



session five information & ideas

INFORMATION AGE

The term the “information age” has been used for decades, but it has become increasingly more apparent in light of digital technology. With the entrance of the Internet, home computers, and now the smartphone, our accessibility to information has extended far beyond what we can calculate. While the exact amount of data and information now available to us is difficult to measure, there are some noteworthy statistics. There are currently over 1.3 billion active websites and over 4.5 billion WebPages.¹ Just to put that into perspective, there are only 130 million books that have ever been published, which means there are ten times more published websites than published books in the world.² Of course a book contains more content than a website, and books have multiple copies printed, but the quantity of the medium is remarkable.

In light of all of this information available at our fingertips, there are about 40,000 Google queries every second, which is about 3.5 billion searches every day.³ There is no fun fact you cannot find, no date in history that is not seconds away from an answer, or any sports statistic that is unreachable. While this may have shallow benefit when it comes to casual conversations or cheating during trivia, it can have profound consequences when it comes to how it trains us to interact with information and ideas.



OVER-INFORMED & THOUGHTLESS

Generally speaking, the cultural trend demonstrates that digital users are becoming increasingly over-informed and more and more thoughtless. Information is easy-everywhere, and our ability to navigate ideas, drawing out their validity and implications, has diminished. More specifically, we can identify some dangerous practices in regards to our interaction with information and ideas in the digital world.

1. *Information is a new kind of idol.*

A professor named Quentin Schultze describes what he calls *informationism*: it is a “non-discerning, vacuous faith in the collection and dissemination of information as a route to social progress and personal happiness.”⁴



*We have begun to believe that the accumulation of information somehow leads to wisdom, that more information will solve society's ills and improve our lives. We place our faith in information. In our hearts and minds, having more data and more information will necessarily lead to progress.*⁵

Information has lost its true function by becoming an end in itself. Information was designed to lead to knowledge and wisdom, yet we seek to be informed for the sake of being informed; and in this pursuit, we place our hope in the further accumulation of information.

This may sound silly, but simply try and be practical with it for a moment. In regards to sports, for example, we tend to have conversation around the topic of sports by simply sharing statistics. When we consider who are the ‘super Christians’ in our life, we often turn to the person who has the most information to share. When there is breaking news, the competition consists in who can present the most information. In all of this, information is presented to us as a new idol that gives us hope for progress and happiness. We are being trained to think that our main problem concerns our lack of information, and that the more information we have, the more advanced we can become.

2. *We are trained to locate answers rather than think through questions.*

Idolizing information has led us to stop short, not carrying information to its proper end of real knowledge. The result is that we have more access to knowledge, but we actually know less. Since we have almost immediate access to answers, we rarely pause to ponder and think through questions. This practice can begin very innocently - e.g., looking up a fun fact that comes up in conversation with friends - but it slowly forms into a habit, where we find ourselves searching more serious questions.

In one sense, the ability to read other people's opinions and answers to these questions can be very helpful, showing us we are not hopeless and alone in our deepest questions; but it can also be hurtful in the sense that it discourages us from thinking through these questions for ourselves. It is only when we grapple through difficult concepts for ourselves, struggling in the midst of the process, that we truly obtain the full depth of knowledge contained in the answer. Being satisfied with accessibility to answers leads to shallow thinking, while struggling through the process leads to deep thinking.

3. We can be exposed to ideas that we are not mature enough to discern and digest.

In May of 2014 two twelve-year-old girls led one of their friends into the woods and attempted to kill her for the purpose of pleasing the fictional character "Slender Man." In a documentary concerning the girls and their Internet habits leading up to the horrific event, viewers see that these girls were basically given unlimited access to the Internet.⁶ They were browsing through sites like YouTube, Creepypasta, and DeviantArt with no filter, and they were taking in all of these ideas about "Slender Man" that eventually led them to commit a horrible thing. It is a horrific story - the causes of which can be complex and should not be oversimplified. However, one thing is certain: these girls were exposed to ideas that they were not mature enough to discern and digest.

There is a reason that movies, TV shows, and video games have ratings tied to them: not all material is suitable for children or teenagers. There are loads of information and ideas easily accessible on the Internet to which children and teenagers should not be exposed. This includes extremely dangerous content - ones that are sexual, violent, and profane - and also complicated content - deep religious mysteries, political propaganda, relationship issues, etc. Young people do not yet have the maturity to discern and digest these things without the guiding hand of an authority figure.

4. Ideas become detached from their context and source of authority.

In young people's developmental years, the concept of right and wrong is communicated and enforced by sources of authority - preferably their parents. Right and wrong is not something young people necessarily discern, but rather it is something they are told. As children grow older and mature, we seek to develop their own ability for discernment; but we do this highlighting the importance of what we have already trained in them - i.e., information and ideas must be communicated in context and from an authoritative source.

In today's world, we are all self-publishers. Whereas book and print publishers inherently proofread and verified the information being published, we do not have to publish our opinions or thoughts with the same level of scrutiny. As the cultural cliché goes, the Internet is the home to a lot of unverified information. Nonetheless, there is also a lot of verifiable, reputable information on the Internet. The issue is that this information - both unverified and verified - is often (not always) side by side with no clue as to the authoritative source.

Furthermore, the Internet is filled with statuses, tweets, and quick information that are often detached from a larger context. The written medium of communication is difficult at expressing context in general; it often takes paragraphs to preface and clarify things in order to properly contextualize ideas and information. As we compound that with the issues of the abbreviated ideas and opinions spewed across social media and the Internet, it becomes even more detached from context. Because of this, we lose the ability to interact with ideas well and appreciative alternative perspectives, which leads us to the next danger.

5. We create an echo chamber for ideas.

Social media has exposed us to more and more opinions, but in the same motion it has quickened us to form them. What we fail to realize is that those quick-formed opinions are multilayered and contextually informed, and in response we are often urged to locate the best-worded construction of our own opinion in order to combat the frenzy. In reality we fuel the frenzy, spewing opinions apart from relationship, and simply fortify our assumptions.

In our inability to interact well with other opinions and different ideas, we often use the Internet and social media to support the opinions we already have. It creates an echo chamber. Even the content algorithms at work on social media function in this way, ensuring that the content you have previously liked or engaged in is the same content they will feed you in the future. We therefore become more and more opinionated, as well as more and more hostile.

The echo chamber strengthens our opinions and we begin to see alternative views and opinions as almost totally unthinkable. Therefore, the people that espouse those alternative views seem crazy, ludicrous, and delusional; and when two people of opposing views have very strong opinions and see the other as delusional, it does not make for a very civil discourse. Add to this what researchers have called the “online disinhibition effect,” where people use digital media “to behave and interact in all sorts of ways that they never would in real life” (usually taking their anonymity to behave like a monster), and what we see is that the exchange of ideas becomes heated and often hostile.⁷

THE GOOD NEWS

Digital technology and social media has given us greater access to information and ideas, but it is has in that same motion made it easier for us to delegate our thinking, prolong our intellectual immaturity, and be ill-equipped to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we must clarify how information and ideas are to be understood within Christianity. More particularly we need to see how modern concepts of information and ideas should be compared to the gospel.

1. The gospel is informative.

The gospel is ‘good news,’ which means that it is communicated on a basic level by providing information. As the apostle Paul noted, information is important to Christianity because it is one of the primary ways we begin the journey of faith. He writes in Romans 10:17, “faith comes from hearing.” This means that we first interact with the gospel in the same manner we tend to ‘hear,’ consume, and interact with information and ideas in general. The good news of Jesus is brought to others and us as ‘news,’ as information. Therefore, as Christians, we need to be informed concerning the God who saves us and calls us his children and recognize this is ‘news’ for others as well.

2. The gospel is functional.

The good news is shared so that there can be a response to that information. We are not called to simply know about that gospel, but we are called to respond - to have faith, believing, trusting, delighting and acting on its truth.

In scripture, James calls the Christian to respond to the gospel with faith, which is more than just mere belief; it also concerns action. To demonstrate this point, James speaks of demons. He writes, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe - and shudder" (James 2:19). Throughout scripture we see that demons believe in the existence of God, the deity of Christ, and Christ's sonship. They believe in hell, a place of punishment (Luke 8:31), recognize that Jesus is the judge (Mark 5:1-13), and submit to the power of his word. The point James is making is that the type of response we are to have to the gospel is more than just simply having some information. We are called to act on what we know, where that information is functional. We are informed of the good news of Jesus so that we can then live out that message.

3. The gospel has authority.

The gospel is not simply an alternative set of facts or information, or another idea that helps explain human existence. The good news of Jesus Christ unashamedly claims to be rooted in the authority of God. As God who has authored this world into existence and inspired the scriptures to testify to Jesus, Christians have an authoritative source for their information and ideas for which they can have knowledge and exercise wisdom.

First, this should change the way you interact with the testimony of Jesus found in scripture. The person and work of Jesus is not a mere suggestion for pursuing a happy life; but rather it is an authority over your life that leads you to true satisfaction as you find your story in the gospel story. Second, this should change the way you share the gospel. We proclaim the gospel with authority, knowing that an authoritative claim demands a response. If the gospel is authoritative and true, this means that we cannot be content with a mere concession of difference of opinion.

WISDOM & MATURE THINKING

Paul admonishes the believer to 'not be children in your thinking' but 'in your thinking be mature' (1 Corinthians 14:20). We are called to grow in our ability to think and train our thoughtfulness. If we desire to be mature, then we must be strengthened in our ability to pursue the hard, time-consuming, skillful act of thinking. This is by no means an exhaustive list of nudges and disciplines for developing mature thinking; however, they are some of the most important ones as they pertain to developing mature thinking and living wisely in light of the temptations of digital technology and social media.

NUDGES

1. Allow more time for you to study the scriptures.

Many of us are guilty of reading scripture as a means to satisfy our guilt and check it off the Christian to-do list. In exercising this legalism, we lower our expectations, quicken our time in scripture, and suffer by being satisfied with shallow truths in the Bible. By giving ourselves more time to pour over the pages of scripture, we grant ourselves the opportunity to pray over passages, work hard to understand those things that are difficult, and find ways to draw-up practical application to what we have just heard. The scriptures are a deep well of truth that if we dedicate the time to excavating, the Spirit of God is pleased to help us in our weakness.

2. Read more books and less blogs.

Blogging is not as popular as it used to be, but the point is this: consume more information and ideas that have verifiable content, which requires longer, more thoughtful work of concentration and comprehension. This is not to say that online articles are not beneficial; but rather, it is necessary for us to train our minds to analyze larger context, concentrate for longer amounts of time, and fight the temptation to skim-read. Studies have shown that we are more prone to skim-read when we read on a digital device as opposed to reading in a physical book.⁸ Training our minds in concentration and comprehension is better done with books.

3. Contextualize the gospel.

We will never fully understand the good news unless we see it in light of its full context - the biblical story. The Bible is a large, complex book that spans thousands of years, dozens of authors, including multiple languages and several genres. Nonetheless, one of the greatest beauties of scripture is its unified story. The Bible is the story of God that climaxes in Jesus. If we do not understand that the whole of scriptures work to testify to Jesus, then we will never understand its particular stories or teachings. This is even more important when we discuss the particulars of scripture with unbelievers. For example, contextualizing the books of Leviticus or the prophets around their function to testify to Jesus will better equip us to help others rightly understand the Bible.

4. Do not be afraid to build relationships with people with alternative perspectives or opinions.

First, we must note that our deepest relationships ought to be experienced in our family - biological and spiritual. We ought to find our greatest support, encouragement, and exhortation in those relationships. Nonetheless, we can still build relationships with others who have alternative perspectives, although the relationship will not be as deep. Having a relationship with people who have different opinions can help encourage mutual respect and decency, especially when there must be a confrontation regarding differing views. As Christians, our goal is not to necessarily win arguments with people, but rather love people well so as to demonstrate the love of Jesus to them.

DISCIPLINES

1. Read scripture every day and have a dedicated study day.

Scripture is inspired revelation from God that is purposed in providing us with an authoritative testimony to Jesus so that we can have fellowship with God and be equipped for every good work (*cf.* 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 1 John 1:1-4). Therefore, the practice of reading, studying, and praying through scripture is extremely important to the Christian life. Nonetheless, as mentioned, scripture is often complex and requires time of concentration in order to comprehend its intricacies. So along with reading scripture every day, dedicate one hour a week to learning and studying scripture, theology, and Christian authors. Remember, this is not something Christians do because they idolize information about God; but rather, we study and learn so that it will lead us to mature thinking, wise living, and practical worship.

2. Bring your doubts to light and work through hard questions.

God is infinite and transcendent, which means his ways and thoughts are far above our ways and thoughts. Therefore, as we seek to concentrate and comprehend God through revelation, there will be occasions where His mysteries overwhelm us and lead us to doubt. This is a natural response to finite creatures seeking to understand the infinite Creator. Being honest about those doubts, bringing them to light in Christian community, and working through the difficulty by faith and prayer are extremely beneficial, if not necessary. When we come across difficult questions, which lead us to doubt, we can have the confidence to embrace the doubt and ask God for help. We should have the courage to proclaim, "Lord I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

3. Do not argue over social media.

Social media has become a playground of exchanging information and ideas, and this often promotes discussions and arguments online. The best way to sort through these arguments, however, is in person and not online. Therefore, when things begin to spiral into a heated or hostile exchange online, seek to move the conversation offline. Extending an invitation to meet in person is a better option than continuing to squabble on social media.

4. Share the gospel.

Because the source of the good news of Jesus is in the authority of God, then this means it is truth that must be shared with all his image-bearers, every man, woman, and child. Furthermore, since our digital age supports echo chambers, prepare to face rigid, opinionated opposition. In itself, the gospel is offensive and foolish to people (*cf.* 1 Corinthians 1:18-25), so do not be surprised when you face resistance in sharing the good news of Jesus (*cf.* 1 Peter 4:12). When you do encounter resistance, listen to how they respond and encourage dialogue. Fight against the tendency of our culture to respond without honestly listening and considering what the other person has to say. Remain strong in your convictions while also listening well and inviting conversation.

Although the gospel must be communicated as information, do not stop there. The greatest way the good news of Jesus was shared to us was through incarnate life of Jesus and the indwelling of his Spirit. While we should work hard to proclaim the good news of Jesus in what we say and inform people of, we should be more concerned with living out our faith through love (*cf.* Galatians 5:6).

ENDNOTES

1. Lindsay Liedke, "100+ Internet Stats and Facts for 2018," Web Hosting Rating, February 5, 2018, accessed June 4, 2018, <https://www.websitehostingrating.com/internet-statistics-facts-2018/>; Stephanie Pappas, "How Big is the Internet, Really?," Live Science, March 18, 2016, accessed June 4, 2018, <https://www.livescience.com/54094-how-big-is-the-internet.html>
2. Ben Parr, "Google: There Are 129, 864, 880 Books in the Entire World," Mashable, August 5, 2010, accessed June 4, 2018, https://mashable.com/2010/08/05/number-of-books-in-the-world/#zJmw3c_ykmql
3. "Google Search Statistics," Internet Live Stats, updated June 4, 2018, accessed June 4, 2018, <http://www.internetlvestats.com/google-search-statistics/>
4. Quoted in Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Faith, Friends, Family, and the Digital World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 141.
5. Ibid., 141.
6. The documentary was entitled, "Beware the Slenderman." You can read an article on the documentary here: "Slenderman Documentary Explores the Internet's Grave Impact," Home Box Office, Inc., March 11, 2016, accessed June 4, 2018, <https://www.hbo.com/documentaries/beware-the-slenderman/slenderman-at-doc-nyc>
7. Kara Eckmann Powell, Art Bamford, and Brad M. Griffin, *Right Click: Parenting Your Teenager in a Digital Media World* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Youth Institute, 2015), 98.
8. See Tony Reinke's comments on the study in *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 83-84.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think we as a culture are over-informed? Why or why not?
2. Can you think of an idea about which people are very opinionated and hostile? How do you interact with that idea and how people discuss it?
3. Do you know of anyone who is very thoughtful? What are some things they do that you think help them be thoughtful?
4. What are some doubts or big questions that you have about God, Christianity, and life? How might you go about answering those questions?



session five information & ideas

STUDENT RESPONSE

Would you describe yourself as a thoughtful person? Why or why not?

Do people find you to be very opinionated and hostile about your beliefs? Is this good or bad?

How much time do you spend seeking to be informed about the gospel? What is hindering you from spending more time becoming mature in your thinking about God?

What are some practical ways that you can take your knowledge of God and live them out in your everyday life?

Who is one person in your life that has a different opinion about God and Christianity than you that you can build a relationship with in order to share the gospel? What is one practical way to start?

PRAYER

Take a moment to write out a prayer to God, praising him that he has revealed the good news of Jesus to you. Ask God to give you the desire to seek him through scripture, strengthening you to concentrate and comprehend what he has revealed. Pray that he will equip you with power to share the gospel with boldness and clarity.
