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Meet the New American Family, Digitally Deluged

Christians are not called to be modern-day Luddites, smashing digital devices with sledgehammers. But we are called to be faithful stewards of digital opportunities, even as we are also called to be faithful in all our relationships. That second stewardship is surely of greater importance than the first.

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The Campbell family of California just might be the prototypical American family of the future. Kord Campbell and his wife, Brenda, recently moved to the San Francisco area from Oklahoma, along with their two children, Lily, age 8, and Connor, age 16. They also came with plenty of digital technology — and they have acquired more.



The family is profiled by Matt Richtel in an article in the June 7, 2010 edition of The New York Times. As Richtel explains, the Campbells might not be just any other family in the neighborhood with respect to their digital habits. Then again, they might be, after all. At the very least, they probably point to a new family reality that will become all the more common.

Kord Campbell is starting a software venture. And yet, his life is so filled with e-mails, text messages, chats, Web pages, and video games that he missed a crucial e-mail from a company wanting to buy his business — for 12 days. In Richtel's word, Campbell is struggling with a "deluge of data." More alarming than that, his family is drowning in the deluge as well.

As Richtel reports: "Even after he unplugs, he craves the stimulation he gets from his electronic gadgets. He forgets things like dinner plans, and he has trouble focusing on his family."

"This is your brain on computers," Richtel asserts.

Scientists are beginning to document the effects of digital exposure on the brain. They are finding that everything from phone calls (remember those?) to e-mail and text messages exacts a toll on the brain's ability to concentrate and focus. Furthermore, they have identified a physiological reward for digital stimulation — a "dopamine squirt." That little squirt of dopamine in the brain serves as a physiological pay-off for digital stimulation, and it can be habit-forming.

It is for Kord Campbell. This husband and father admits to being often unable to focus on his wife and children and their family life. He goes to sleep with a laptop or similar device on his chest. When he awakens, he goes directly online, where he remains throughout the day. During family time, he often retreats into his digital world. He has left family outings to play video games and check his digital gadgets. Brenda laments, "It seems like he can no longer be fully in the moment." When he tries to unplug, he becomes "crotchety until he gets his fix."

And yet, rather than attempt a move out of such digital dependence, Mr. Campbell seems to be drawing his family members into the digital net. Brenda checks e-mail about 25 times a day, sends and receives text messages, and is getting more involved on Facebook. Connor, age 16, is becoming so involved in the digital world that his grades are slipping. Lily, age 8, has only one hour of unstructured time each day, and she often devotes that hour to digital devices. Connor apparently has a computer with Internet access in his bedroom, along with his iPhone. When he studies, an inner voice

seems to call out to him to move instead to a digital distraction.

The Campbells may be atypical in the extent of their digital entanglements, but new research indicates that they are probably not as atypical as we would hope. Richtel reports that Americans in 2008 consumed three times more daily information than in 1960. Those who use computers at work change windows or screens an average of 37 times an hour.

The change in human experience is so vast that Adam Gazzaley of the University of California, San Francisco, names it one of the most significant shifts ever experienced in the history of humanity — and one with inevitable consequences.

What about multitasking? Many people claim that exposure to digital technologies prompts the development of a new mental skill, managing multiple mental tasks. As it turns out, multitasking seems to be more of an illusion than a reality. Richtel reports that brain researcher Eyal Ophir of Stanford University has found that multitasking actually takes quite a toll on the brain's ability to concentrate on anything. Furthermore, research also suggests that multitaskers have a very difficult time turning that mode of thinking off — a fact that goes a long way toward explaining why some people cannot handle real-life face-to-face conversations.

In an accompanying article in *The New York Times*, Tara Parker Pope asked a chilling but revealing question: “Has the high-speed Internet made you impatient with slow-speed children?” Does that question not arrest you on the spot?

The research indicates that people who are highly invested in digital involvements are less empathetic, less attentive, less patient, and less able to remember something as basic as a conversation.

Just imagine what all this means. While the average American is likely to express some measure of concern in light of this research, and while most families no doubt seek a life different than that described of the Campbells, Christians have to look at this picture with a very different and far deeper set of concerns.

Is that what we were created to be? Is this the purpose for which God created humanity? The Creator made us in his image, and thus to be relational beings. But this relationality is intended to be expressed first and foremost in relationships with human beings, and certainly not with machines. A biblical understanding will also press us to identify the relationships of our greatest accountability — the relationships of marriage, family, kinship, and congregation — as well as the relationships of greatest Gospel opportunity. When these relationships suffer due to digital distractions, we bear full moral responsibility.

The answer is not to throw away all the digital gadgets. The information revolution is here to stay, and it comes with great gifts as well as tremendous temptations. Christians are not called to be modern-day Luddites, smashing digital devices with sledgehammers. But we are called to be faithful stewards of digital opportunities, even as we are also called to be faithful in all our relationships. That second stewardship is surely of greater importance than the first.

This stewardship will require clear boundaries, honest self-knowledge, and authentic accountability. Otherwise, you may well end up spending more time with your digital devices than with the people you love. Count on this . . . they will notice.

I will be speaking today at the Ligonier Ministries 2010 pre-conference: “[Bits, Bytes, Blogs & Bibles: Christian Communication in a Hypersocialized World](#).” You can watch the event by Webcast [here](#). My address, “The Hypersocialized Generation,” begins at 10:25 EDT.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Matt Richtel, “[Hooked on Gadgets and Paying a Mental Price](#),” *The New York Times*, Monday, June 7, 2010.

Tara Parker Pope, “[An Ugly Toll of Technology: Impatience and Forgetfulness](#),” *The New York Times*, Monday, June 7, 2010.

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