

The Device Paradigm

Most of us would probably say that technology and new inventions have made our lives easier and more comfortable. It has brought us many conveniences that our grandparents never had when they were young. However, as we grow up with these amenities, we become dependent on them and our whole way of life completely changes. We certainly do not go through the same routines as our grandparents or even as our parents. Why does this happen though? What is it about technology that alters the way we live our lives? Perhaps what we think may be helping us may actually be taking something very important away. Albert Borgmann argues this point in his book, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life. Technology, he believes, is taking away a very important part of our lives. By our dependence on new inventions and devices, we are losing the social context in which things belong and isolating ourselves from older traditions and customs.

To see this, we first have to establish the differences between a “commodity” and a “thing.” Commodities, as the author Albert Borgmann defines it, “are highly reduced entities and abstract in the sense that within the overall framework of technology they are free of local and historical ties. Thus they are sharply defined and easily measured (pg 81).” Things, he contrasts, “engage us in so many and subtle ways that no quantification can capture them (pg 81).” By this he means that commodities are objects that have no other significance attached to them. Things, on the other hand, are not just the objects themselves, but also include the emotional feelings and meaning that might be connected with the object. Let us use dinner,

something we are all familiar with, as an example to clarify this. For dinner, we can choose to either go out and get a burger at a fast food restaurant or we can stay at home and prepare our own meal. A take-out fast food dinner is fast and convenient. It requires little planning and is available just about anywhere at anytime. You go there, eat the food, and leave. A home cooked meal, on the other hand, has to be planned, prepared, and then cleaned up. There is more than just eating involved. Whoever is making the dinner has to go out and get the ingredients and put time and effort into making the meal. This person may also be getting joy from cooking the dinner for himself or for someone else. The fast food hamburger would be the commodity in this case while the dinner we cook at home would be the thing. We can measure the number of burgers sold at the restaurant or count the number of people who regularly have dinner there. From this data we can get the eating habits of anybody. However, no matter how long we observe the dinner at home, we are not able to measure the experience of the meal at home, the pleasure of tasting one's own creations and the feeling of sitting around the dinner table together with friends or family. This is what separates things from commodities.

Now, with the difference in commodity and thing clearly defined, we can look at the role technology plays in affecting what the author calls things and how it can turn them into commodities. Borgmann, in his book, develops a theory he calls the "device paradigm" in which people view the function of modern technology as being solely a means to an end. It is around to simplify and ease the burden of obtaining goods. Technology makes such goods "instantaneous, ubiquitous, safe, and easy (pg 41)."

People have often thought of technology as a means to an end. We use a technological device to produce something that we want. As machines have evolved through the years, the inside workings have become more and more complicated. At the same time, the user interfaces to the machines have become more intuitive and easier to use. Take, for example, two watches:

one digital and one a spring-driven watch. The spring-driven one was first built in the late seventeenth century, and with advancements in technology since then, the digital watch became the norm. Even with many refinements to the construction of mechanical watches since the seventeenth century, somebody like Newton, Bacon, or Descartes would be able to look at the inside of the watch and explain to us how it works. However, tell him to describe a digital watch and he would be at a complete loss. While it may be the case that the inner workings are more of a mystery to the user, using a digital watch is simpler than using a mechanical one. There is no need to wind it up or manually set the dates for leap years and months with less than 31 days. It gives time with greater precision and comes in a more compact package. This trend of devices being easier to use but harder to figure out is taking place in all areas where technology is present. Consequently, people have stopped trying to figure out the details of how they are getting the ends from the means and just blindly use the devices. Because of this, technology has separated means from end, whereas in meaningful human activity, activities that perhaps our grandparents participated in, the means and end is not disjoint or neatly distinguished.

Technology, in separating the means from the ends, strives to ease the burdens of life with the use of new machines and procedures, but while doing this, commodities are produced and things are reduced. To express this concept take Borgmann's example of the modern day heater. Today, millions of homes are kept warm by the invention of the heater. In earlier days however, the only possible way to heating your home was by means of the fireplace. The fireplace required that every member of the household fulfill various tasks and duties to keep it functional. Chores such as the chopping of wood and the clearing of ashes had to be delegated each and every day and those within the household had to act as a team to keep the fireplace in good condition. In addition, the fireplace, because it was only able to warm the room it was in, was a place for families to gather around to converse and partake in various activities. In result,

fireplace was a prime example of Borgmann's definition of a "thing". Its main purpose was to provide warmth but from the process of getting this good, there were a lot of other meaningful activities that occurred. The family worked together to gather and prepare for the fire, each member of the household had to be responsible for certain duties, and at the end the whole family spent time together in front of the fire. If you were to question an individual from that day and age, the mention of the word "fireplace" would probably create a feeling of nostalgia. The means here are certainly inseparable from the ends. On their way to achieving the end, the family had to do other chores that contained value and gave them satisfaction. If you were to mention the word "heater" to any modern day individual however, there would be no reaction because there would be no memories associated with a heater as there was with the fireplace. Although both fulfilled the same task, the change in technology has changed the way lives are affected. There is no longer a need to gather firewood, but rather only the need to plug in and turn on. The modern day heater is an example of how technology has decreased the number of "things" in today's world and replaced them with "commodities".

Because it is so evident that commodities are replacing things in the modern day world Borgmann evaluates the present day world and the lifestyles of those affected by the changes in technology. According to Jerome B. Wiesner (former president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), technology's goal is "to lead mankind toward a life of greater fulfillment (pg 38)." According to Borgmann however, this statement is inherently limited. He asks if technology has fulfilled the purpose to better the quality of life of human beings and comes to the conclusion that technology has done more bad than good. In particular he believes that technology has had a detrimental effect in the world's social fabric as well as other areas such as economics and politics. In Borgmann's point of view, he holds traditional values to be of great importance and believes that technology eliminates tradition from daily life. In the area of politics for example,

we can observe that democracy was based on some very virtuous ideals. The democratic voting system once worked well; people listened to the issues at hand and voted on a representative they thought was best. In the current day election process however, because of the influence to technology and media, he believes that the democratic process has withered and that election of officials has become a popularity contest- counter to democratic ideals. Like this example, Borgmann believes all areas of life are effected by technology, and that although convenience achieved, it is achieved by sacrificing more than what is gained.

Borgmann's arguments are very persuasive. When applying Borgmann's device paradigm to the modern day world, it is easy to observe that the paradigm is true almost universally. New technologies are created, and things become commodities. Furthermore, the daily life of an individual becomes more convenient but at the price of lost tradition. In evaluating Borgmann's arguments I believe that he makes a compelling case as to why technology does harm, but I also believe that Borgmann neglects to see a lot of benefits of technology. Technology for example, does take away from the social fabric within communities, but in return new social groups are formed. Borgmann does not recognize the benefits of technology in detail and seems to be slightly biased in his portrayal. His arguments nonetheless still pose questions that should be considered in all fields of technology. Technology has an adverse effect on the lives of all individuals around the world, and comes with a cost. Individuals will have their separate opinions and while some believe that old traditions should take precedence in value, others will argue that new technology should be pursued. It all comes down to what an individual values, whether that be old tradition on one side of the spectrum, or a new tradition that changes with technology on the other.

Works Cited

Borgmann, Albert. Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1984.