehicles for voyeurism: buffers to passively observe, unnoticed by others, without any demands being placed on them. Screens can tempt users to fall into a "spectator culture" that produces more bystanders than activists. Spectator culture relies on endless entertainment, streaming videos, and social media algorithms to produce the exact kind of newsfeed that will keep users scrolling for hours. In this way, screens can pacify and disempower; users can choose to engage only what entertains and or confirms their worldview without confronting other content or connections that might challenge them. This allows people to ignore other parts of reality or even hide from it. Screens can be helpful for those who do not have access to desirable content and connections in their physical surroundings, but, when online interactions replace rather than supplement offline relationships, the costs typically outweigh the benefits for individuals and society at large.

Of pressing concern is the growing manner in which screens also serve as tools for radicalization, amplifying more extreme voices marked by haughty and often hateful language. YouTube has become a platform for some disturbing views, profiting from radicalization.[88] Sometimes hiding behind a cloak of anonymity, people filled with hate use these programs and platforms to spread misinformation, suspicion, blame, disgust, and at times, incite violence. Rage spreads fastest online, which is sometimes a cover for helplessness.[89] Such strong rhetoric fuels polarization, an emerging sense of increasingly oppositional perspectives and priorities. Fear and anger threaten to tear apart families, friends, and communities. The result is an unraveling social fabric, fractured civic body, and mounting frustration at "us versus them" tribalism.

Following the 2016 election, 85 percent of Americans reported feeling that the country is sharply divided.[90] Two years later, nearly

[88] Becca Lewis, "Forget Facebook, YouTube Videos Are Quietly Radicalizing Large Numbers of People—and the Company is Profiting," *NBC News*, October 4, 2018, www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/forget-facebook-youtube-videos-are-radicalizing-millions-young-people-company-ncna916341.
[89] Matthew Shaer, "What Emotion Goes Viral the Fastest?" *Smithsonian*, April 2014, www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-emotion-goes-viral-fastest-180950182/.
[90] Jennifer Agiesta, "A Nation Divided, and Is It Ever," *CNN*, November 27, 2016, www.cnn.com/2016/11/27/politics/cnn-poll-division-donald-trump/.

nine out of ten Americans lamented that the nation remains more divided than at any point in their lifetime.[91] More recently, seven out of ten Americans report feeling sad, angry, or fearful due to the state of politics.[92] Much of this tension is caused by hyper-partisanship that shifts political differences into disdain for those on the other side of the party line. In a recent poll, roughly half of Democrats described Republicans as ignorant (54 percent) and spiteful (44 percent) while a similar proportion of Republicans described Democrats as ignorant (49 percent) and spiteful (54 percent). Moreover, 61 percent of Democrats labeled Republicans racist, sexist, or bigoted, while 31 percent of Republicans applied these terms to Democrats. Perhaps most concerning of all, more than 20 percent of Republicans (23 percent) and Democrats (21 percent) called members of the other party "evil." Only four percent of both parties think the other side is fair and even fewer describe them as thoughtful or kind.[93] News media foment anger and vitriol directed at the "other side." Social media thrives on hot takes, snap judgments, and simplistic labels. All of this makes it easier to assign people to camps—in and out, right and wrong, worthy and unworthy—without humility, curiosity, compassion, or generosity. It does not help that political activity has become more a matter of winning—that is, beating one's detestable opponents—than a shared commitment to the common good.[94] Polarization might be considered the "defining characteristic of modern American politics," but most Americans do not like polarization.[95] Nonetheless, the average citizen has internalized the antagonism that has become normative in our nation's capital, on cable news, and in the comments section of any article or video. This makes it all too common to demonize fellow citizens, simply for seeing things differently.

Social separation makes it easier to demonize others across differences, as one rarely encounters someone who looks, thinks, or acts differently. This has been the trend in America, as the "collapse of the

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[91] Stephen Hawkins, Daniel Yudkin, Miriam Juan-Torres, and Tim Dixon, "Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape" *More In Common*, hidden-tribes.us/pdf/hidden_tribes_report.pdf.

[92] Alex Vandermaas-Peeler, Daniel Cox, Maxine Najle, Molly Fisch-Friedman, Rob Griffin, Robert P. Jones, "American Democracy in Crisis," *PRRI*, October 11, 2018, www.prri.org/research/american-democracy-in-crisis-civic-engagement-young-adult-activism-and-the-2018-midterm-elections/.

[93] Kim Hart, "Most Democrats see Republicans as racist, sexist," *Axios*, November 12, 2018, www.axios.com/poll-democrats-and-republicans-hate-each-other-racist-ignorant-evil-99ae7afc-5a51-42be-8ee2-3959e43ce320.html.

[94] Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 11–12.

[95] James E. Campbell, *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 117, 126.

American community" has resulted in the decline of social trust.[96] The value of social capital, the connective tissue of community, has decreased dramatically since the 1950s, when social bonds were forged through playing bridge or bowling with neighbors, participating in sewing circles, and attending meetings for the Rotary Club, Knights of Columbus, or PTA. Even if people were living in ethnically or religiously homogenous neighborhoods, their interactions in these social clubs and meetings created a more diverse social bond.[97] Since Robert Putnam's work to diagnose the decline of social capital nearly twenty years ago, "social sorting" has been on the rise, creating homogenous lifestyle enclaves, "geographies of similar manners, sentiments, and interests."[98] Fewer Americans encounter others across differences—except at work[99]—because of the loss of "middle ring" relationships that exist between the intimate ties of family and friends and the more distant ties of acquaintances.[100] The rise of "homophily" means that Americans are living increasingly segregated lives, not only by race or ethnicity, but also by political and economic ideology.[101] Online and offline, we are becoming increasingly separated from one another. We stand in need of hope and healing, which are often in short supply in digital settings.

A Moral Response to Life with a Screen

In view of these rather daunting challenges, the task in front of us is to discern how it is possible to practice love of God and neighbor in this hybrid social-digital context. How do these digital tools and networks help us reach our desired telos, that is, right-relationship with God and neighbor? This question does not imply a Luddite rejection of technology, but it points to the need for a more virtuous approach to screens in everyday life. Digital tools and networks operate as "structures of vice" when they malform moral identity and character and as "structures of sin" when they induce people to think, speak, and

[96] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 20–21. Putnam cites figures from 1992, when three-quarters of the U.S. workforce agreed that the "breakdown of community" and "selfishness" were "serious" or "extremely serious" problems in America (*Bowling Alone,* 25).
[97] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 23, 103–4.
[98] Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Mariner, 2009), 71.
[99] Maxine Najle and Robert P. Jones, "The Fate of Pluralism in a Divided Nation," *Public Religion Research Institute*, February 19, 2019, www.prri.org/research/american-democracy-in-crisis-the-fate-of-pluralism-in-a-divided-nation/.
[100] Marc J. Dunkelman, *The Vanishing Neighbor: The Transformation of American Community* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 97.
[101] Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort*, 12–13.

act in sinful ways.[102] What would it take for screens to become "structures of virtue" and networks of grace? Five virtues—prudence, temperance, fidelity, self-care, and resistance—are crucial for responding to the impact of screens on moral identity, character, agency, and relationships in order to prevent personal and social malformation.

The virtue of prudence serves to integrate practical wisdom so that knowing the good is a catalyst for striving to do good. Prudence helps individuals to reflect on human experience, distinguish good from evil, and form a person's conscience to discern the most fitting way to love God, self, and others in order to pursue right action with the right intentions in the right way for the right outcome.[103] Aquinas describes prudence as "right reason in action" that is "caused by love."[104] Prudence prevents other virtues from becoming inordinately restrictive or expansive. It helps us to make sound judgments for how we use digital tools and networks. For example, how are the Beatitudes and Jesus's emphasis on humility, mercy, and reconciliation (cf. Matthew 5:1–12; Luke 6:20–26) reflected in what I view and share online? Given the lack of privacy and rampant oversharing, how can I exercise caution in what I post or provide access to? Am I helping others use the screens in ways that are respectful, inclusive, and empowering?

The virtue of temperance aids in defining a limit: it moderates the drive for more and seeks fulfillment in what is sufficient. Temperance moderates our attachment, finding the right balance between too much and not enough. As a virtue, temperance protects against excess and deficiency so that attachments to people and objects help us better love God, self, and others.[105] It serves a moderating function so that we know how much time is enough to learn, interact, create, accomplish, or be entertained without our screens becoming a distraction, escape, tools for procrastination, overachievement, voyeurism, or temptations to addiction. Temperance is helpful for making a habit of putting our screens down, carving out time for digital fasts—set times free from

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[102] These categories reference Daniel J. Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 1039 (2011): 341–57.

[103] Aquinas states that every virtue "is a kind of prudence" (ST I-II q. 58, a. 2).

[104] ST II-II, q. 47, aa. 1–2. See also, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1806, where prudence is called the "charioteer of the virtues" as it "guides the other virtues by setting rule and measure … [to] overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to avoid."

[105] Attachment is an important moral issue, as being over- or under-attached to people or things can lead to inappropriate relations. William Cavanaugh contends that a significant problem in consumer culture is not inordinate attachment to things (i.e., greed), but detachment and dissatisfaction, placing people on a hedonic treadmill of never-ending pursuit for something more. See Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 34–35.

screens—to make time for offline tasks, interactions, and fruitful solitude. Unplugging from digital devices can bring a variety of health benefits and even result in a longer life.[106]

Practicing temperance can help us rebuild a strong sense of self-identity and moral character through time in solitude, free from distractions and deception. Confronting a fear of boredom can turn solitude into time for reflection, prayer, and discernment or creative expression and innovation. In the face of widespread commodification and exploitation that neglect the interior life, temperance can be a virtuous disposition and habit to practice attention, reverence, and devotion to God's presence and activity in and around us.[107] Intimate moments—with God, ourselves, with loved ones—should be screen-free to ensure our full attention and authentic presence. Temperance helps me gauge whether and how I can make time for what I most deeply desire.

Practicing the virtue of fidelity is an exercise in harmonious relationships with others in the right way, for the right reasons, and to the right ends or goals. It means doing justice—giving to each person what is due to them—in light of the "demands of a [covenant] relationship."[108] Fidelity is a virtuous allegiance to those who are closest to us and rely most consistently upon our care and concern. Although fidelity represents a strong pull toward these close ties, relations among family members and friends should not be viewed in competition with a more expansive loyalty with all of the members of the "household of God" (Ephesians 2:19). Fidelity helps to balance one's commitments between the particular and universal. It combats the "compare and despair" dynamic that views everything as a zero-sum competition, the constant measuring to detect where I stand relative to others, leaving me to feel like I fall short.

Fidelity is fundamentally opposed to tribalism and social separation. It is the foundation for an inclusive solidarity, one that recognizes kinship with all, especially those who lack status and prestige. Fidelity turns our attention to those who are forgotten or rendered invisible and unheard in the busy channels of digital exchange, those discarded by the "digital divide" that leaves out women more than men, the old more than the young, people experiencing poverty or a disability, and

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[106] Catherine Price, "Putting Down Your Phone May Help You Live Longer," *New York Times*, April 24, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/04/24/well/mind/putting-down-your-phone-may-help-you-live-longer.html.

[107] This movement—attention, reverence, and devotion—has been popularized by Howard Gray. See, for example, "Ignatius's Method for Letting God Shine through Life's Realities" *Company*, August 14, 1999, www.companymagazine.org/v163/asiseeit.html.

[108] John Donahue, S.J., "Biblical Perspectives on Justice," in *The Faith that Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*, ed. John C. Haughey, S.J. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1977), 68–112, 69.

a considerable number of indigenous communities. Fidelity combats a "throwaway culture" that sees these people as expendable and calls for a "downward mobility" to forge connections with those too often seen as "less than."[109] It is a habit of sparking empathy and understanding, outreach and accompaniment in order to help heal isolation and loneliness.

Fidelity serves as a check against degrading and demonizing rhetoric, actions that reject or alienate others. Practicing fidelity means aspiring for inclusive solidarity and the mutually respectful and responsible discourse that helps to bridge social divisions. It reminds us to evaluate whether and how we are using digital tools and networks for connections that promote dignity, equality, and shared empowerment. Fidelity seeks strong, secure attachments online and offline, providing people a sense of security, stability, and safety.

The virtue of self-care means prioritizing our integral well-being. It is the way that we honor the "unique responsibility to care for ourselves, affectively, mentally, physically, and spiritually."[110] Self-care is expressed by showing mercy to our self, balancing an ethic of sacrifice and other-regard (cf. Philippians 2:3–4) that might risk giving or enduring too much. Self-care chastens obligations to be compassionate and courageous, generous and forgiving when these might lead to a person becoming depleted, overwhelmed, or exploited. Self-care ensures that one is not exposed to violence done to their dignity, sanity, and agency. Proper self-care enables a person to be authentic, not a chameleon who tries to pass for what others expect to see and hear. Self-care is a matter of self-possession for self-realization. It recognizes one's inherent value and unfolding vocation. Practicing self-care means ensuring that screens are used not just to de-stress, escape, or be entertained, but to be empowered so we can become more fully human. It implies discerning the kinds of content and connections that ensure our freedom to flourish.

In light of the many threats to dignity and freedom, a fifth virtue is needed: the virtue of resistance, proposed by Kochurani Abraham as a feminist virtue.[111] She explains, "Through resistance, women can reclaim their subjectivity and agency, and can cast away the robe of victimhood, refusing to remain 'inert and passive objects of defining dis-

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[109] On "throwaway culture," see Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, nos. 20–22, 43. On "downward mobility," see Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 98-99. Brackley cites Philippians 2:5–11 as the basis for this "standard of Christ."

[110] James F. Keenan, S.J., "Proposing Cardinal Virtues," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 709–29.

[111] Kochurani Abraham, "Resistance: A Liberative Key in Feminist Ethics," in *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World Church* (New York: Orbis, 2014), 97–107.

courses as people without any control over their lives.' Resistance becomes a means for contesting power relations that are marked by domination and oppression, and a tool in the hands of women in their everyday negotiation of power."[112] Similar to fortitude, resistance is a virtue rooted in courage and strength. However, its unique valence derives from its oppositional posture: resistance that virtuously contests hegemonic social structures and abuses of power that separate and subjugate. It is a practice—especially by women or those on the margins of social status and power—to reclaim their subjectivity and exercise social, economic, and political agency. Resistance is a personal and social virtue, empowering the kinds of relationships and communities that foster noncompliance with an unjust status quo, an active refusal to cooperate with evil and limit its effects on oneself and others. In this way, it makes possible a shift from an "ethic of order" to an "ethic for change."[113] Resistance carves out a critical distance from popular dispositions, habits, and systems in order to imagine what else might be possible. There is no reformation or transformation without resistance to the present order. Practicing resistance keeps us attuned to the ways that screens too often contribute to "human downgrading" as vicious instruments that induce sin. It reminds us of the call to conversion—both personal and social—away from any exercise of power that obstructs the love of God, self, and neighbor. Resistance means staying on guard against the normative social-digital attitudes and actions that can corrupt our conscience.

CONCLUSION

How do we love well in a digital age? In many ways, of course. This includes waking up to the formative effect of spending eleven hours a day with a screen. It requires practicing prudence, temperance, fidelity, self-care, and resistance when we use screens. It also demands more and more intentional time to unplug from these digital devices and networks. Love in a time of digital technology means assessing how well we use screens in living up to the demands of dignity, equality, and justice. We all will have to answer for how, when, and why we used screens as well as the effect this had on ourselves and others. Sometimes this will mean embracing the incredible possibilities afforded by digital technology and online networks. And other times, this will mean heeding the advice of Pope Francis, who suggests that we put our screens away, since they cannot actually fulfill our deepest

[112] Kochurani Abraham, "Resistance: A Liberative Key in Feminist Ethics," 104.
[113] J. B. Metz, "Theology in the New Paradigm: Political Theology," in *Paradigm Change in Theology*, ed. Hans Küng and David Tracy (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 355–66.

desires.[114] Only virtuous attitudes, actions, habits and relationships can do that. M

Marcus Mescher is associate professor of Christian ethics at Xavier University in Cincinnati, OH. He specializes in Catholic social teaching and moral formation, focusing especially on solidarity, the common good, and justice in intimate relationships. He is the author of a dozen academic articles and book chapters while also contributing to public theology for *America*, *Millennial Journal*, and *Daily Theology*. His book *The Ethics of Encounter: Christian Neighbor Love as a Practice of Solidarity* was published by Orbis Books earlier this year.

[114] Liz Dodd, "Don't Waste Time on 'Futile' Internet and Smartphones, Pope Tells Youth," *The Tablet*, August 6, 2014, www.thetablet.co.uk/news/1038/don-t-waste-time-on-futile-internet-and-smartphones-pope-tells-youth.