

Talk “Family and Technology”

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Introduction

A warm welcome to your homes and offices. As I am a stranger to almost every one of you, except the Austrians and Swiss present, let me give you a quick introduction to who I am¹ and what I would like to share with you in the next few minutes.

First and most importantly, I am a member of one of the numerous families you are ministering to. I am originally from Austria, so my mother tongue is German, I am a 4th generation SDA, a spouse in a happy marriage, a homeschooling mom and a mother of a 4 and a 6-year-old. At the same time, as I am an advocate of a church in which we can tell more than the pleasant and honorable parts of our stories, I think you should also know that I am a woman who initially got married at the age of 21 and divorced at the age of 28 and I consider this to be mainly my fault. So, unfortunately, I do not serve as a role model for the ideal of Christian life and fellowship, but I am one of the living examples of the amazing grace of God and a witness that he is willing to use even broken pieces.

Apart from all this, my life up to this point has been devoted to education. I was an Adventist high school teacher for 13 years, principal of Bogenhofen Adventist Academy for 6 years and I am currently working on my second Masters' Degree in Educational Sciences at the University of Basel, Switzerland. As my focus has remained on my family, this will probably take me another 5 years to finish, and I have no idea where the Lord will lead our family from there. I hope and pray, I will end up in a classroom again one day.

As you will see, I will address you from both perspectives today – the perspective of a family member and the perspective of an educator of young children and teenagers likewise. And – and this is the last piece of information about me, I am still a member of the almost extinct breed of Digital Immigrants. You may be familiar with Mark Prensky's distinction of Digital Immigrants and Digital Natives – Digital Immigrants being those who were raised without the Internet, still remembering a world of telephone booths, letter writing and a computer lab at the University of Vienna with 40 computers for the entire student body. The screen was black with white letters, the @ symbol looked weird and the Netscape web browser seemed like an amazing invention. Yes, I am 5 years older than Mark Zuckerberg and proudly so. Being a Digital Immigrant does not mean I am not at home in the digital world. On the contrary, I think using technology as a tool is a thing of the 80s kids, in fact the most innovative tools were invented by my generation – a generation that had been raised offline.

So today I would like to introduce you to a random Adventist family – probably similar to the ones you have in your fields, I would like to share some common misconceptions about family and technology – at least from my point of view – and discuss some ideas on why the church could be a God-given antidote to most of the problems media consumption are creating.

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Questionnaire

First, though, I would like to do something more interactive. If you'd be so kind as to answer a few questions real quick. The poll is anonymous and will be gone after the session is closed. I will give you a few minutes and then share the results with you.

I am

- a Digital Immigrant (born before 1980)
- a Digital Native (born after 1980)

I am part of the Social Media World (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn etc.)

- No
- Yes

I use my computer and/or smartphone on average

- Less than 4 hours a day >> 0-4
- More than 4 hours a day >> 4-6
- More than 6 hours a day >> 6-8
- More than 8 hours a day >> 8+

I mainly use the internet (please choose 2 options)

- To retrieve information / inform myself
- To connect with others
- To relax and entertain myself
- To buy or sell online
- When waiting

It is hard to imagine living without (please choose two options)

- Google Search
- Google Maps
- YouTube
- WhatsApp
- Facebook
- Netflix
- Amazon
- Podcasts
- Computer Games
- None of the above

The thought of being without my computer / smartphone for 48 hours

- Does not affect me
- Is very welcome
- Makes me nervous

I deliberately go offline from time to time.

- Yes, on a regular basis.
- Every once in a while.
- Hardly ever.
- Never.

At night my phone can be found

- Mostly at my bedside.
- Sometimes at my bedside.
- Hardly ever at my bedside.

I am satisfied with the AMOUNT of my media consumption

- Always.
- Most of the time.
- Sometimes.
- Hardly ever.

I am satisfied with the CONTENT of my media consumption

- Always.
- Most of the time.
- Sometimes.
- Hardly ever.

The idea of this questionnaire was to make us more aware that this topic is not one of society, of the church or the families. It concerns all of us. It would be interesting to discuss the results, but you have come here for a different reason.

A typical Adventist family

To get an idea what we are talking about when addressing the topic of family and technology, let us just imagine a typical church-going Adventist family.

The husband of this family spent his youth gaming. Fortunately, Fortnite and Minecraft had not been invented yet and – most importantly – you did not play online back then. When he became an Adventist at the age of 26, he stopped playing altogether. He works long hours and one thing that troubles him is that he does not have time for physical exercise... or the motivation to do sports on a regular basis. Then the Oculus Quest was invented. For those of you not familiar with this device, it is a virtual reality headset by a company owned by Facebook. You put it on and move in a different – a virtual reality. Our husband finds out there are programs that help you do sports and stay fit. The gaming mechanism behind them helps him stay on track. Benefit: He is doing sports on a regular basis and feeling much better. Risk and side effects: Virtual Reality gaming is highly addictive and his kids will one day argue Dad is doing it, we can do to.

The mother of this family has another favorite gadget: her Apple airpods, wireless and almost invisible headphones. She is at home with her kids and the airpods help her to stay connected with the outside world that does not focus on diapers, weaning and caring for toddlers. She loves podcasts on all kinds of topics. Benefit: She has the chance to listen while doing her housework. There is no time to read anyways. Risk and side effect: When she is tired and exhausted, she listens to her podcasts while caring for the kids. She is with them but not really present. Kids don't cope well with that.

The kids of this family have not had a lot of exposure to the media yet. The parents are strict when it comes to the media consumption of their kids. But there is a Lego App that helps the kids build their models, all the music is on the iPad and the grandparents bought a flute that came with an App. Without anybody realizing, the kids are having screen time, more than anticipated and planned. The risks and side effects of screen time in young children are well documented. It can result in developmental deficits like a lack of self-regulation and impulse control, emotional restlessness and a decrease in the ability to concentrate.

So how can family ministry assist a family like this when it comes to the use of technology? I came across three common misconceptions in our church, at least I would label them this way.

Misconception °1 Media is bad. / Media is good.

This may sound confusing but, though contrasting statements, both beliefs share the same problem. They are simplifications of a very complex issue.

- I know church elders who consider a power-point presentation, video footage or other screen content in church absolutely unacceptable. Technology should not be used at all, when preaching.
- At the same time, videogames as The Heroes II are released by Hope Channel International to share the Three Angels' Message with games and young people around the world.² Having tried this game, I have serious doubts about this concept.

We also encounter extremes, when we observe parents in church and the rules they make for their kids³.

- Some share the enthusiasm of their teenagers and forget that they are human beings in development, not mature enough to set their own healthy boundaries.
- Others have strict rules they never explained to their kids or discussed with them. They are not aware of the needs, thoughts and feelings behind their media consumption.

I think we should adopt Melvin Kranzberg's First Law of Technology: "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral."⁴ We need to carefully weigh the pros and cons in our personal lives, in our families and as a church. We need to take into account that we are different and what is driving us when using technology is different as well. We may even have to admit to incorrect assessments and change our behavior in view of the consequences.

Misconception °2 When addressing the issue of family and technology, we need to focus on our children and teenagers.

I would like to introduce you to one of the most interesting studies I know when it comes to media consumption. It is called The World Unplugged and it asked close to 1,000 university students in ten countries on five continents – from Chile to China, Lebanon to the USA, Uganda to the United Kingdom – to abstain from using all media for a full day. After their 24 hours of abstinence, the students were then asked to report their successes and admit to any failures. 600 students from a dozen universities submitted close to half a million words. The word cloud you see on the screen was generated from those words written.⁵ Some of the most interesting findings are

1. A clear majority in every country failed to go unplugged for 24 hours.
2. The students describe cravings, anxiety and depression similar to the feelings of a drug withdrawal.

² tedNEWS (2021). Adventist Church Releases New Bible Trivia Game App.

<https://ted.adventist.org/news/1841-adventist-church-releases-new-bible-trivia-game-app>.

³ In a study by the University of Mannheim (2015), they found four different types of parents: laissez-faire parents, fearful conservatives, friendly liberals and child-centered active parents. Neue Zürcher Zeitung (2015). Kein Smartphone Ist auch keine gute Idee. <https://www.nzz.ch/wissenschaft/technik/kein-smartphone-ist-auch-keine-gute-idee-1.18622857>.

⁴ Kranzberg, Melvin (1986). Technology and History. Kranzberg's Laws. *Technology and Culture*. **27**(3): 544–560. [doi:10.2307/3105385](https://doi.org/10.2307/3105385). *JSTOR 3105385*.

⁵ Moeller, Susan D. (2019). The world unplugged. <https://theworldunplugged.wordpress.com/>.

3. Students report that their phones have become an extension of themselves. Going without media, made it seem like they had lost a part of themselves.
4. They report they cannot afford NOT to be active on social media, it is essential to the way they construct and manage their friendships and social lives.
5. For many students, going without media for 24 hours ripped back the curtain on their hidden loneliness.
6. They report how desperately bored they were.
7. The study participants depend on music to regulate their moods.

Now here is the part I have not told you so far: This study was conducted in 2011. The students of the past are the couples, the moms and dads of your ministry.

If we focus on the media consumption of children and teenagers in our church, we are missing the most important factor influencing it: their parents. And if we focus on the do's and don'ts in media education we are missing what education is all about: role models.

When I visited a huge indoor playground last week – believe it or not in Switzerland this is possible despite Covid-19 – there were probably a hundred kids running around, enjoying their time and having fun. I should have taken a picture of their parents on their smartphones. I was the worst of all. I had brought my laptop.

Misconception °3 “We need to brief the families on the dangers of media consumption.”

This leads us to misconception °3 “We need to brief the families on the dangers of media consumption.”

Now, why would a person so well-informed on the downsides of technology, bring her laptop to a playground instead of using this opportunity to spend the time with her kids and giving them her undivided attention? I cannot answer for all the other parents there, but for my part, the answer is: “Because that’s what I have been doing for the last 6 years with hardly any break, without daycare, without kindergarten, without grandparents nearby or the iPad as babysitter. And I was just glad that they were running around for 1 ½ hours not needing me, knowing I am there just in case.” And I have the suspicion I was not the only one.

There are two reasons why I think our focus should not be on lecturing parents and teenagers:

1. Regarding adults: I have been doing media talks for the Health Department of our church and for an Adventist School for several years now. The number of people attending is low and those attending are already aware of the risks and side effects. We are not reaching those who would need it the most.
2. Regarding teenagers: I sat down with a group of girls from all over Switzerland two years ago. They were having their girls4Christ day and I was invited as their speaker. I decided not to speak. I decided to ask questions. We spent a great day together and they told me everything I could have told them and more. They opened up and I concluded once more: It is not that they don't know. It is that there seem to be hardly any alternatives.

Risks and Consequences

So, what is it we experience in our or other people's lives? What are the basic risks and consequences we are talking about?⁶ There are multiple well documented significant harms.

Physical consequences

Among others a lack of physical exercise, overweight, postural deformities, hypertension, risky behavior while driving leading to car accidents

Mental & Emotional consequences

Among others anxiety like the fear of missing out, mobbing, attention deficit disorder, reduced ability to concentrate, dementia, depression, lack of empathy, substance and non-substance addictions like gambling addiction or pornography addiction

Social consequences

Among others limited education, reduced willpower, anonymity, social isolation, loneliness (being never alone but lonely), polarization by sensational news and fake news, less solidarity, threats to democracy

For some reason, though, all this knowledge does not decide how we embrace technology and let it into our personal lives.

Kuroschi Yazdi, chief physician of one of Austria's leading clinics for treatment of behavioral addiction, puts it this way: "There's a junkie in all of us, even if we don't want to admit it."⁷ The internet seemingly offers a fulfillment of almost every wish.

- You want to buy something – Amazon sure has everything from A to Z
- Longing for suspense or relaxation – Netflix offers unlimited entertainment
- Want to keep in touch – Facebook helps you connect and share
- Need attention – Capture and share your moments with Instagram
- Want to communicate fast and effectively – Use a messenger service like WhatsApp
- Want to be aroused – Pornography is almost free of charge
- Need success – choose the game you like
- Want to know or show how to... – broadcast yourself on YouTube

It has been designed like a slot machine, it is available 24/7, we carry it in our pockets, and it is almost free of charge. Our biological reward system is activated and the dopamine kicks in. It can be released within seconds to compensate negative sensations or just because. The problem is that God created our biological reward system to help us do strenuous and exhausting things like physical exercise or the like. It was not meant to be used by attention engineers making sure we spend more time online.

But if we are honest, it is difficult to resist the equation "no effort + no wait = happiness"

⁶ Manfred Spitzer (2019). *Die Smartphone Epidemie. Gefahren für Gesundheit, Bildung und Gesellschaft*. Klett-Cotta. S. 147.

⁷ Yazdi, Kuroschi. (2013). *Junkies wie wir*. Edition a.

The church as antidote

God's plan is different, though, and all of us present have experienced it. God's equation is "effort + patience = life happiness". It results in the ability to think for yourself, to form lasting relationships and to enjoy blessings without being addicted to them.

So how can the church help families to experience this?

- Not by labeling the media as good or bad
- Not by focusing on the children instead of the family as a whole
- Not by teaching and lecturing

All of this does not help us.

However,

Role models do.

And real-life experiences do.

Role Models

Forgive me this old-fashioned example. It seems like forever, but when I was in my 20s and the TV set and a DVD player was all we had to watch movies, there was a lady in my church who I secretly admired for her outlook on life. She told me she didn't have a TV set at home, watching movies was not worth the time she had left on this planet. Note: She did not blame me for owning one myself, she did not tell me Adventists must not watch TV, she did not urge me to get rid of it. I was shocked and jealous at the same time, thinking there was no way I could end up like her at the same time knowing this was what God wanted for me as well. I remember praying warily, "God if you want that for me as well, you need to show me a way how" and then pretty much forgetting about it. I am going to spare you the details but not only did God make sure that my TV set was gone 5 years later but I very rarely watch a movie at all today, because there is too much life has to offer, too much to be experienced and above all too much suffering to be soothed.

Translated into the 2020s:

- If we are people who survive without social media and still have relationships and a career
- if we don't constantly check our phones pretending it is because we are so busy serving God... but the youth should put their phones away
- if we treat our attention with respect, fight the fragmentation of it and resist multitasking our lives away
- if we feel the right "to do anything but are not mastered by anything", like Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 6:12
- and if we finally admit that we too are drawn to this shortcut to happiness one way or another

...then we will be living testimonies that God knew what he was doing when he created REALITY in contrast to man not foreseeing the consequences of creating VIRTUAL REALITY in its multiple forms.

Real-life experiences

“Imagine social media magically disappeared for a week, it would be the worst best thing that would happen to society, some people would finally appreciate what is really important and some people would realize that they don't have anything worthwhile in the real world.”⁸

Years ago, I did an advanced training in addiction prevention for schools. They taught us never to focus on the harmful substance or addictive behavior. “Addiction is not a matter of the substance/behavior but a lack of alternatives” is a sentence I will never forget. A vibrant church life is one of those alternatives.

The family I introduced to you at the beginning of this session is my family. And you, my church, are the reason we will not get lost in one of the rabbit holes created by people who are getting rich offering us shiny treats in exchange for minutes of our attention, some of our money and bites of our personal data.

- My husband prefers pastoring his church and heading his family to virtual reality fitness. The church has called him to serve, so he decided on a very limited amount of time spent with his Oculus VR glasses.
- I am involved in our church life together with my children and too busy to get lost in the world of ideas and stories, so my podcasts remain a delightful source of inspiration every once in a while.
- And my children grow up acquiring real-life social skills within their family that will – by the grace of God – help them to navigate a crazy world. And even if they should get addicted to whatever one day, they will be able to remember a different life that was better.

I chose my family as an example because the church in Switzerland has done two things for our family:

1. They offered real-life experiences.
 2. They got us involved.
- Early in our marriage we could form a group for couples, talking openly about the challenges we are facing.
 - When I became a mom, other evangelical churches showed me how to organize a toddler group for both Adventists and Non-Adventists in Zurich. This is a very valuable time in the life of a woman because you have so much time and are not at work. Although you are constantly sleep-deprived you are so thankful for any activity you can be a part of that offers the opportunity to connect with other mothers.
 - We started a group called MAMA Talk where moms can sit down, rest, talk and pray while the dads and kids spend time outside.
 - The youth department started a pathfinder group for 3-6-year-olds where the family as a whole can spend time in the woods. It is growing rapidly and the perfect opportunity to invite non-believers.
 - Family Ministry in Switzerland started something called 4two, an evening for couples helping them to spend quality time. It was the first date for my husband and me outside our apartment after 4 years of 24/7 childcare.

⁸ Tofuu YAYA (2016). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCPvc2qp08E>. 2021-04-11. Comments.

- Finally, we are looking forward to an Adventist Family Retreat in Spain in 2022.

These are only examples, but they have two things in common

- All participants are actively and authentically involved spending essential time interacting
- People are meeting in real-life provided this is possible

In the end, it is the people you have met and spent time with personally that shape you the most. This is why this pandemic does not only kill people, but it also seems to suggest that technology can save us from isolation. It will not in the long run, there will be long-term consequences on our mental, social and probably even spiritual lives I do not want to imagine.

The church providing spaces for families to spend time together seems God's perfect antidote to the fake life technology offers. Let us pray for ideas that suit the situation of your churches. In my opinion, family ministry should focus on what disciples of Christ can do like nobody else: being present, available and caring not on Facebook, not on YouTube but in real life.

Thank you for your attention. It is very precious, ask the tech industry.