4

Communicational Dimension of Technology

In case you have not examined your beliefs about social media and technology as a Muslim yet, it may be time to reflect on the spiritual implications of using technology with regard to the development of our individual faith.

Although some of us may consider that given the technologies which make our lives much easier, we may be living in incredible times, others may feel not so lucky as there is not so much time to process one progress after another. Perhaps, an approach of numbness or resistance can be taken or we can choose not to be as thoughtful as we should be.

Technology can be considered as a culture-making activity which involves an exercise of freedom and responsibility by human beings. In addition to their intended use, digital artifacts can also shape our world in economic, social, and cultural ways. As the famous aphorism "The medium is the message" of the media scholar Marshall McLuhan states, new ways of living and communicating are delivered by means of technology in addition to the content. To give a more specific example, the automobile is more than a "medium" for getting from point A to point B; it also has a "message." The automobile brings with it personal autonomy and allows us to separate where we live, work or shop, or even worship. Most mosques are surrounded by a large parking space. Many individuals in the Jummah prayer do no longer go to the same mosque in the same local neighborhood where their office or house is located as their cars enable them to drive to other mosques of their own preference as well. No longer restricted by geography, individuals can choose to worship in settings that suit their own individual preferences. As it turns out, our tools not only shape us, but they also shape our faith and places of worship.

Another technology that shaped worship is the microphone as along with sound boards and amplifiers it is at the core of the prayers in mega mosques. Another technology that shapes our worship is the data projector used in some mosques to display Qur'anic scriptures and hadiths. The projector acts not

only a means of displaying content, but it may lead to other changes as well in the sense of displaying the Qur'anic verses on screens so that worshippers may be less inclined to look at the physical Qur'an.

It is no longer a surprise that the cyberspace is also providing new possibilities for communities who worship. To give a specific example, "Second Life," being one of the most popular virtual worlds, enables individuals to immerse themselves in computer-simulated environments. In his book *God and Gadgets* Brad Kallenberg asserts that all of the three conditions, namely, time, place, and bodies are required in order for human communication to occur. These refer to the things that technology can make us think as if we can ignore them. Such way of thinking can result in a new form of Gnosticism – if taken to extreme – which reduces the importance of physical bodies in physical community.

With regard to these new tools and technologies surrounding our mosques we should consider fundamental questions about the purpose of worship and the mosque. Although there may be no harm in making use of the best cultural and technological gifts available in our mosques, we may also be wise in considering the following warning of McLuhan: "the 'content' of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind." So we should better watch against any distractions and ignoring the messages embedded in various technologies.

Marva Dawn suggests that "Worship centers on recognizing that 'great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised' and on responding to that worthiness by gathering with others to praise God as is His due." The media and technology of worship may change, but the message and purpose should remain the same.

Needless to say, worship covers all aspects of our daily life, including our digital activities. As technology is a means for the glory of mankind, we should be mindful to shape them in ways that glorify our Creator.

Augmented reality seems to be now breaking into the world of consumer gadgetry even though, once, it was originally developed for military applications.

On the other hand, we should take into account that as human beings what we yearn for is relationships rather than robots. Rather than looking for solutions via means of programs or computers, we should be seeking prayers. As the Islamic worldview explains the origin of this desire very well, we are created as servants of God on earth.

When it comes to human relationships, we may be wise not looking for efficiency in the first place. Approaching individuals based on a criterion whether they would be worth one's time would be inhumane. In fact, such an

assumption well reflected in Neil Postman's famous concept of "technopoly," which refers to the notion that technology can solve every human problem and is hence the king. According to Balaban's explanation, what we need is more information. Yet, what most people are seeking are deeper relationships, rather than more information.

A few years ago Microsoft ran a commercial for the Windows Phone 7. It portrayed a variety of people immersed in their smartphones while oblivious to their surroundings. The series of vignettes includes a distracted father sitting on a see-saw leaving his daughter stranded high on the other end, a hapless man absorbed in his smartphone while his legs dangle in shark-infested water, and a bride walking down the aisle while engrossed in her phone. The commercial is not only amusing, it rings true – many of us are frequently distracted by our glowing rectangles. Ironically the commercial was promoting a new smartphone (albeit one that promised to "get you in and out and back to life" quicker). It's understandable that our digital devices are compelling – they instantly connect us to our friends and family, help us navigate roads and cities, and also provide news and entertainment. Digital technology has brought blessings in education and medicine, and has helped spread the gospel message to the ends of the earth. But many decades ago, prophetic voices like Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman warned us that while we may shape our devices, our devices also shape us. According to Nicholas Carr, who is the writer of the famous article "Is Google Making Us Stupid?," the Internet keeps diminishing our ability to concentrate and contemplate. Carr claims that our minds are being re-wired to take in information in a swiftly moving stream of particles as the Web distributes it. He makes the analogy of converting from being a scuba diver in the sea of words to a Jet Ski driver zipping along the surface.

More recent research in neural science has demonstrated that our brains remain malleable and change in response to the things we do. Our technological activities gradually shape and sculpt our brains in particular ways. According to the neuroscientist and author of the book "iBrain" Gary Small, our high-technology revolution put us into a continuous stream of partial attention spans in which we can no longer contemplate on thoughtful decisions." A thousand years ago, St. Augustine already had an inkling of this when he observed that those habits that are not resisted may soon turn into necessities.

It turns out that the alluring draw of many of our apps may not simply be an unintentional side-effect of pleasing esthetic design. In his recent book The Tech-Wise Family (Baker, 2017), Andy Crouch observes that the "makers of

technological devices have become absolute masters at the nudge." These "nudges" come in the form of alerts and notifications which reward us each time we are distracted.

Canadian philosopher James K. A. Smith suggests in his book "You Are What You Love" that our habits and rituals are like liturgies that point our heart in a particular direction. Our digital devices foster habits that have significant shaping implications. Smith suggests that we need to look beyond what we are looking at on our smartphones and consider the rituals underpinned by an egocentric vision which makes the individual the center of the universe. The Qur'an is full of verses that warn us to guard your heart, for everything we do flows from it. The heart is of strategic importance – once it is captured everything else follows along. If habits shape the heart, Muslims ought to devote significant attention to their habits and rituals. Crouch's book "The TechWise Family" provides some practical guidance for "putting technology in its proper place" by outlining "Ten Tech-Wise Commitments" for a healthier family life with technology.

These commitments are meant to nudge us in a better direction and include advice such as remembering the "rhythm of work and rest," and to "show up in person for the big events of life."

Crouch does not merely prescribe countermeasures, but in several sections of candid honesty he shares how his own family has struggled with keeping technology in its proper place.

The Canadian author Arthur Boers, in his book Living Into Focus: Choosing What Matters in an Age of Distraction (Brazos, 2012), builds on the writings of the philosopher Albert Borgmann by suggesting what we need to cultivate are "focal practices." These practices include things like family meals, cooking, gardening, and hiking. He suggests focal practices are things that take time and effort, connect us widely and deeply, and remind us about things that matter. In addition to such focal practices, Islamic traditions offer a rich set of historical practices we can retrieve. Perhaps the best antidote to the challenges of the modern digital age lie in rediscovering the practices found in ancient spiritual disciplines. These include things like reading the Qur'an and the hadiths, prayer, fasting, and serving others. We need to resolve to periodically stem the stream of nudges from our digital devices to re-center ourselves around Islam. Establishing daily and weekly rhythms where digital devices are intentionally and regularly set aside will serve to keep technology in its proper place. It will also have the benefit of helping us avoid the silly situations portrayed in the Microsoft phone commercial. But more importantly, if habits shape the heart, then these habits will serve to point our hearts back to God.

Given proliferation of the technology into our lives, will the new generation be able to accept the idea of moral standards based on the Truth as conveyed in Qur'an? Will technology dominate the lives of the new generation to the extent that it will control their time? Let's further explore some of these concerns how we might respond.

1) *Defining beauty, truth, and goodness*: Due to the predominance of the new digital media, we are exposed to an unregulated and unexamined landscape of ethical concepts which makes the determination of truth more difficult. Ascertaining what is good, beautiful, or true has never been so difficult given the possibility for endless edits on Photoshop, circulated rumors about one's personal life, and any type of self-exhibition on social media. As the new generation increasingly struggles with the idea of absolute truth, how do we know what is true and how is this related to technology?

2) *Fragmented reality*: Despite so many individual experiences in the online world, there is so little coherence which makes it more difficult to bring all pieces together to make sense of reality. Given the high volume of unassimilated and disorganized information, the need to help individuals with foundational frameworks is more important than ever not to mention the increasing level of religious illiteracy regardless of their faith. Helping individuals see where they fit into the big picture of God's story through history is so crucial. Coherent learning experiences are critical gifts.

3) *Approaching technology as a means to paradise or an object of desire*: What does "moderation in all things" mean given the daily average use of social media? Can adults support the new generation in examining their own usage? Among some of the effective strategies to regain a meaningful perspective on this are technology "fasts" and "no-tech Sundays."

4) *Sages or servants*? In order for the new generation to make an impact, they must effectively use the tools of our culture while grasping their limitations and lures. If the search for a grand narrative is not being asked, cultural ideas cannot be affected in wise and conscientious ways.

5) *Balancing persistence, speed, motivation*: While technology is often times used to complete many things at once, our attention span has been changed given these new means of rapid communication and production. It is no longer surprising to be undisciplined in a world of distraction. On the other hand, the potential of technology for more engagement, creativity, and prompt

collaboration in new ways which could never have been imagined before should also be not underestimated. As technology, if used correctly, can increase motivation, and thereby extend learning, it provides a meaningful context for personal development.

6) *Communication fluency*: Apart from technology literacy, it seems critical that for both living out their faith and achieving success in this world, youth need to know how to read social clues, how to empathize, and demonstrate respect by seeing others as God's creatures on Earth. Effective use of social media can be an important means to help develop the kinds of appropriate relationships skills that the new generation needs to learn.

The table below provides a summary of the concerns and individual needs discussed so far along with some practical approaches to better nurture the new generation in an age of technology and social media.

Concern/need	Use Approaches
(1) *Defining beauty, goodness, and truth*	Learn to ask critical questions about the habits of mind and heart in order to develop personal reflection on faith.
(2) *Fragmented reality*	Make individuals understand the coherence of creation by means of project-based learning in interdisciplinary fields.
(3) *Approaching digital gadgets as a means to paradise or an object of desire*	Develop useful habits such as realizing mental idols, and following spiritual paths.
(4) *Sages or servants?*	Convey crucial fundamentals of faith by means of inquiry-learning approaches.
(5) *Balancing persistence, speed, motivation*	Establish flow by keeping individuals engaged and motivated. Increase user choice and context, and provide opportunities for sharing work.
(6) *Communication and relationship fluency*	Provide more opportunities for collaboration and valuing of others in community.

These issues can all be resolved within the light of the Qur'an in the best way. Once we identified critical knowledge and skills necessary for competency and creativity by using the tools of this age, what we need to do is to enhance coherence through learning experiences. Technology and social media have great potential to serve humanity in terms of developing the kind of world-transforming individuals that humanity keeps seeking.