Prime time: Albert Borgmann on taming technology

by David J. Wood in the August 23, 2003 issue

For Albert Borgmann, philosophy is a way of taking up the questions that reside at the center of everyday life—questions that are urgent but often inarticulate. The philosophy of technology, which has been the principal focus of his work since the mid-1970s, is about bringing to light and calling into question the technological shape and character of everyday life.

Borgmann is Regents Professor of Philosophy at the University of Montana in Missoula, where he has taught since 1970. He was born and raised in Freiburg, Germany, in a Catholic household. At a relatively early age he was drawn to philosophy through his encounter with the lectures and writing of Martin Heidegger. Borgmann's most recent book is Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology.

"Reason and reflection cannot presume to govern faith," Borgmann has stated, "but they can precede it and clear a space for it. Making room for Christianity is in fact the most promising response to technology." I talked with him about technology and how it can be restrained and redeemed.

When people hear the word *technology* they usually think of devices like computers, cars, televisions and phones. What does the term mean to you as a philosopher who thinks about technology?

Computers, televisions and cars are all part of technology. But technological items and procedures coalesce into a culture, a way of life, and that's what I'm interested in as a philosopher.

How does technology shape a way of life?

A crucial feature of a technological device is that it makes something available to us in a comfortable way. You don't have to work for it. It's there at our beck and call.

In the case of television, information and entertainment become easily available. Television to some extent takes the place of stories, pictures, ballads, gossip—other ways of informing ourselves about the world.

That transformation is much more profound than we realize. If two or three hours of television a day come into our lives, then something else has to go out. And what has gone out? Telling stories, reading, going to the theater, socializing with friends, just taking a walk to see what's up in the neighborhood.

So technology is not just a tool.

No. It's an inducement, and it's so strong that for the most part people find themselves unable to refuse it. To proclaim it to be a neutral tool flies in the face of how people behave.

Why do 90 percent of all families or households watch television after dinner? Is it because they decided that that's the best way to spend their time? No, something else must be going on. And what's going on is that the culture around us—including work that is draining, food that's easily available, and television shows made as attractive as some of the best minds in our country can make them—encourages us to plop down in front of the TV and spend two hours there.

Is this way of analyzing technology inevitably biased against technology?

No. In some cases devices make things available that we definitely would not want to miss. For instance, medical technology has given us freedom from many diseases, and gas and fuel technology gives us the warmth that furnaces make available. These are wonderful things.

Philosophers of technology tend not to celebrate such technological achievements because they get celebrated all the time. Philosophers point out the liabilities—what happens when technology moves beyond lifting genuine burdens and starts freeing us from burdens that we should not want to be rid of.

What burdens should we not want to get rid of?

Consider, for instance, the burden of preparing a meal and getting everyone to show up at the table and sit down. Or the burden of reading poetry to one another or going for a walk after dinner. Or the burden of letter-writing—gathering our thoughts, setting them down in a way that will be remembered and cherished and

perhaps passed on to our grandchildren. These are the activities that have been obliterated by the readily available entertainment offered by TV.

The burdensome part of these activities is actually just the task of getting across a threshold of effort. As soon as you have crossed the threshold, the burden disappears.

As one student of your work put it, you consider technology to be not the principal problem of late modern life, but rather its principal condition.

Yes. The problem is that we are not taking responsibility for the condition. It's a self-imposed regimen that we live under, and so at the very least the issue has to be put on the agenda. It gets raised here and there by journalists and other writers. But this growing concern is never raised in a concerted and sustained way.

In church life we talk often of the effects of technological culture. For instance, we are concerned about the influences that come through television and the Internet. But we do not seem to have a way of talking about the fabric of life that technology stitches us into.

That is part of the general reluctance to take the measure of contemporary culture. For a large part of the technological era, roughly from the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th, technology was very beneficial. It remedied the miseries of hunger, confinement and illness. And then it imperceptibly moved to colonize the center of life. And I think one reason for the lack of response must be this imperceptible movement. People didn't know when to say stop, to say: this far but no further.

Another reason is that the whole movement of technology is so deeply rooted in the economy. We think that the economy can't exist in the way it does unless there is more production and consumption.

A third reason for embracing technology might be the understandable desire to embrace what's distinctive about our culture. It's difficult to accept the notion that the things that are most characteristic of our lives should not be most central.

One more factor is very powerful in shielding technology from examination: liberal democratic individualism—the notion that the individual is to be the judge of what is the good life for him or her. In the abstract it sounds like a wonderful principle, and

there’s a lot of important reality to it. But it makes it very difficult to generate a meaningful examination of our culture, which inevitably is a common and collective enterprise.

The reality of devices such as television and the computer ought to be a common part of our conversation within our communities of faith.

Right, and the way to talk about them is to help people put reasonable bounds on their use of these devices. But my focus is less on setting limits than it is on creating the positive conditions in which technology becomes less compelling and different kinds of engagements thrive and flourish. How we situate technological devices in our homes is morally significant. Placing the television in an inconvenient location in one’s home removes it from a position of constant availability and makes room for other engagements to flourish. With this kind of physical rearrangement must come a reengagement with what I call focal things and practices.

What would be a good illustration of a focal thing or a focal practice?

A focal thing is something that has a commanding presence, engages your body and mind, and engages you with others. Focal things and the kinds of engagements they foster have the power to center your life, and to arrange all other things around this center in an orderly way because you know what’s important and what’s not. A focal practice results from committed engagement with the focal thing.

For example, a guitar is a focal thing—it commands from me a certain kind of engagement of my body and mind. As I learn to play it (a focal practice), it engages me with the larger tradition of music and the community of musicians. The meal is a focal thing and its preparation is a focal practice. The wilderness is a focal thing and hiking a focal practice. The stream, or the trout, is a focal thing—fly fishing the focal practice. In the life of the Christian community, the bread and the cup are focal things and the Eucharist the focal practice. Focal things and our engagement with them orient us and center us in time and space in ways that technological devices do not. A focal thing is not at the mercy of how you feel at the moment, whether the time is convenient or whatever; you commit yourself to it come hell or high water. It helps, of course, if it’s a shared commitment, because when one person weakens, the other person can make up for that weakness. Two weak persons, each expecting the other to be strong, will be strong together.

Preparing and sharing a meal together constitutes a focal practice that has the power to reorient the life of a family. To establish the conditions for such a practice to flourish, there must exist a firm agreement among those in the household—especially between parents.

Such agreements establish the disagreement with the default culture. You seem confident that there is real freedom to choose this way of life that you're talking about.

There is that freedom. But it's a freedom that is grasped not in the daily decisions but in those fundamental decisions in which you take stock of your life and ask yourself: How am I going to arrange my physical environment and what sort of agreements and commitments do I make with my partner, my spouse, on how we're going to conduct our lives. You have to step back and take the measure of the worth of your life.

There's hardly a home that isn't working on limiting the use of technological devices. How much time do I let my children be on the Internet? Should children have their own computer, television or Game Boy? Should they use instant messaging? Use of technology is central to much of the intense negotiation that goes on between parents and children and between parents themselves.

This seemingly endless negotiation can begin to feel like a hopeless struggle. For this struggle to become productive and meaningful, we must not see technological devices themselves as the enemy. For example, I enjoy the benefits of the Internet. The exchange of pictures and information and communication has been a blessing in my relationship with our daughters and their families in this country, and with my family back in Germany. In relation to my work as a scholar, the access I now have to sources is extraordinary.

The question and the challenge we must take on is: How do we gather technological devices together into the good life? Nothing by itself makes for a better life.

Your description of what constitutes a good life—a life oriented by focal things, concerns and practices in the context of a household, of family life—is very appealing. At the same time I think people would say that reading, engaging in conversation, taking a walk, writing a letter, playing a musical instrument or a game such as chess, preparing a meal, or even just

sitting at a table together for an extended period of time seem to be no match for Nintendo, instant messaging, Web surfing or listening to a CD in the privacy of one's room. As parents, we feel we just don't have what it takes. We're no match for the hyperreality that is so readily available through all the devices that inundate our homes.

The first thing to say to such parents is that they should love what they make a focal thing and practice. They need to be inveterate runners or chess players or musicians, and if they don't have such a thing, they should consult their aspirations. Parents must find that love of doing something in particular. Most of us had something that we loved—we have simply let it go, and our lives are now reduced to doing what has to be done and are filled with periods of doing nothing much at all. It's the death of the focal practice if it's done from a sense of guilt or obligation.

So this kind of work must spring from love. If you love it, your children learn to love it. What children best remember from their childhood and most likely re-create in their adult life is what their parents loved. For example, my father loved gardening, and as children we would help him weed or cut the grass. None of us, while we were children, loved gardening. But now, in adulthood, all four of us have vegetable gardens. Nobody told us to do this—we just found ourselves doing it. So you have to find something you love.

The second thing to say to parents concerns thresholds. The threshold to Nintendo games and television shows is low, and so you move across that threshold easily. The rewards from that are low as well. It's well established through research that when people get up from two hours of watching television—and there are similar results with people playing Nintendo games or working on a computer for two hours—they don't feel well. They feel worse than they did at the beginning. So low threshold, low rewards.

Focal things and practices have a high threshold. The threshold is high morally, not materially. It's not as if people have to exert themselves strenuously or face some danger before they can sit down at the table. It's right there, within reach. But there is a moral threshold. It's a bother, it's a pain. There is a high threshold, and so it's difficult to get across it. But once you're across it the reward is high as well. After a fine meal you get up with a glad heart. After playing tennis with your kid for a couple of hours both of you feel good. Obviously you have to begin with your children when they're small, and then you have to live and practice for them the thing that you

love. And then they'll take it up as well.

You should expect it to be hard, but there is something on the other side of that high and difficult threshold, and those are high rewards. The rewards are not invariable. Sometimes the meal will be a chore from start to finish. But such episodes will not call into question an established practice.

As a pastor, I am wondering what you might say to pastors as they seek to exercise leadership amidst this technological culture of ours.

I would suggest that there are two things they need to do. One is to be more confident of the good things that they're doing and make it clear to people who are gathered for worship what an extraordinary thing this is and how such gatherings are suffused with grace. I think pastors often give themselves far too little credit for what they preside over and what they stand for.

And then out of that joy and confidence must come the desire to make focal things prevail in the culture at large. You won't make them prevail if you don't understand what you're up against. But if those two things come together—an intelligent understanding of the pattern of contemporary society and confidence in God's grace—then we can hope that the kingdom of God will come a few steps closer.