Albert Borgmann informs readers that no matter how wonderfully technology has enhanced our ability to live full and unencumbered lives, for some reason, we do not. The text uncovers that reason. Borgmann does not encourage the rejection of technology, but he does urge restraint. He does not despair as a defeated technological determinist, but offers cogent reasons to embrace what people intuitively know to hold dear: celebrating the essentials of life, worshipping God, and sitting down and eating and fellowshipping with loved ones.

One value of Borgmann’s text is that it takes a long and arduous way to explain that while technology has made life more comfortable and convenient, it has also fostered disenchantment, isolationism, and superficiality. His writing style is arduous because his vocabulary (inimical, p.8; obespeakes, p.15; dessication, p.23, quotidianity, p.85; invidiousness, p.123) and thought flow require focused, meditative and repetitive reading. This is of value, however, in that the routes traveled produce astute, relevant, and convicting points about technology’s, essentially unexamined, broad influences.

While the text clearly targets more disciplined readers, Borgmann helps his readers to comprehend his insights by including excellent analogies and examples. Professors in ministry, philosophy, and sociology would find this an excellent resource text and should consider requiring its’ reading in graduate programs. Positive points and illustrations from the text could be absorbed into lecture material in undergraduate settings.

Borgmann claims that technology has so enhanced our opportunity to live unencumbered by worry or inconvenience that we have misplaced the ultimate value which technology can
provide, “technology can awaken in us a new capacity to hear the word of God” (p.82). He calls readers to responsible living, strongly encouraging them to examine life’s realities and then to articulate relevant conceptual structures providing priorities to live by (p.17). The underlying theme of the text appears to be that when people discover that technology is incapable of providing ultimate satisfaction with life, of addressing every hunger, and of removing every misery, people will again realize a need for relationship with God and each other. Only when Christians stop treating the grace of God as a commodity will they begin to realize that contact with the world must exceed activity of “effortless and inconsequential consumption” (p.86).

Structurally, the text breaks down into two parts. Part one consists of the first three chapters and dissects the circumstances surrounding the culture of technology and the invisible realities and pervasiveness of its nature. In chapter one Borgmann introduces the construct of the “device paradigm”, which consists of: commodities, the distinctive surface appearance of technological items; machinery, the concealed deep structure on which commodities rest; and, the patterns of division and connection between commodities and machinery (p.18). As is typical in the text as a whole, Borgmann finds a common example to illustrate his point; he explains the device paradigm, with its religious and moral ramifications, by considering the example of “cool whip”. Essentially, he asks, “Do people today prefer cool whip or cream”?

According to Borgmann, most people today prefer the more convenient, cheaper, yet materially ambiguous concoctions of humanity [cool whip] to the richness of the natural [cream]. In chapters two and three he clearly indicates and laments the pervasiveness of this reality. He also discusses the significant problem that arises, when the freshness, uniform perfection, and availability (commodity) valued in “cool whip”, is sought and expected in other persons as well. Though Borgmann endorses the value of technology, he encourages Christians to consider
principled reform, so that “we are able to speak eloquently on behalf of the “thing” and then practice that focus our life” (p.23). To accomplish this, he implies that one must ask, “Does material culture or moral theory direct my daily course of life”? He expresses concern that material culture directs most peoples’ lives, unawares.

Two key claims shine through in the first part of the text. Firstly, moral theory, as it is practiced in principled living, guides one into developing true ethics and appreciation of the beautiful depth of life. Secondly, technology induces people into virtual, throw away, reality. Playing an instrument allows one to engage true reality and cultivate understanding of its laws, where as listening to the stereo typically distracts people into isolation from the environment and other people. A thing (the instrument) requires practice and fosters developing of skills, while a device (stereo) invites nothing more than consumption (p.31). Borgmann calls for counter measures to derail the driving force of material culture. Such counter measures primarily consist of intentional, communal celebration (focal practice), where leisure disengages from production and consumption, and embraces relational engagement in community.

The second part of the text discusses the place of Christianity in the culture of technology. Chapter four masterfully deals with the topic of contingency, what is understood to be beyond explanation and true at the same time, and grace. While the accomplishments of technology have explained away the laws of nature and thus reduced the contingency of God, Borgmann deftly illustrates how technology will never be able to reduce the contingencies of conditions. He suggests that practicing philosophers and theologians must facilitate an awareness of such truth and, thus, a restoration of reverence for God and His grace.

Chapter five distinguishes between what Borgmann calls careful power and regardless power. Regardless power is inconspicuous and wielded whenever summoned, regardless of time
or place. Switches and buttons represent such power. Careful power describes recognizing the sovereignty of God, one’s own infallibility, and being careful in one’s experiences with nature. Treating others as objects represents regardless power; treating another with generosity represents careful power. This chapter highly illuminates the notion that careful power starts with Christ and results in realistic and relational engagement with life.

In chapter six Borgmann dismantles the current cultural concept of reality and freedom and offers his own interesting definitions. Cultural reality today consists of simulated experience, incessant consumption, and expected prosperity, while resting on an ill-defined concept of freedom. Freedom is not a constant state of disburdened, mobil opportunity, “it is the active celebration of human wholeness” (p.99). Accordingly, experiencing frailty, reality, allows one to reaffirm true freedom and dependence on the grace and mercy of God.

Borgmann contends that the presence of poverty demonstrates that we will never possess “unconditionally valid assurances regarding our basic condition” (p.107). As such, frailty provides Christians with the opportunity to manifest Christ in practice, not just in theory. Borgmann believes that the average Christian does not live a weekly life much different than that of an atheist; opportunities are missed due to Christian complacency in a culture which is inhospitable to grace.

The text closes with a challenge to Christians to show “courage” by crossing “the threshold from the TV den to the dining room or from the home to the realm of communal celebrations” (p.115). He suggests that playing an instrument, teaching a child to play tennis, and visiting a local museum are all places where disappointments are sure to occur, but worth the endeavor. He summarizes his ideas in the encouragement to return to the culture of the word and the culture of the table, to the Word of God and to the breaking of bread together in community.
The strength of this text lies in its competent insistence on awareness and self-disciplined response to the influences of culture today. Borgmann has correctly suggested that most Christians are not living alert and practically positive lives. If there is a weakness in the text, its in the complexity of the text, as has already been alluded to. Borgmann knows it himself as he refers to one of his explanations as “ambiguous and obscure” (p.90). Sometimes, however, when thinking runs deep, there are no simple ways to get there.

How ironic that I started to write this review on my laptop, while on the deck of a Retreat Lodge in the Adirondacks, overlooking a beautiful lake, while my family relaxed near by. There I sat, 100s of miles from where I “work”, able to work, anonymous to the world (p.33), representing quite the concrete example of, “where in our leisure time we surrender to the diversions of commodities” (p.123). Realizing the “profanity” (p.96) of this experience, and actually trying to practice what Borgmann has encouraged, I shut down the lap-top and took a hike with my family [experienced and illustrated Borgmann’s call for “focal practice” (p.22) as a way to “restrain” (p.94) technology from engulfing me within its’ “disposable reality” (p.33)]. The woods were beautiful, as were the smiles on my children’s faces. The reading of this text will hopefully continue to make a difference in my life and in the lives of those within my circles of influence.

A text which reads heavy academically, and is older, yet speaks similarly and convincingly of the erosion of community is The Community in America (1987) by Roland Warren. For a non-Christian perspective, with the same concerns voiced by Borgmann, one should consider reading Soul of a Citizen (1999), by Paul Loeb.

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