

**Opening Remarks for The Digital Society Conference
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Seattle Pacific University**

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Good afternoon! I want to welcome you all to our conference, The Digital Society: Rethinking the Christian Commentary on Technology for the 21st Century. For those of you I haven't met yet, my name is David Stearns, and I'm a historian of technology and culture. I used to be a software developer, but now I teach part-time here at SPU. I am also one of those who helped organize this event.

Let me take a moment to introduce the other organizers: Al Erisman, Executive in Residence at the School of Business and Economics; John Terrill, director of the Center for Integrity in Business; and Tom Lane, Operations Manager at the Center, without whom, this conference would never have come together. Tom is your go-to man for any logistical questions you might have during the conference, and even if you don't have any questions, you should get to know him—you'll be glad you did.

As we begin, I want to take a few moments to explain why Al and I thought this conference was necessary, how we structured it, and what we hope to achieve over the next day and a half.

Motivations

In many ways, this conference builds upon another conference that Al and I attended about a year and a half ago down at Laity Lodge in Texas. That conference featured Albert Borgmann, the well-known Christian philosopher of technology, as well as those who have found his work to be an inspiration for their own. A few of you were also at that conference with us, and I'm sure we would all attest to the beautiful setting, the stimulating conversation, and of course, the really amazing food!

The content of that conference was also quite engaging, but both Al and I left feeling that a few important things needed to be added to the conversation, things that we felt would add more nuance and balance to the discussion. This first of these was a true integration of the perspectives of technological practitioners: those who design, develop,

and direct technological projects, as well as those who utilize sophisticated tools in their work. Although there was a rather large panel of technological practitioners at one point during the Laity conference, their comments seemed to be wholly separate from the rest of the conversation. There was no real attempt to *integrate* their perspectives into those of the academics and pastors. The assumption, it seemed, was that theory should inform practice, but not the other way around.

This was unfortunate, because I think academics have just as much to learn from practitioners as practitioners have to learn from academics. Our technological practice most certainly needs to be shaped by well-thought-out theory, especially theory that pushes us to reflect upon the unintended consequences of our work, but that theory also needs to be informed by the experiences of those who have spent years working in technical industries, especially when those experiences don't seem to line up very well with the espoused theory. Al, myself, and many of you have spent time both in industry and in the world of academics, and we all know the value of having our theory and practice inform one another.

In many ways, I wasn't entirely surprised by this lack of integration, as the perspectives of practitioners also seem to be largely absent from the broader Christian commentary on technology. This commentary, or at least the segment of it that I've read, tends to be much more theoretical than empirical, resulting in claims that I think are far too reductionist, universal, and overstated. Much of this commentary also seems to be steeped in a kind of neo-Romanticism that blames all our social ills on engineers and the systems they design, leaving one questioning whether it's possible to be both a sincere Christian *and* an engineer. I'm not entirely sure why this is the case, but I do think that we have the opportunity here to correct this imbalance. The Christian commentary on technology so far has been a fairly one-way conversation, and I think it's time for practitioners to join in.

The second thing I felt needed to be added was the more recent empirical scholarship on technology and society, especially the insights from the integrative field known as Science and Technology Studies, or STS (sometimes unpacked as "Science, Technology & Society"). This scholarship, which started in earnest in the 1980s, challenges two commonly held assumptions: first, that technologies "impact" society in a

sort of one-way, deterministic relationship; and second, that technology advances independently of society according to its own internal, relentless, and unstoppable logic. This sort of view, which is commonly referred to as “technological determinism,” was fairly prevalent among early critics of technology, and is still quite common today among journalists, and dare I say it, popular Christian writers as well.

The trouble with technological determinism is that it just doesn’t square with what we see in detailed historical case studies. New technologies most certainly shape the societies that adopt them, but instead of being mere *passive* recipients of new technologies, early adopters often play very *active* roles in shaping our understanding of what a new device or system actually *is*, as well as what it is *good for*. Most innovations seem to have a certain degree of “interpretive flexibility.” The meanings we now associate with things like bicycles, telephones, synthesizers, or payment cards (to give just a few examples) were actually worked out in a *dynamic interplay* between designers, manufacturers, marketers, *and* consumers. In some cases, early adopters have also helped to *physically* and *functionally* reshape these new devices so that they better fit with their social values. This process is referred to as “technological domestication” and it becomes very easy to see in cases such as the Kosher mobile phone, which our first keynote speaker, Heidi Campbell, has written about.

But the deeper problem with technological determinism is that it leaves us with a rather bleak choice regarding new devices that we find problematic: adopt it and suffer the inevitable consequences; or entirely reject it. When we use this sort of logic, we think about technology in the same way an addict thinks about his drugs, and it leaves us feeling just as powerless, and just as hopeless.

But if we acknowledge the degree to which both practitioners and consumers play an active role in technological adoption, a third possibility comes to light: we can reshape and maybe even “redeem” technologies that we feel are currently undermining our social values. We can domesticate our devices. We can move *beyond* mere critique into creative engagement and participatory redemption.

By integrating the perspectives of technological practitioners, as well as the more recent scholarship from STS, I think we can transform the Christian commentary on

technology into something that is more balanced, nuanced, and ultimately more helpful to not only our fellow Christians, but also the wider secular society.

Conference Structure

So now that you have some idea of why we thought this conference is necessary, let me explain how we've structured the conference so that we have a chance to integrate these other perspectives.

In order to push the conversation forward, we need to first review where we've come from and what we've inherited from the Christian commentary on technology thus far. Our first panel discussion will do just that by reviewing the work of a few thinkers who have significantly influenced the way Christians think and talk about technology: Jacques Ellul, Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, and Albert Borgmann. In case you haven't had the joy of reading the thousands of pages produced by these thinkers, our esteemed panelists will briefly summarize their main points, and then identify the aspects of their work that should be rethought in light of our current context.

After that we'll hear from our first keynote speaker, Heidi Campbell, Associate Professor of Communications at Texas A&M. Heidi has been researching the intersection of media, religion, and culture for quite a while now, and her latest book, *When Religion Meets New Media*, applies concepts from Science and Technology Studies to the adoption of new media by various faith groups. Heidi will inject some much needed empirical observations into the discussion, and help us see how STS concepts can illuminate the ways in which some faith groups are already domesticating things like mobile phones and social media to better fit with their social values.

After Heidi, we'll break for a dinner, provided by our hosts, the Center for Integrity in Business! Dinner will be served out in the atrium, and there will be plenty of time and opportunity to introduce yourself to some people, and discuss what you've heard so far.

At 7:00pm, we'll reconvene for our second keynote speaker, John Dyer, who is currently the Director of Web Development for Dallas Theological Seminary. John is sort of a hybrid, in that he has spent significant time writing both some very cool software *and* some insightful reflections on media ecology and faith. John will help us transition

from the more academic discussions we'll have before dinner to the more practitioner-oriented content that will fill the rest of the conference. Speaking from both his practice and his theory, he will discuss how we might participate in the creative redemption of technology.

Tomorrow, we will lead off with a really fun panel discussion led by a series of practitioners who have spent time developing community and inter-personal relationships in online spaces. Most of the Christian commentary about online spaces has been highly critical so far, and perhaps rightly so, but it also tends to be highly theoretical and written by people who I suspect haven't really spent much time there. We rarely hear from the people who are actively developing communities in online spaces to find out what is really working and what is not, how people are withering, but also how they are flourishing. So we'll hear from one of the co-founders of the First Presbyterian Church of Second Life, a faith community that meets regularly in that online virtual reality environment. We'll hear from a pair of youth pastors who have spent countless hours interacting with young Christians in online spaces. And we'll hear from a pioneer in online education to find out how personal transformation does and does not occur in an e-learning environment.

After that we'll hear from our third and final keynote speaker, Scott Griffin, who served as CIO for The Boeing Company for many years. Scott will transition us into the last part of the conference where we will grapple with how our faith and our technical work should inform one another. Scott has thought quite a bit about this, and he will share with us his insights.

We'll then move to our final panel discussion, which will wrestle with the question What does it mean to be a *Christian* engineer? That is, how do we truly integrate our faith and our technical work? Intuitively we know that our faith should matter to our work, but what does that look like in the context of a *technical* practice? How would an integrated Christian engineer differ from a secular one? And how can Christian engineers help academics think about technology and culture in more nuanced ways?

By that point, you will have heard a number of people talking about a wide array of fascinating things, and it will then be time for you to go to work (so to speak). We'll ask you to gather in small groups to discuss what you've heard so far, raise any questions

that you might have, and develop a few common understandings that you can share in the concluding discussion. During that discussion, we hope to formulate a few key statements about what a truly integrated Christian perspective on technology should look like, and how we think the Christian commentary on technology should be reformulated.

Conclusion

I'm looking forward to what we come up with together over the next day and a half. I want to stress that I definitely don't think that I have all the answers—that is why I decided to have a conference and invite all of you to help us think it through! Each of us has an important perspective to contribute, and I hope that we all strive to *hear and understand* one another so that we can help each other think more clearly about the relationship between our faith, and the things we create and use.

Lastly, I also want to acknowledge that what we do here will only be the start of what I hope will be an ongoing conversation that spreads back into our local congregations. We are living in a time of great technological change that is no doubt incredibly exciting to some and very frightening to others. As we grapple with the rapid shifts happening around us, I think we need to avoid both the extreme technophile *and* the extreme technophobe reactions. Most people want to chart a course somewhere in between, a course that bends these new technologies more towards us than we bend towards them. A course that recognizes that we cannot simply reject these new technologies and return to what seems like a simpler time. A course that works to actively domesticate these devices and bring them in line with our desired social values. I think we can begin to chart this course here, and I hope that each one of you will then take this back to your own local congregations and apply it.