WEEK 7 | DIGITAL LIFE

In truth, we are finite flesh and blood living among finite flesh and blood.
–Tony Reinke

One of the most concerning pathologies of modern technology—the internet and social media in particular—is the psychological impact it is having on us as human beings. Since these technologies came online around 2010, psychologists and sociologists have noted several alarming trends that, increasingly, appear directly connected to the technologies themselves. We will examine each of these trends in turn. However, we will first try to discern *why* these technologies have such a dramatic impact on us. We have already seen that these technologies demand our attention through an infinite number of distractions. These technologies do more than just distract—they also change the way we interact with reality.

LIFE DISEMBODIED

Sherry Turkle, a social psychologist studying the effect of devices on young people, observes a disturbing trend in which she notes, "It is not unusual for people to feel more comfortable in an unreal place than a real one because they feel that in simulation they show their better and perhaps truer self."[1]

What Turkle is describing is a phenomenon that many who have analyzed the impact of the digital world on our lives have noted: we are increasingly living disembodied. As we noted last week, these digital technologies have been carefully and intentionally designed to grab and to keep our attention, even when we are away from them. Thus, it is as if a part of us is always "online," always connected to a dynamic world that never sleeps. Felicia Wu Song writes,

> being permanently connected means that, even if our devices are not powered on, or even in one's possessions, our consciousness has become sufficiently trained and thoroughly immersed in habits of mind formed by an unceasing awareness of the constantly shifting landscape of what is being said and posted in the digital realm. Life is constantly 'being lived elsewhere' as our bodies are in one place, but our minds and consciousness reside focused on the stuff of our screens.[2]

If we are being honest, this is an experience we can all relate to. Our minds are often drawn to our screens and away from the reality that is in front of us. These technologies were designed to distract; they have, but they have gone further. Increasingly, much of our lives are spent in the digital rather than the material world.

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[1] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 212.

[2] Song, *Restless Devices, 22.*

Andrew Sullivan has written an extreme but telling firsthand account of this phenomenon in New York Magazine and is worth reading in full. One of his key insights is that, in many ways, this disembodying impact of digital technology is only the latest step in a series of steps that have degraded our attention and removed us, bit by bit, from reality. As he writes,

> Since the invention of the printing press, every new revolution in information technology has prompted apocalyptic fears. From the panic that easy access to the vernacular English Bible would destroy Christian orthodoxy all the way to the revulsion, in the 1950s, at the barbaric young medium of television, cultural critics have moaned and wailed at every turn. Each shift represented a further fracturing of attention — continuing up to the previously unimaginable kaleidoscope of cable TV in the late-20th century and the now infinite, infinitely multiplying spaces of the web.[3]

Sherry Turkle has observed that "You are where your attention is." Each new iteration of technology advancement, building on the innovations that came before it, have further captured our attention and thus removed us from living our lives fully immersed in the world God has made and the setting He has sovereignly placed us in (Acts 17:26).

Smartphones have exacerbated this impact dramatically, making the infinite rabbit hole that is the internet portable, mobile, and, thus, harder to escape. Our dependence on these devices has become so extreme that a Pew research study found that 46 percent of people interviewed reported that they could not live without one.[4] Smartphones have become extensions of ourselves, wholly integrated into who we are. "Our generation relies on our phones for our moment-to-moment choices about who we're hanging out with, what we should be thinking about, who we owe a response to, and what's important in our lives. And if that's the thing that you'll outsources your thoughts to, forget the brain implant. That is the brain implant. You refer to it all the time."[5]

That last statement is significant. We are outsourcing more and more of ourselves online, so that the devices we use to access our online "selves" is becoming as much a part of us as our physical bodies. Sullivan writes, "Just look around you—at the people crouched over their phones as the walk the streets, or drive their cars, or walk their dogs, or play with their children. Observe yourself in line for coffee, or in a quick work break, or driving, or even just going to the

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[3] Andrew Sullivan, "I Used To Be a Human Being," in *New York Magazine* (September 2016), https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2016/09/andrew-sullivan-my-distraction-sickness-and-yours.html

[4] "6 Facts About Americans and Their Smartphones," Pew Research (April 2015), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/01/6-facts-about-americans-and-their-smartphones/

[5] Tristan Harris, quoted in Lewis, "Our Minds Can Be Hijacked."

bathroom. Visit an airport and see the sea of craned necks and dead eyes. We have gone from looking up and around to constantly looking down."[6]

Tony Reinke goes so far as to argue that we are now *ignoring* our flesh and blood in favor of our online realities.[7] This is a problem, and especially so for Christians because "the Christian life could not be more embodied."[8] Reinke, writing from a Biblical worldview, cuts to the heart of the issue: God created us with physical bodies. After narrating the grand project of creation in Genesis 1, Moses narrows his focus in Genesis 2 on the creation of man, the pinnacle of God's handiwork:

> When no bush of the field[a] was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground— then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.
> – Genesis 2:5-8

In creating man, the first thing God does is form the man's body "of the dust of the ground." It is into this body that God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life," that is, created the man's soul. It is only after these two parts of man, body and soul, material and immaterial, are united that the man "became a living creature." This is a critical point we must not miss. Man was designed, from the beginning, to be body and soul—and this was a *very good thing*, as God's declaration at the end of the sixth day makes clear (Genesis 1:31). Our physical bodies are not unnecessary nor undesirable. We were never meant to transcend them—it is a purely evolutionary worldview that believes the next stage of human evolution is to somehow escape our bodies so that we are only immaterial.

After God creates man, body and soul, He places man in a physical place, a garden (2:8). He gives man a vocation—to "work it and keep it" (2:15)—that will require physical arms and legs. God provides the man food, "every plant yielding seed. . . and every tree with seed in its fruit" (Genesis 1:29), to nourish man's physical body. He even provides a partner, a help-mate that the man will be joined to, both spiritually and physically (2:24), in marriage. The creation narrative shows a God who shows intentionality and with great care creates a physical context in which the creatures that bear His image can thrive and enjoy Him and His creation.

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[6] Sullivan, "I Used to Be a Human Being."

[7] See his chapter "We Ignore Our Flesh and Blood," in *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 55-63.

[8] Ibid., 62.

Part of what is means to be human is to be embodied. God designed us this way and has provided for all our physical needs. Part of being human is to bear the limitations of a physical body that reminds us we are creatures, not the Creator. Our physical bodies remind us that we are dependent on God for sustenance, for life itself.

We also see in the creation narrative that we were made for fellowship, both with God and with each other. This fellowship is not just intellectual, but also physical. Though not everyone will have the depth of physical relationship that a husband and wife enjoy, God does command Adam and Eve to "multiply and fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28). The earth was meant to be filled with image-bearers who would live with each other, work together, eat together, engage in discussion together, worship God together—in other words, they would do life physically together. It's no wonder that the New Testament teaching on the nature of the church places such a great emphasis on our "togetherness." The author of Hebrews commands us not to neglect gathering, physically, with the saints (Hebrews 10:25). Even the ordinances of baptism and communion assume the physical presence of others.

The more we live our lives online, the more we miss out on the fellowship and community that God intended for us. Reinke writes, "In the smartphone age, when our cognitive actions are separated from our bodily presence, we tend to overprioritize the relatively easy interactions in the disembodied online world and undervalue the embodied nature of the Christian faith."[9]

LIFE AS THEATER

It was social psychologist Mark Leary who coined the term *sociometer* to describe that internal, mental gauge that tells us how we're doing in the eyes of others moment by moment. He theorized that what people need is not self-esteem but *others*-esteem. His abstract reads:

> In conceptualizing self-esteem as the output of a system that monitors and responds to interpersonal acceptance and rejection, sociometer theory differs from most other explanations of self-esteem in suggesting that people neither need self-esteem nor are motivated to pursue it for its own sake. Rather, according to the theory, when people do things that appear intended to protect or increase their self-esteem, their goal is usually to protect and enhance their relational value and, thus, increase the likelihood of interpersonal acceptance.[10]

In other words, what people desire—what becomes the driving force for much of what we do—is to get *others* to see us as desirable partners for various types of relationships. The early chapters

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[9] Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*, 61.

[10] M. R. Leary, "Sociometer theory," in P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology* (2012): 151–159). Sage Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446249222.n33

of Genesis make clear that we are social creatures. In our relationships with each other we express the image of God, reflecting the eternal fellowship between the three members of the Trinity. We naturally crave this fellowship and social approval; because of our sin nature, this approval often becomes an idol.

The internet, and social media in particular, has only exacerbated this problem. Now, we are always connected, with an almost unlimited amount of social interaction only a tap or swipe away. The problem, however, is that we were not made for this *amount* of interaction *all the time*. Further, the type of interactions we have online operate on a different value system. What garners likes, comments, thumb-ups, or "hearts" is not a true expression of oneself, but a performance that the audience desires.

Researchers have noted the inherently performative nature of social media platforms which have made it "almost obligatory. . . for users to perform for one another." "Public performance," one author writes, "is risky" because it opens one up to negative feedback the psyche may not be ready for.[11] This is especially true for teens, who need low-risk social interaction where "A bad joke or poorly chosen word among friends elicits groans, or perhaps a rebuke and a chance to apologize. Getting repeated feedback in a low-stakes environment is one of the main ways that play builds social skills, physical skills, and the ability to properly judge risk."[12]

Today, however, teens at an early age are cultivating their online image and persona to please hundreds or thousands of people, with comments, "likes" or "hearts" providing an objective measurement of popularity or acceptance. The stakes—and the pressure—are high. The negative impact of this performative culture has been especially damaging to teenage girls. "Girls," one researcher writes, "are socialized more to compare themselves to other people, girls in particular, to develop their identities, so it makes them more vulnerable to the downside of all this."[13]

Sadly, the ability to simply opt-out of this harmful social game is not always available, as not participating has its own negative consequences. "Performative social media has put girls into a trap: Those who choose not to play the gamer are cut off from their classmates. Instagram and, more recently, TikTok have become wired into the way teens interact, much as the telephone became essential to past generations."[14] Social media exacerbates the already omnipresent concern of being left out.

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[11] Jonathan Haidt, "The Dangerous Experiment on Teen Girls," in *The Atlantic* (November 2021), https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/facebooks-dangerous-experiment-teen-girls/620767/

[12] Haidt, "The Dangerous Experiment on Teen Girls."

[13] Dr. Steiner Adair, quoted in Rachel Ehmke, "How Using Social Media Affects Teenagers," from *The Child Mind Institute*, https://childmind.org/article/how-using-social-media-affects-teenagers/

[14] Ibid.

As we will see in more detail in a coming lessons, the psychological impact of these technologies on younger generations has been devastating. Living this kind of digital life levies "a psychic tax on the teen doing the posting. . . as she anxiously awaits the affirmation of comments and likes."[15] The possibility of always being connected creates the expectation of always being available, and young teens who are finding their self-esteem through their online social interaction are being forced to curate the appearance of a perfect life online to garner the affirmation they crave. The dopamine hit they receive from all those "likes" and comments only reinforces the need to keep up the performance. Life online becomes a theater.

IMAGE & IDENTITY

Things were not meant to be this way. As human being created in the image of God, our identity is meant to be grounded in our relationship with our Creator. Throughout human history, however, mankind has far too often sought its identity in relation to something other than God, an aspect of idolatry littered across the pages of Scripture. The digital age has not introduced a new problem—it has exacerbated an old problem by increasing our ability to connect, seek each other's approval, give or withhold our approval, all online and separate from the face-to-face, physical interaction that is integral to what it means to be human beings living in fellowship and community with other human beings. The impact is dramatic and only increasing as these technologies become more and more central to our lives.

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[15] Jean M. Twenge, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?," in *The Atlantic* (September 2017), https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/