


Taming Digital Technologies

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COMMENTARY

Modern technology bestows an abundance of blessings. The curses that it inflicts are less vivid, but they are neither hidden nor far off. As always in arranging our affairs and organizing our lives, we must grasp the tradeoffs, the better to maximize the benefits while reducing the costs.

Some – particularly romantics, moralists, and cranks – talk boldly of renouncing technology. But few, even among technology’s severest critics, are prepared to give up its wonders. Since the dawn of modernity, the application of scientific knowledge to building machinery and equipment – enabled and structured by the rule of law and free markets – has produced an abundance of now-taken-for-granted comforts and conveniences that until recently were beyond the reach of kings and queens. To mention just a few: safe and speedy travel and instant audio and visual communications; year-round fresh fruit and vegetables; internal plumbing, heating, and air-conditioning; and therapies, drugs, medical devices, and life-saving surgeries of all sorts.

Nevertheless, technology has its downside. These days right and left blame it for fanning the flames of polarization. The Internet was supposed to bring people together and usher in an era of greater understanding and increased sensitivity to diverse perspectives. It was hoped that moving reading, writing, and discussion online would democratize access to knowledge by providing equal opportunity to disseminate opinions and ideas. Instead, social media has empowered individuals to encase themselves in online communities that curate indignation and outrage while denying entrance to discomfiting questions and dissenting views as well as to the disreputable individuals who advance them.

Already by 2008, observers worried that widespread and regular use of the Internet impaired hearts and minds. In “[Is Google Making Us Stupid?](#)”, Nicholas Carr expressed appreciation for “[t]he advantages of having immediate access to” the “incredibly rich store of information” online. At the same time, experience and emerging scientific research indicated that life on the Internet – gliding from text to link and to link within link until losing sight of losing sight of the original – eroded “concentration and contemplation.”

Well before the Internet, novelists and public intellectuals warned about the decline of attentiveness and thoughtfulness. In 1979 in “The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,” Milan Kundera described a pathology that he called “graphomania” – the rage to write, and to be read by as wide a public as possible. Kundera traced graphomania to the deterioration of the disposition to listen, which diminished opportunities to be heard. More than one hundred

years earlier, in his monumental 1867 Inaugural Address as the honorary rector of the University of St. Andrews, John Stuart Mill highlighted a cost of modernity's hustle and bustle. Studying classical authors had become even more important, he argued, because their austere and carefully crafted writings provide models of human excellence otherwise unavailable to those "who write in a hurry for people who read in a hurry."

In the late 18th century, Edmund Burke discerned the deeper problem. It lay in the zeal for complete and untrammelled freedom.

In 1790 in "Reflections on the Revolution in France," the English statesman described the unprecedented revolution undertaken across the Channel, which aimed at much more than replacing rulers or altering governments. The revolution in France also sought to fundamentally transform individuals and society by eradicating old "sentiments, manners, and moral opinions." The removal of the monarchy and the elimination of special privileges for the clergy and the aristocracy were just the start. The French revolutionaries aspired to sweep away every belief, practice, and social and political arrangement associated with the old regime and replace them with new ones.

Burke saw in the revolutionaries' brutal reduction of the queen to a common criminal the end of an epoch: "[T]he age of chivalry is gone." Instead of upholding a moral code that "kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom," the revolutionaries embraced the spirit "of sophists, economists, and calculators." Subjecting moral and political life to the principles of accounting, the revolutionary spirit cast aside "the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle and obedience liberal." It ripped apart "the decent drapery of life" that the "moral imagination" used "to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation."

This dehumanizing moral philosophy repudiated the wisdom embedded in tradition, abolished venerable moral codes, vilified the virtues and empowered the vices, and overturned established ranks and institutions. "On this scheme of things," wrote Burke, "a king is but a man, a queen is but a woman, a woman is but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order."

Released from time-honored duties and customary constraints by the rule of "sophists, economists, and calculators," human beings would enjoy the freedom not only to produce marvels of technological innovation but also to subject themselves to those marvels.

In "The Extinction of Experience: Being Human in a Disembodied World," Christine Rosen explores the latest such marvels and the contemporary forms of self-subjection. She concentrates on the damage to friendship, romantic love, family, workplace relations, and civic life stemming from our immersion in "mediating technologies." These comprise such devices as computers, smartphones, virtual assistants, virtual-reality headsets, and, coming soon to your local healthcare giver, implantable microchips to enhance physical well-being,

mood, and cognition. Our use and abuse of mediating technologies, Rosen argues, “has blurred the boundary between ‘virtual’ things – things not grounded in physical reality that we encounter while online or via mediating technologies – and ‘real’ things embedded in physical space.”

A senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a Commentary Magazine columnist, Rosen writes with perspicacity and measure about the fateful issues that lie at the intersection of technology, culture, and politics. To clarify what we are losing and to encourage us to reclaim it, she surveys numerous spheres of life transformed by our wired world. She shares vignettes from her friends, family, and professional life; draws on the latest social science; supplies context from intellectual history; and offers wise reflections on the perils to our humanity posed by the addictive, sheltered, attenuated existence into which virtual reality lures us to reside full-time. Our headlong embrace of life online, she shows, imperils “valuable human experiences.” Their withering “creates a world where our sense of shared reality and purpose is further frayed, and where a growing distrust of human judgment will further polarize our culture and politics.”

Rosen emphasizes the decline of the “face-to-face” encounter. This, as the Bible says in describing how God spoke to Moses, is the way a man speaks to his friend (Exodus 33:11).

In contrast, digital technologies provide immediate communications across distances great and small. The gains in ease and efficiency, Rosen argues, are offset by the disembodiment of the interactions. Without the aid of tone, facial expression, and gesture, it is harder to attend to what is clearly stated and more difficult still to listen to what goes unsaid. Overreliance on online exchanges and on screen-mediated participation in the world deprives us of simple daily experiences with, and in the presence of, fellow human beings. These face-to-face encounters cultivate virtues such as civility and toleration, which undergird citizenship, and patience and empathy, which fortify friendship and love.

Digital technologies have accelerated the atomization, decline of community, and thinning out of civic life that have long been seen as prominent features of liberal modernity. Modern science, individual freedom and human equality, market economies, and industrialization and the movement of people from rural life to the cities tend to make us both more independent and more isolated.

But digital technologies, as Rosen reminds, do not – at least not yet – compel us to use them indiscriminately. We remain at liberty to set aside our laptops and turn off our smartphones. We can choose to go outside and check the weather by feeling the air and gazing at the skies. We can decide to stroll down the street and make eye contact with passersby, remove our earbuds and chat with clerks and cashiers, and take a walk in the woods and listen to the leaves, streams, and wildlife. We can resolve to put our imperfect selves at risk in daily face-to-face encounters with other imperfect persons who are as apt to misconstrue our meaning, overlook our fine qualities, and exaggerate our irritating ones, as we are theirs.

As Burke would have argued, technology is no more the source of our miseries than have been “[r]eligion, morals, laws, prerogatives, privileges, liberties, rights of men,” and other abiding features of social and political life. Those, he asserted, are the pretexts. It is the eternal vices – “pride, ambition, envy, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites” – that drive the abuse of material objects, institutions, and fellow human beings.

We confront a new version of an old challenge: To tame digital technologies – to maximize their benefits and reduce their costs – we must not only grasp the tradeoffs. We must also rediscover and cultivate the virtues that form good citizens and good human beings.

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