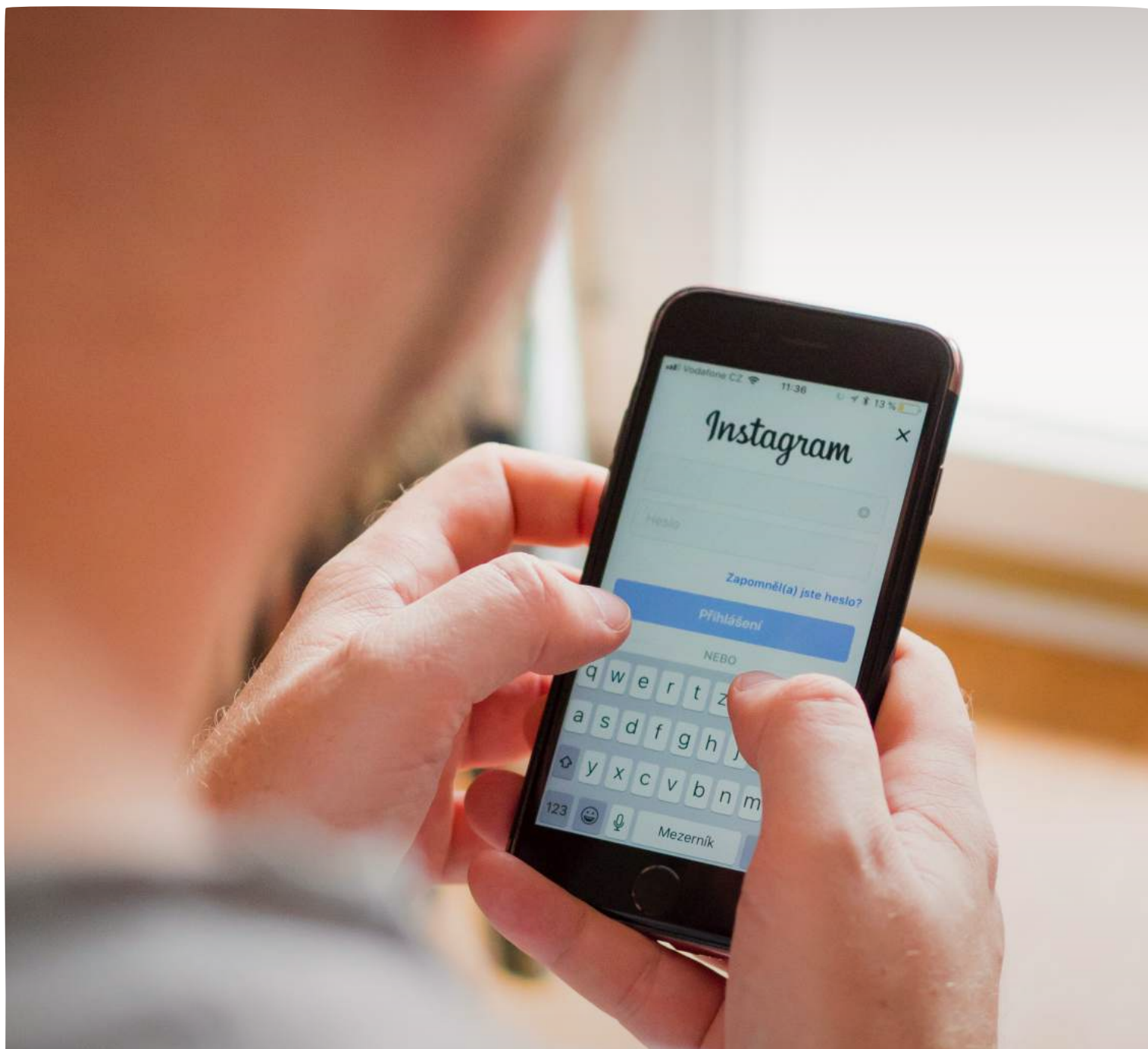




TECHNOLOGY AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

Dr. Douglas Groothuis

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6 Ways Technology Can Diminish a Godly Life

by Dr. Douglas Groothuis, Professor of Philosophy at Denver Seminary

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As I prowled around bookstores, I find a gaggle of books on managing technology overload. One after another fall off the presses and make their way onto the shelves and into my hands. Some, I buy; most, I pass over.

*Often, I think, "I noticed that twenty years ago." I did not predict Google or Facebook or Wikipedia, of course; but in my book, [*The Soul in Cyberspace*](#), I did exegete the medium qua medium, noted some of the internet's strengths, but warned of ways it could diminish the good life that God wants us to live.*

Here are six phrases that capture some of the insights I find repeated again and again in these new books.

MORE IS OFTEN LESS

Humans can profitably interact only with a limited amount of data and sensory stimulation.

We must limit our exposure to internet (and all) electronic media because, unless we are careful, it will addle and unravel us. It may even stupefy us, even as we twitch and click away.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

As Marshall McLuhan wrote 50 years ago, each communications media shapes its message according to the dictates of the form of communication. An image communicates differently than the spoken word, the spoken word, differently than the written word, and so it goes. Attending a worship service cannot be translated truthfully by watching it online.

EFFICIENCY IS OVERRATED AND MAY BE DANGEROUS

Many good things come slowly, such as strong and vibrant relationships, handcrafted furniture, and skill in playing a musical instrument.

All too often, modern technology accelerates without regard to quality. Downloading a PDF of a book can be done quickly; but perhaps finding a hard copy and enjoying its un-electrified slowness is what you should do.

We often give too much of our time to the online world. Our very souls are shaped by its speed, its fragmentation, its instantism.

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It is more efficient to use a program to put comments on students' papers. However, writing with pen and ink is more personal and embodied. Yes, it is slower—and better (if you have the time).

RESIST QUANTIFICATION OVER QUALITATIVE CONCERNS

Technologies trade on numbers. How many likes did your Facebook post receive? People may like it for the wrong reasons. How many people follow your tweets? How can you maximize exposure to your blog?

What is left behind, too often, is the quality—the objective nature—of what is available online. What might God think of your essay, your poem, or your cartoon? Does what you put online contribute to human flourishing?

VIRTUOUS ENGAGEMENT ONLINE REQUIRES ABSTENTION

We often give too much of our time to the online world. Our very souls are shaped by its speed, its fragmentation, its instantism. Thus, we are wise to retreat, to unplug, to desist, to desert it.

Leave your phone in the car when you go shopping or when you meet a friend at a coffee shop. Designate hours and days when you are offline entirely. You will gain a new perspective on your online life by going offline. You will notice what slipped into the background: friends, pets, nature, the Bible, prayer needs, and more.

EVERY NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY GIVES AND TAKES AWAY

There is no sheer advantage. The telephone and radio extend the voice, but take away the physical presence. Early users of telephones were rattled by a disembodied voice coming from far away.

The internet opens up the world to us, but may separate us from the people in our midst. Hence, “the absent presence” of much of life today. How can someone listen to you when they are texting someone elsewhere?

Electronic music files make music available nearly anywhere, but the sound quality is worse than a record. And when you can listen to music through your ear buds in public, you will not be as aware of the world around you. You may not see the tears in a stranger's eyes or hear a sound of distress in your midst.

CONCLUSION

My miniature essay fails to address the evil algorithms out there, the good and evil of big data, and other empirical matters worthy of concern. Nevertheless, my six ideas cover much of what is being written about today, twenty years after I warned about the down side of technologies.

My inspiration was and is thinkers such as Neil Postman, Marshall McLuhan, Malcolm Muggerridge, and Jacques Ellul. Take some time away from Facebook, Instagram, et al, and read them, please.