

INTRODUCTION

Insights, Considerations, and Conversations on Technology

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The role of technology in contemporary society is expanding every day, and critical reflection on the impact of technology now pervades a growing number of scholarly and popular contexts. Not only is it a struggle to keep up with accelerating technological developments, we can be overwhelmed by a deluge of observations, opinions, and analyses of these developments. Indeed, thanks to the rise of new technologies like social media, there are many more ways that our attention is being drawn to the impact of technology. The question that sparked this special issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* is this: How is Anabaptist-Mennonite faith and practice grappling with these accelerating technological changes and the corresponding rise in the study of these changes? More concretely: What do the academic disciplines undergirding this journal, including theology, philosophy, and peace studies, have to contribute to this discourse, especially given the ascendancy of the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) as authoritative voices in both society and the academy?

The four contributors to this issue offer provocative answers that reflect their ongoing considerations of technology from particular disciplinary frameworks. David C. Cramer draws on his perspective as a pastor and theologian to develop an approach to “digital discernment” inspired by the practices of Amish communities. Andy Brubacher Kaethler weaves together insights from theological anthropology and ecclesiology to enable Christian communities not only to critique but to transform their relationship with technology. Religious studies scholar Maxwell Kennel introduces philosophical interpretations that collapse the distinction between technology and humanity in order to make connections to the problem of violence. Lisa Schirch opens a window onto the many ways that

the field of peacebuilding and Anabaptist-Mennonite approaches to ethics intersect with issues posed by technology.

Each contributor demonstrates interdisciplinary adeptness and engages with a wide range of sources. They share a similar posture toward technology that reflects assumptions that have become widespread in recent years. For example, they frame technology as a problem to be considered, not as the answer to a problem. Technological change is no longer the definitive indicator of progress but a cause for concern in both church and society. In my view, this explains why technology is no longer subordinated to other aspects of culture that humanists and social scientists have long considered more worthy of their attention, such as science, economics, and politics. Further, and even more crucially, the contributors are united in recognizing that technology is *not* morally neutral. Rather, technologies embody the values of their creators and come to shape the values of their users. We dramatically underestimate their power if we conceive of them as mere tools.

Two decades ago, proposing such a critical view of technology would have required an extended argument with anyone beyond a relatively small circle of philosophers and historians. However, in the years since Nicholas Carr first asked “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” on the cover of a major U.S. magazine, this view has become widely accepted, if not conventional wisdom.¹ The problematic and formative nature of technology means that none of the articles in this issue is content merely to explain or analyze; they seek to prompt changes in the way we engage with our technological reality. The point isn’t simply to get our thinking about technology right, but rather to inform our practices as citizens, churches, and communities.

It is also noteworthy that the four contributors must engage in interpretive work in order to effectively connect Anabaptist-Mennonite thought to the topic of technology. That is, they have to make explicit insights that are only implicit or at best suggestive. Whether in Old Order Amish communities or in the work of contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars, technology has so far not received extended treatment in published sources. However, this is not to say that there are no reference points for situating this special CGR issue. Indeed, the call for proposals that generated

¹ Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid? What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains,” *The Atlantic* 302/1 (July/August 2008), 56-63.

it emerged out of my personal preoccupation over several decades with the intersection of technology and Anabaptist/Mennonite faith and practice. I must note that contributors David Cramer and Andy Brubacher Kaethler are extending conversations on technology that have been nurtured at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary going back (at least) to my time as a student there in the late 1990s.² One prominent example was Arthur P. Boers's initiative to unite insights from Albert Borgmann's philosophy of technology with Christian practices by bringing together Borgmann and a number of Mennonite academics, pastors, activists, and writers.³ Perhaps it isn't surprising that Mennonite pastors and practical theologians have been leading the effort to reflect on technology and faith, given the concerns that families, congregations, and church institutions are struggling with.⁴

In a less direct way, two of the contributors to this issue, Maxwell Kennel and Lisa Schirch, are extending conversations on technology that have long been nurtured at Conrad Grebel University College. This is evident, for example, in articles by Conrad Brunk published in CGR more than thirty years ago that examined technology through the lenses of philosophy and peace and conflict studies.⁵ Indeed, it was encounters with professors like Brunk and A. James Reimer while I was studying engineering at the University of Waterloo that first prompted me to consider larger questions about technology.

Of course, there are additional settings in which space has been made for Anabaptist-Mennonite conversations about technology, including the annual Religion and Science Conference organized by Goshen College,⁶

² Under the supervision of Gayle Gerber Koontz, I completed a thesis entitled "Toward a Theology of Technology from a Mennonite Perspective" at AMBS in 2000.

³ Boers convened a "Focal Living Consultation" with Borgmann and these academics, pastors, activists, and writers at AMBS on March 4-7, 2008, that informed his subsequent book *Living into Focus: Choosing What Matters in an Age of Distractions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012).

⁴ See the essays on technology edited by Andy Brubacher Kaethler in *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 16/2 (Fall 2015).

⁵ Conrad G. Brunk, "Professionalism and Responsibility in the Technological Society," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 133-53, and "Ethical Values, the Technological Mind, and the Problem of International Peace and Security," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 9, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 293-307.

⁶ "Past Conferences and Guest Speakers," <https://www.goshen.edu/religionscience/archive/>,

courses offered by the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University,⁷ and even conferences and partnerships facilitated by Mennonite Central Committee.⁸ As well, such conversations can be sparked by sources beyond the Anabaptist-Mennonite world; for every recent book on technology from Mennonite publishers⁹ there are many more from other traditions.¹⁰

Yet it seems to me that the articles collected in this special CGR issue only underscore the urgency of creating more opportunities to dig deeper and extend the table further among Anabaptist-Mennonites. This issue is only a start. In addition to theologians, philosophers, pastors, and peacebuilders, what about social workers, medical professionals, and those who have lived experience with the disparities and injustice caused by technological change? What about Anabaptist-Mennonite perspectives from the global South? In addition, the perspectives of practitioners immersed in the technology sector would add crucial insights to the conversation. After all, Anabaptist-Mennonite communities include numerous designers, developers, engineers, scientists, researchers, technicians, managers, and investors who are playing crucial roles in the very technological changes we are grappling with.

accessed March 13, 2022. Proceedings from these conferences have been published on occasion. See, for example, Owen Gingerich, *Worrying About Evolution* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2013).

⁷ Courses taught by Lisa Schirch at the Summer Peacebuilding Institute have included “Digital Peacebuilding and PeaceTech: Understanding Social Media, and Conflict and Online Violent Extremism.”

⁸ Mark Siemens, ed., *Harvest in the Balance: Food, Justice and Biotechnology* (Akron, PA and Winnipeg, MB: Mennonite Central Committee, Food, Disaster, and Material Resources Department and International Peace Office, 2002); and Jacob Schiere, *Beyond Technology: MCC Occasional Paper No. 14* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1991).

⁹ See Ed Czerwinski, *Reconnect: Spiritual Restoration from Digital Distraction* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2020); and Douglas Estes, *Braving the Future: Christian Faith in a World of Limitless Tech* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2018).

¹⁰ See, for example, Andy and Amy Crouch, *My Techwise Life: Growing Up and Making Choices in a World of Devices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2020); Craig Gay, *Modern Technology and the Human Future* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018); Kate M. Ott, *Christian Ethics for a Digital Society* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); and Felicia Wu Song, *Restless Devices: Recovering Personhood, Presence, and Place in the Digital Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021).

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