Weaving the Technology of Our Lives

Robert J. Marks:

Welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your loyal host, Robert J Marks. What the heck is happening in our world? In 1939, my father was forbidden to go see the classic movie Gone With the Wind. Why? Because one of the main characters said, "I don't give a damn." And the word damn was considered a terrible curse word in 1939. Then when I was a boy, my mother said I could not use the term son of a gun. I don't even think she knows why it was a bad phrase. So I had to later look it up and find out why it was a bad phrase. And I read that on British warships of old, resident prostitutes were allowed and could become pregnant on board and their baby's fathers were unknown. So the child thus conceived was called son of a gun.

Robert J. Marks:

Today it's even getting worse. We see book titles and movie titles making a token effort to disguise filth words by inserting asterisks is like, for example, don't give a F**K or something like that. I also see some of these filth words written boldly on shirts of people that wear them that are, for some reason, not ashamed. So what happened since 1939, when damn was a filth word? The challenge of course is that curse words are only an indicator. They are only part of a bigger slippery slope. Philosopher Marshall McLuhan described our situation. He said, "We live invested in an electric information environment that is quite imperceptible to us as water is to fish." Imagine a drop of dark colored sewage being dropped into a fresh clean water pool. There's a swirl as the visibility of the dark sewage mixes with the clean water, but soon the sewage is dissipated and the water looks clear again. The fish adapt and another drop of sewage is added. And again and again and soon, the fish are swimming in sewage and they don't even know it. They are numbed by familiarity.

Robert J. Marks:

We are similarly affected today by the sewage, from social media, the news and political pundits. We are swimming in the sewage. If you're like me, you often get mad at what's happening, but there's little you can do unless you invest yourself fully in the process. But there is something that you can do locally for yourself, for your family, for those around you. And we can make the water clean for ourselves and our family. How do we do this? How do we make the water clean for us and our family? Well, we're going to talk today with somebody who has some good ideas about this, our guest today to talk about this is Andrew McDiarmid. Andrew is a Senior Fellow and Media Specialist at the Discovery Institute. He writes a lot. He's written for The Daily Wire, The New York Post, The Houston Chronicle, The American Spectator. He's a regular columnist for Newsmax. He is guest hosted here on Mind Matters News also. So Andrew, welcome.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Bob, thanks for having me.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. Look, I went against the tirade against technology and all of this stuff that we're being bombarded with over the media and stuff, but I know that your solution is not the banning of technology. But you want to introduce something called authentic technology. You're not against technology, it's just the way it's used. Tell me about authentic technology.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Absolutely. Yeah. I guess the term digital wellness is, it's an umbrella term for, "Hey, how do we go about doing this in a healthy way?" My approach would lean more toward digital authenticity. In other words, it's getting to the heart of why we should have wellness with our digital life. So I call it authentic technology. There's a number of names for it, number of approaches, but this is something I've developed as I've studied this the last five years. It's the, as I said, the digital authenticity. It's three steps to get there. The first is to renew our understanding of technology. Before we can change our relationship to technology for the better, we need to become fully aware of how we're interacting with it and how it's affecting us. We've got to renew our understanding of what the word technology means. And we have to look at the ways that technology impacts us and make some decisions about that.

Andrew McDiarmid:

So the first step that I've come up with is renewing our understanding, just becoming aware and really changing how we understand technology. The second step is to reset, to hit that reset button, resetting our relationship with technology. That's stepping back, turning things off, asking some big picture questions that will help us then ask questions about our technology. And of course this doesn't happen as quick as that easy button at Staples. This is something that has taken years to develop. So it's going to take time to address and change in us. And finally, once we've reset our relationship, it's time to, the third step is releasing our potential as human beings. Everything is geared toward that step, Bob, because it's the most important thing we can do. Release what we have inside us for the betterment of not just us and our families but for those around us and the world in general.

Robert J. Marks:

So let me ask you, what do you mean by discovering the meaning of technology? I think I understand pretty well what technology is, but you have something deeper in mind. So what did you discover about the meaning of technology?

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah, yeah. I have a nasty habit of opening etymology dictionaries and just looking-

Robert J. Marks:

Etymology. Oh, that's the source of words. Okay.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah, yeah. Etymology, just the history of the words and what they mean, where they come from.

Robert J. Marks:

I have to pause every once in a while, Andrew, when people use big words. So okay, good.

Andrew McDiarmid:

No problem. Me too. So I just look at what technology actually means. That's where I started. I thought, "Okay, if I'm going to study this, if I'm going to see how this is affecting me and my family, my kids, how do I parent them? What do I do? I need to go back to just what the word means." And it was actually a very exciting discovery that I made as I studied this. It is all about us, just not in the selfish, passive, unthinking way that we often see tech take hold of us today. The word technology is the sum of the ways in which social groups provide themselves with the material objects of their civilization. And so I thought as I read those words, material objects. Well, where do they come from?

Andrew McDiarmid:

The prefix techno or techna in technology means art, skill, a system of making or doing. And when I dug deeper, I found the root teks, T-E-K-S. And that root, teks, literally means to weave or fabricate. And this root is where we get words like ax, hatchet, carve, join, build, as well as words like textile, tectonic, text, tiller, and even toil. So the heart of the word technology I discovered is the art and skill we use to weave together things that we find useful for human living. And the good news, as I studied this, was that I realized this art and skill doesn't just refer to the original maker of the tool. It also applies to everyone who will use it, who will harness it. And that's us. I thought all this was pretty exciting when I first came across it.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah. Let's unpack this a little bit. The ways that material comes together. So can you relate that, for example, to some common things that are happening in the real world to us today?

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. If we understand the word technology as weaving and fabricating, building-

Robert J. Marks:

Weaving and fabricating. Okay.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. It's the literal weaving of a basket. It's the tiller that allows you to steer the boat or create the furrows in the land before you plant. It's all the things that we can do with our minds and our hands to produce objects that we will find useful that help us through life. And of course, we could be here all day giving examples, but when you go right back to it, it's what we weave together. What we create, what we make.

Robert J. Marks:

And all of these things are available. It's just how we weave them together, I think. See if I have this right. For example, we have available to us today things like computers, automatic dishwashers, car, cell phones. And the weaving together is the manner that we choose to aggregate these together. Is that...?

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. When you talk about our gadgets today, it's our decision on how we use them, how we harness them, or whether we decide to put a gadget down or a platform down and just move on without it. We really have to assume the boss of our technology, just really keep it in check by deciding which gadgets and tools are going to be useful to us per our purpose and vision and which won't be.

Robert J. Marks:

This is a common theme in technology and stuff that exists that it in itself is neither good or bad. Computers aren't good or bad. Automatic dishwashers aren't good or bad. Cars aren't good or bad. It's the manner that they're used. And this has to be incorporated, I guess, into a healthy way of doing things and recognizing this idea of authentic technology. Right?

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. Yeah. I'm not sure if I would go across the board with the neutrality of technology, just because there are arguments to be made for certain things coming into being that may be better off not being and being. But that may be just looking too deeply. If we do start with technology as neutral and then what are we going to do with it? Yeah. That's a good place to start when it comes to our own digital wellness and digital authenticity.

Robert J. Marks:

Well, so what's an example of something coming into the being that does universally bad or abhorrent?

Andrew McDiarmid:

Well, I think of Apple on the smartphone. Their iPhone that came into being in 2007. I'm not going to sit here and say, "Well, gosh. It shouldn't have been invented." But I wonder, and this is something you could say about a lot of gadgets and inventions, is how much thought was put into whether we should make it before we were just dominated by, well, we can. We could do this.

Robert J. Marks:

Ah.

Andrew McDiarmid:

There's a lot of tech teams in companies that are just dying to come up with something new to solve another pain point that they perceive in the population. And it's like that classic Ian Malcolm phrase in Jurassic Park as he's talking to Hammond about the park. He says, "We were too busy thinking whether we could, that we didn't stop to think if we should." And so I think that's another way to address whether these gadgets and inventions are truly neutral and whether enough thought went into them by the humans that brought them about.

Robert J. Marks:

I see. This is a debate which comes up in the area of artificial intelligence and whether you should have autonomous artificial intelligence killing machines that are totally without human supervision.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

Is that something we should even pursue development of? I think in certain cases there are, but I can see that in many cases it's a better idea just not to go there.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. It's certainly a debate with certain things because there's usually pros and cons to a piece of technology or a device that's been made. Arguments on both sides. And you don't want to rule out either side, but you do want to find... You do want to get to the heart of the purpose for something and whether it can be used for good or bad. And that's why I encourage people to think bigger when it comes to the questions about technology. It's not just, is this something that I should use? It's, does my life and my purpose and those around me, does it call for it to be used? Is it going to contribute to that larger purpose and vision?

Robert J. Marks:

I see. Okay. Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. I know that you've been influenced a lot by somebody named Jacques Ellul. If I'm saying the last name right.

Andrew McDiarmid:

You are.

Robert J. Marks:

Who is he and why did he influence you?

Andrew McDiarmid:

So Jacques Ellul is a French sociologist, theologian, and philosopher of technology. His lifetime spanned almost the entire 20th century, 1911 to 1994. He wrote over 50 books and over 1,000 articles in his writing and teaching career. And as you can imagine, living through the 20th century, he had a front row seat to observe how modern society was being impacted by technology. He wrote whole books on the topic as well as whole books on what he recognized as the solution. And as I said, I'm so glad I discovered him because he kind of gave me a real boost of inspiration to the point where I thought, "Well, golly, I need to take some of his ideas and give them to a new generation." Because I was fully on board with what he presented and the solution, not just the problem. So two of my favorite quotes from Ellul, these kind of capture his thinking. He says, "The denizen of the technological state of the future will have everything his heart ever desired, except, of course, his freedom."

Robert J. Marks:

Let's unpack that, unpack that a little bit. The future, as we have more and more things available to us, will get to the point where we have everything available to us. But what's the consequence of that? What are we still not going to have?

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. We'll have less freedom than we ever did.

Robert J. Marks:

So technology, if we just embrace everything that comes out is going to diminish our freedom. Is that what you're saying?

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. Yeah. And Ellul uses a concept called technique to explain how this happens and we can talk about that next. He also said, "When we become conscious of that which determines our life, we attain the

highest degree of freedom." So there's that freedom word again. How do we get the highest degree of freedom? By knowing what is determining or dictating or governing our life. And by first knowing and then having control over that, we can attain that freedom that we so desperately desire as humans.

Robert J. Marks:

I see. So the concept of technique is, tell me if I'm getting this right, is the choice of the proper technology, the proper components that you're going to put together and weave your life.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yes, yes. Ellul's concept of technique is an amazing way to understand how technology can shape us and how big tech is influencing our life. In one of its most popular books, 1954's The Technological Society, Ellul explains in great detail the phenomenon of technique. At the most basic level, technique is simply the practical methods we apply to tasks. Ellul defines it as the ensemble of practices by which one uses available resources to achieve values. Technique in itself is not a bad thing, but in the hands of an entity or company or leader with different values than us and different goals and different visions, it can become harmful or detrimental. And usually I start with a little bit of history in case you want to weigh in there.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah. Let's go into this. I would like to understand a little bit of the history and some more of the specifics of what's going on here.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. So prior to the Industrial Revolution technique was just a straightforward part of life. It was localized. It was to do with how craftsmen and people working in different fields did their jobs. It was various. Somebody who did a task a certain way in one country did it differently than somebody in another country, the same type of task. It developed slowly at the pace of humans. It never got ahead of them because we governed the techniques that we were using in our work. And it was concerned with beauty and function, not just efficiency and convenience. But then the Industrial Revolution came along and started to replace human muscle and mind as a source of energy and information. And since then, technique has entered every sphere of our life and come to shape human life in many ways. And one thing that has done is it's gotten ahead of us. Now, humans are no longer in control of the technique that's governing their life because it's moving faster than us.

Andrew McDiarmid:

And that's kind of where we're at today. Modern techniques concerned with the perfection of the instrument or the process, not the perfection of us, the human being. Modern technique is governed by rationality, artificiality, and automation. It decides what is moral and it's totalitarian, meaning it's going to decide the one best way and we have to conform to it if we want to achieve this task, depending on what we're talking about in this life. And you have to remember that this is not just technology we're talking about. The word technique is not synonymous with technology or gadgets. Technique is the methods by which something is realized or done. And more often than not, today we're talking about who's in control of this technique. Who's looking for the most efficient, most convenient way? Who's guiding us toward that? And we see that the answer plainly today is big tech. It's the big technology companies and the medium size ones too, that have this influence in our life. And I can talk about how they influence us as well.

Robert J. Marks:

Great. Thank you, Andrew. We have been talk... I want to continue this conversation and ask you specifically about how the technique can be applied today, how we can use it to better our lives. But we'll do that next time. Thank you again, Andrew. Our guest today has been Andrew McDiarmid. Andrew is a Senior Fellow and Media Specialist at the Discovery Institute. And so until next time, be of good cheer.

Speaker 3:

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