

Seattle Pacific University

From the Selected Works of Michael J. Paulus, Jr.

September 27, 2014

Digital Wisdom for a Digital Age: Spirituality and Technology in the 21st Century

Michael J. Paulus, Jr., *Seattle Pacific University*

Ryan Ingersoll, *Seattle Pacific University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/michael_paulus/44/

Digital Wisdom for a Digital Age: Spirituality and Technology in the 21st Century¹

Michael J. Paulus, Jr., and Ryan Ingersoll²

Introduction

In 2011, the Seattle Pacific University Library established a new service area for students called the Tech Desk. Initially conceived as a place where students could get help with and access to technologies needed for academic work, this program quickly became an incubator for ideas and innovations around meeting students' technological needs. In 2014, we surveyed our largely "millennial" undergraduate population to assess the program and explore ways of enhancing it. Results from this survey, which are consistent with other research that complicates the notion of "digital natives," revealed that our students desire and need help thinking about the role of technology in their spiritual lives. Before providing a summary of these results, we recall the long history of technology that has preceded our present moment in time. We conclude with a response to the needs highlighted in the survey by introducing the concept of and an approach to digital wisdom, which links attention, analysis, and action in the use of digital technologies. Digital wisdom is an important disposition for our students if they are to flourish in our high-tech city and world.

Technology through the Ages

We tend to think that information overload is a modern or current problem, but there has always been too much to know. The wisdom book of Ecclesiastes concludes with the admission, "Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh."³ New communication technologies, such as writing and scrolls in the time of Ecclesiastes, increase knowledge as well as access to it. These technologies also help us sort, select, store, synthesize, and share knowledge so that we may become wiser.⁴ But this depends on our wise use of them.

"Technology" can refer to artifacts—"hard" technologies, such as a hammer, book, or a computer. It can also refer to the application of specialized knowledge, such as the "soft" technologies of carpentry, publishing, or coding. Both forms of technology are tied to the history and future of the City—Cain's primordial Enoch, Solomon's historic Jerusalem, and our current cities—which are important places of technologically-aided human progress. As villages evolved into cities, settlers developed technological tools, institutions, and infrastructures such as the temple, palace, arsenal, court, bank, store, library, and school. After the fall of the great city Rome, Augustine wrote in the *City of God* that every earthly city "displays its own presence" but also signifies "the Heavenly City," the New Jerusalem.⁵ At the end of his Apocalypse, John saw the rulers of the world bringing their glories into the New Jerusalem—a reversal of what happened at the City of Babel.⁶

Moving from the lost paradisiacal Garden toward the eschatological City, there have been a number of technological revolutions: the invention of writing some 6,000 years ago; the invention of the bound codex some 2,000 years ago; the invention of mass produced texts and literacy beginning about 500 years ago; the invention of new electronic media and networked technologies, which began over 150 years ago with the telegraph; and, within the last 25 years, we have seen internet, social media, and mobile technologies become nearly ubiquitous.

Each technological change awakens ancient anxieties and ambitions. Consider, for example, the range of responses to the availability of mass print in the nineteenth century. One response was that of the author in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. Overwhelmed with the knowledge and publications of his time, the unnamed anti-hero misses the opportunity for love and a new life and withdraws from the industrial city and its bureaucratic information control system. Another response was Søren Kierkegaard's, who criticized the popular press for creating and fueling unfocused and uncommitted curiosity.⁷ Yet another, and rather different approach, was taken by the benevolent empire of the early nineteenth-century American church, which innovatively used new communication technologies to fill the country with Bibles, tracts, Sunday-school literature, and other books—all of which missionaries brought into the Pacific Northwest, along with churches, schools, libraries, and other literary institutions.⁸

We can easily apply Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's critiques and responses to our always updated now of internet time. But how, like the early American church, might we bring the wisdom of the past into our present condition so that we may use new technologies for the advancement of wisdom? And what unique opportunities do we have within the distinctive culture of Cascadia, with our dramatic and expansive landscapes that create a sense of deep protologies—what Douglas Coupland describes as the “unshakable sense that the undiscovered world is . . . larger than the world we think we know.”⁹ Or with our history of optimism and utopianism oriented toward innovative eschatologies?¹⁰ Or with our entrepreneurial spirit that engages us actively in the present? In his contribution to the book *Cascadia the Elusive Utopia*, Mark Wexler points to our region as model for the future, in which “The quest is to place the machine in the garden and see to it that each, in harmony, thrives.”¹¹

Knowledge in the Digital Age

In 2001, Marc Prensky popularized the term “digital natives” to describe those who, born after 1980, grew up with new digital technologies and were therefore more familiar with them.¹² It is true that so-called digital natives are extensive users of new technologies: 96% use the internet, 84% use social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), and 97% have cell phones.¹³ But familiarity does not necessarily translate into facility. Social media and youth researcher danah boyd, whose recent book is appropriately titled *It's Complicated*, writes:

Just because teens are comfortable using social media to hang out does not mean that they're fluent in or with technology. Many teens are not nearly as digitally adept as the

often-used assumption that they are “digital natives” would suggest ... many teens are more likely to be digital naives than digital natives.¹⁴

Prensky now deemphasizes the notion of “digital natives” and emphasizes instead the need for “digital wisdom”: the wise use of digital technologies to become wiser.¹⁵ To thrive in our high-tech place and time in history, so-called digital natives (not to mention digital immigrants and digital exiles) need to learn how to become people of digital wisdom.

When the SPU Library Tech Desk launched in the fall of 2011, the focus was on addressing immediate and known student needs: providing access to tools needed for academic work, training for using those tools, and collaborative work spaces in which to use them. Within its first three years, the Tech Desk recorded over 9,400 in-person consultations for software training and use, and loaned laptops, iPads, video recording equipment, and other tools over 12,500 times.¹⁶ Over time, we gained an anecdotally informed understanding of our students’ technological competencies based on their use of our tools, training, and spaces. In early 2014, we surveyed our undergraduate students to assess our program and understand better the role of technology in their academic, professional or vocational, and spiritual development. The survey focused on digital technologies currently provided and most questions were open-ended. We had a response rate of about 24% (812 responses), with good representation from undergraduate areas of study; 91% of the respondents were aged 18-22; 73.5% of the respondents were female.

In the areas of academic and professional development, our results reflected comparable studies: students need help accessing and using new technologies, as well as understanding how these are changing disciplines and professions.¹⁷ The most revealing part of our survey came from questions we asked about technology and spirituality. First, we asked, “Are there tech tools you consider important for your spiritual life?”¹⁸ An overwhelming majority—86.4%—responded “no,” with one student responding, “Umm ... I worship GOD not a computer.” Another wrote, “I don't really think about technology when I connect with God.” And another said, “This is absolutely ridiculous. Of course not.” Those who answered “yes” provided 113 examples of specific technologies that were important for them, including Bible study software, mobile devices, social media, and audio/video equipment.

Many students became more reflective as they answered subsequent questions, nuancing or contradicting their initial answers. In response to the next question in this section, which asked about technologies used to connect with God and others, respondents—including 12% of those who answered the first question negatively—provided 205 examples of technologies they use in their spiritual lives: 27% mentioned the use of social media, such as Facebook and Instagram; 25% mentioned digital texts, such as devotionals; 17% mentioned research resources, such as Blue Letter Bible; and 11% mentioned tools for listening to sermons, worship music, or other spiritual content.

Some students were rather reflective about and interested in the integration of technology in their spiritual lives. One said, “My camera I can use to take pictures of God's beautiful creation and share them with others to proclaim the glory of God.” Another wrote, “Technology can be used to access God's word and create a space and focus for worship.” Another explained, “Even the simplest tech tools can allow you to be more efficient and also produce the best possible product. When you think of your work as something that should be glorifying God, I think it can be beneficial to your spiritual life.” And another claimed, “I use the Xbox to communicate with non believers and bring a Christian perspective to Call of Duty.” Most students, however, were not certain how technology related to spirituality. One student wrote, “I'm not sure how my spiritual life can relate to this. I think it would create more distraction.” Eighteen students expressed interest in learning more about the relationship between technology and spirituality. The more we learn about youth and digital technologies, the more we see that wisdom is needed for every facet of their lives.

Wisdom for a Digital Age

The final words of wisdom in Ecclesiastes are about God's word: “Fear God and keep his commandments.”¹⁹ To keep the commandments, which are summarized in the Decalogue or “Ten Words,” is to focus attention on the love of God and the love of neighbor. Attention—the ability to select and focus on discrete information for action within an information-rich environment—has been described by Howard Rheingold and others as the most important twenty-first century discipline or literacy.²⁰ It is also, Rheingold points out, “a fundamental building block” for human relationships and collaboration.²¹ Operative at two different levels, attention includes an internally focused “narrative network,” which links past memories with future plans, as well as an externally focused “direct experience network,” which perceives more immediate information.²² The Ten Words encompass and integrate both types of attention, directing attention to the past, future, and present—to memories, expectations, and direct experiences of divine and human love.²³

In “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” Simone Weil describes how attention, as both direct perception and as a narrative framework, functions in study. She says that attention consists of “suspending thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object . . . waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it.” But it also means “holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of.” She illustrates the relationship between receptive thought and already formulated thoughts by describing “a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains.”²⁴ The suspension of one's self, to make room for the present reality of something or someone else, is the key to study as well as prayer. The love of God and the love of neighbor, she says, “have attention for their substance.”²⁵

It is hard to cultivate attention, both as a sustained internal narrative framework and as immediate external receptive focus, when we are jacked into an overfull present of present time in which there is a tendency, as Douglas Rushkoff observes, for “narrativity and goals [to be] surrendered to a skewed notion of the real and the immediate.”²⁶ Blaise Pascal, who reflected much on the seemingly infinite human capacity for distraction and what it reveals about human nature, noted: “I have often said that the sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.”²⁷ Pascal’s speculation was recently confirmed in a study in which participants demonstrated their preference for self-administered electric shocks to “being left alone with their thoughts.”²⁸ The conflict, as Pascal describes it, is between a drive to be occupied and a desire for rest—the attentive balance between work and rest that is prescribed at the heart of the Ten Words in the Sabbath commandment.

With so many distractions—especially digitally mediated distractions—all of us need help cultivating attention, which is the beginning of digital wisdom: attention to and reflection on one’s identity, intentions, and integration of digital information and technologies. This is followed by the acquisition and analysis of digital information and technologies, which includes search, selection, and synthesis. Then comes action, shaped by community values, the ethics and responsibilities of citizenship in digital spaces, and the call to become co-creators with God and others.

In the early twentieth century, corporations had vice presidents of electricity. Eventually, as this technology was integrated into operations and facilities, such positions were no longer needed. In the not-too-distant future, we will come into a postdigital world: the digital revolution will be over; digital technologies such as the internet and mobile computing will flow through our lives “like electricity”²⁹; and our current “experiential disjuncture,” the digital dualism we perceive between digital and non-digital materiality, will collapse.³⁰ To be wise in this coming age—to use all technologies wisely to become wiser—each of us will need to have engaged some fundamental questions:

1. What is my digital identity?
2. What is my digital vocation or mission?
3. What does healthy digital integration look like?
4. Who is my digital neighbor?
5. How can I use digital technologies as a medium of creation?

¹ Presented at the Christ & Cascadia Conference in Seattle, Wash., September 27, 2014.

-
- ² Michael J. Paulus, Jr., is University Librarian and Associate Professor and Ryan Ingersoll is Head of Library Technology at Seattle Pacific University.
- ³ Ecclesiastes 12.12b (ESV).
- ⁴ Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011), 3.
- ⁵ Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), Book XV.2.
- ⁶ See Revelation 21.24-26.
- ⁷ See Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Anonymity Versus Commitment: The Dangers of Education on the Internet," in *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition: An Anthology*, ed. Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek (Malden, Mass.: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 642.
- ⁸ See Michael J. Paulus, Jr., "Archibald Alexander and the Use of Books: Theological Education and Print Culture in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 31:4 (2011): 639-69.
- ⁹ Douglas Coupland, *Life after God* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 344.
- ¹⁰ See Douglas Todd, ed., *Cascadia the Elusive Utopia: Exploring the Spirit of the Pacific Northwest* (Vancouver, B.C.: Ronsdale Press, 2008), esp. 9-11, 18, 29; 46; 66, 79-83; 121-23.
- ¹¹ Mark Wexler, "Conjectures on Workplace Spirituality in Cascadia," in *Cascadia the Elusive Utopia*, 218.
- ¹² Marc Prensky, "From Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom," in *From Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom: Hopeful Essays for 21st Century Learning* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin, 2012), 202.
- ¹³ Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie, "Main Findings: Teens, Technology, and Human Potential in 2020," Pew Research Internet Project, February 29, 2012, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/02/29/main-findings-teens-technology-and-human-potential-in-2020/>.
- ¹⁴ danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014), 22.
- ¹⁵ Prensky, "From Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom," 202.
- ¹⁶ See SPU Library Annual Reports, available from http://digitalcommons.spu.edu/library_reports/.
- ¹⁷ See, e.g., Helen Beetham, "Students' Experiences and Expectations of the Digital Environment," Jisc Blog, June 23, 2014, <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/blog/students-experiences-and-expectations-of-the-digital-environment-23-jun-2014>.
- ¹⁸ The first part of the survey, which focused on academic work, narrowed the definition of technology by listing hardware and software provided by the library (e.g., MacBook Pros, iPads, Video Cameras, MS Office applications, Adobe Creative Suite, SPSS, etc.).
- ¹⁹ Ecclesiastes 12.13b (ESV).
- ²⁰ Howard Rheingold, *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012), 57.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 149.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 66-67.
- ²³ Simone Weil identified a similar structure in the Lord's Prayer, which appears in the middle of Jesus' commentary on the Law in his Sermon on the Mount: "in the first three petitions the attention is fixed solely on God. In the three last, we turn our attention back to ourselves in order to compel ourselves to make these petitions a real and not an imaginary act." *Waiting for God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 151.
- ²⁴ Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," *Simone Weil: Writings*, ed. Eric O. Springsted (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 96.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.
- ²⁶ Douglas Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 6.
- ²⁷ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1966), 67.
- ²⁸ Timothy D. Wilson et al., "Just Think: The Challenges of the Disengaged Mind," *Science* 345:6192 (2014): 75-77.
- ²⁹ Pew Research Center, March 2014, "Digital Life in 2025," 5, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/03/11/digital-life-in-2025/>.
- ³⁰ David M. Berry, "Post-Digital Humanities: Computation and Cultural Critique in the Arts and Humanities," *EDUCAUSE Review*, 49:3 (2014), <http://www.educause.edu/ero/article/post-digital-humanities-computation-and-cultural-critique-arts-and-humanities>.