Being at Altitude

The first time I was at altitude, I felt terrible and I had no idea why.

A couple hours into a long-awaited weekend in the mountains, it began with a dull headache and an inchoate sense of discomfort. We had unpacked the car, the kids had scrambled through the ins and outs of the vacation rental property, and we were finally ready to get playing! Eager to press on with our family's plans, I ignored my body's early distress signals and muscled through the afternoon. But as the night wore on, the headache and exhaustion had overtaken me and I was casting desperately for explanations: What was going on? Why did I feel so badly?! Poor fitness? Previous nights of poor sleep? Not enough breakfast?

I self-diagnosed in all the wrong directions, getting more and more frustrated. Finally, my mind found its way through my self-inflicted maze of bewilderment and came to the simple realization, "*Oh right. I'm at altitude.*"

It's the same with digital technology. At first, everything is exciting and fun! You're jamming through your to-do list, multitasking with great efficiency. The messaging banter with friends is pretty great. Your social media presence is getting some attention, as people like and re-post your content. But then, a few years in, you begin to feel a vague discontent and sometimes even guilt about your digital life. Checking your notifications starts to feel more compulsive and isn't as satisfying as it used to be.

In fact, even when things get ugly and you recognize how much you need to make a change, you press on because you don't know how to stop or change your digital reflexes. It feels impossible. Why? Because we live in an environment that is structured and designed to resist and even punish such change. To realize that one's growing dissonance is largely rooted in such a digital environment is like realizing, "*Oh right. I'm at altitude.*"

When we are at altitude, even if our minds don't grasp it, our bodies sure do and they send out distress signals. Similarly, when we are living in a digitally saturated society, even if our minds don't recognize it, our bodies and our spirits know—and arguably, they've been sending out distress signals for more than a few years now.

If medical knowledge helps us understand that dehydration reduces our body's ability to acclimate to higher elevations and leads us to drink more water when we're on the mountain hiking or skiing, sociological insight can help us understand the cultural and structural character of our digital environment and lead us to imagine an alternative way of living in today's digitally saturated world. A good place to start is simply naming some of the key characteristics of the digital environment and recognizing how they've changed dramatically over the last thirty years.
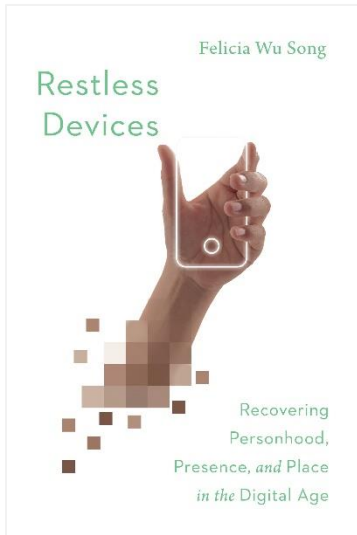
When the internet first went mainstream in the mid-1990s, the very idea of forming and carrying on relationships through the glow of the computer screen was met with one of two responses: alarm or euphoria. Some feared that the internet would cause us to neglect our "real lives" because we would be seduced by the avatar-driven fantasies of cyberspace. More, however, were excited by the dazzling prospects of the internet connecting people across the world and creating new avenues of support, community, and empowerment.

Restless Devices
Recovering Personhood, Presence, and Place in the Digital Age

Felicia Wu Song (PhD, University of Virginia) is a cultural sociologist of media and digital technologies, currently serving as professor of sociology at Westmont College in Santa Barbara. Her publications include *Virtual Communities: Bowling Alone, Online Together* and articles in such scholarly journals as *Gender and Society* and *Information, Communication & Society*.

Thirty years into this magnificent experiment of digital communication, when we look around at our world today, it seems the optimists were mostly right. We don't appear to have completely lost touch with reality. We aren't cloistered in our basements or bedrooms playing the latest equivalent of *World of Warcraft* or *Fortnite*. We still manage to keep our jobs and tend to our families. In fact, many scholars surmise that we may be more connected with each other and more in touch with the "real world" than ever as our technologies enable far-flung friends and loved ones to see each other on screens, share videos and pictures, and even convene virtually during major life moments like childbirths, anniversaries, and graduations.

On the surface of things, while the optimists may have carried the day, even the most strident would have to acknowledge that the actual experience of the internet and the social dynamic of "going online" has completely changed. "Being connected" in today's world means something dramatically different from what it meant back in the 1990s when the internet of yesteryear was accessed through a boxy desktop computer dialed into the wall of our homes or workplaces. Most prominently, "being connected" today is closer to a state of consciousness—a human condition—than a discrete behavior. Unlike the World Wide Web of old, the character of today's digital technologies and social media push us toward living in, what some scholars call, "a state of pervasive or permanent connectivity."[8] Once we are in the digital environment with email, social media, and a device, we don't have to actively "do" anything to be connected. We just are.

A major part of this shift to permanent connectivity occurred when the internet slipped beyond our desktop computers and into our phones and onto our wrists. The internet became *mobile* and *ubiquitous*. With our digital devices now in our pockets, in our bags, and even beneath our pillows when we sleep, we move through our days and nights draped with the immanent sense of the digital. Ever available and accessible, it is perpetually poised to tend to our desires, living and breathing alongside us.

This 24/7 availability of digital experience would not have revolutionized our lives if the reason we seek out the internet remained stuck in the 1990s when we mostly marveled over such e-commerce innovations as Amazon.com, Travelocity, and eBay, or enjoy the novelties of reading the news online or using HTML to build our own website. No, what makes our current state of permanent connectivity so culturally compelling is the fact that the digital media and technology of today have become the primary portal to our social lives. Rather than meeting strangers in AOL chat rooms and Usenet forums during the 1990s, today's social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram capitalize on our existing networks of friends, family, colleagues, and professional contacts. Rather than drawing us away from our family and friends as so many early pessimists of the internet had feared, much of our contemporary digital experience is thoroughly looped into our existing ties. We turn to our screens because it is there that we find and experience friendship, family, and relationship. We are excited about being connected to the internet today not because it connects to the information superhighway or a limitless shopping extravaganza, but because it promises to connect us to the important people in our lives.
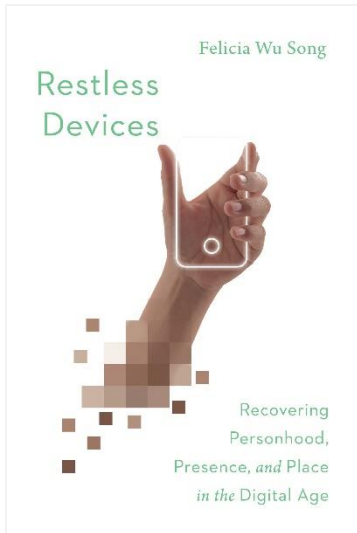
While turning to the digital today offers the possibility of communing with those we love, it is precisely because our digital experiences are *thoroughly social* that its ubiquity and mobility can become a problem. In her poignantly insightful books *Alone Together* and *Reclaiming Conversation,* social psychologist Sherry Turkle explores what it means that friends and family are now digitally tethered. Undoubtedly, to be constantly tethered to loved ones in this way can be reassuring and pleasurable. But Turkle points out that it can also serve as a crutch when we grow to become people incapable of solitude, fearful of being alone with ourselves, and prone to turning to our screens and away from our immediate surroundings, whenever we feel awkward, bored, or anxious.

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Moreover, being digitally tethered can foster a growing expectation of constant availability to one's friends and family, regardless of time or day. Just as the digital is always accessible to us, we come to expect the same of people. And even as some of us may intuitively feel that something is not quite right about this arrangement, we can't shake the tendency to express and measure our commitments to each other by the degree to which we are immediately responsive to our friends' digital requests for attention. We have fast become a people who are always available, always on call. Our young people are growing into their friendships and personal identities in this engrossing fog of social pressures, stresses, and anxieties that had—until this point in human history—mainly been the purview of surgeons, firefighters, and workaholics. (And even then, first responders and doctors were professionally obligated to take time away from their beepers. . . .) This is not even to address the widely recognized fear of missing out (FOMO) that drives people to compulsively check their devices and respond to notifications at a moment's notice.

While our psychological longings to belong and to be "in the know" can hardly resist the scent of real-time news and updates delivered by our devices, our propensity to check our devices are further fed by the *infinite novelty* that is designed into our current digital media and services. From the moment a young person gets her own smartphone, she knows that she is gaining access to a mode of life that is perpetually filled with possibility. Her social media feeds are ceaselessly "refreshed," her games and apps are always "updating," and there are always new texts, snaps, and "stories" to tend.

When the mobile, social, and infinitely novel aspects of the contemporary digital experience are mixed together, the result is a psychological cocktail of pleasures, anxieties, and felt expectations. This is what it means to be living at altitude. There is a soft tyranny that persistently feeds our desires to check one's email, peek at one's Instagram, tweet one more remark, and respond to one more text. Indeed, with our devices in our possession, the promise of fulfillment, completion, and emotional connection feels ever within our reach. These key features are what make the digital experiences of today so difficult to resist, and frankly, much more difficult to even differentiate from our "real lives" because they are so intimately enmeshed in delivering to us our daily sense of reality.

Indeed, being permanently connected means that, even if our devices are not powered on, or even in one's possession, our consciousness has become sufficiently trained and thoroughly immersed in the habits of mind formed by an unceasing awareness of the constantly shifting landscape of what is being said and posted in the digital realm. Life is constantly "being lived elsewhere" as our bodies are in one place, but our minds and consciousness reside focused on the stuff of our screens. Our collective consciousness is increasingly one in which—no matter where we are or what we are doing—we feel the need to catch up: to catch up on our emails, texts, social media feeds, the news of the day. The internet used to be "out there" in an exotic frontier called cyberspace. Now the internet is very much in the mundane of our kitchen counters and living rooms, lubricating our social lives and infused into our daily rhythms and habits of being. The comparison of "real" and "virtual" from the 1990s simply doesn't make sense anymore.
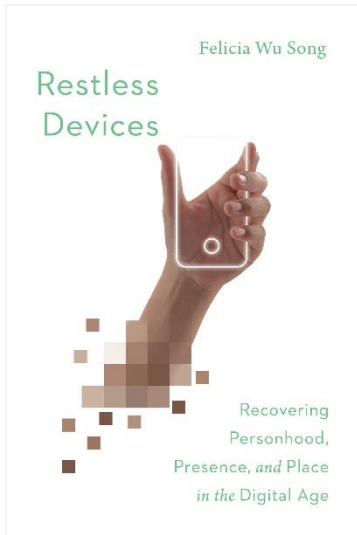
Rather it might be more apt—whether your main point of reference is the Bible or the movie cult classic *The Big Lebowski*—to borrow the ancient notion of "abiding" to describe our relationship with digital technologies today. In the same way that Jesus called his disciples to abide in him as he would abide in them, we too have become a people who abide in the digital, and the digital abides in us. And for *Big Lebowski* fans, in the same passive way that "the Dude abides" and rides the currents of life in a medicated and vague hope that all will turn out fine enough, we too may be becoming a people who run the risk of passively riding the digital currents in a numbed hope that all will turn out just fine enough.

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Is it any wonder that young adults who have spent significant portions of their formative years catering to the whims of social media's notifications and algorithmic gatekeeping now express the staggering discovery that something has gone very wrong? They speak of how "the internet broke my brain" and are on the search for some kind of relief. Indeed, daily we swipe on the glass to refresh our feeds and we gaze with the peculiar gaze of hesitant anticipation commonly seen on casino floors when gamblers pull the lever of the slot machines one more time. Just one more time. We are at altitude, and we don't even know it.

—Taken from chapter 1, "Being at Altitude: Understanding the Digital Ecology"

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A Generative Vision for Your Digital Practices

What events or discussions led you to write *Restless Devices*?

Felicia Wu Song: When people learn that I study digital technology, they often share their confessions and frustrations about the digital habits and tendencies of themselves, their colleagues, their students, or their children. Usually, those conversations presume fairly binary categories about technology (e.g., Is social media good or bad? Is digital technology good or bad?) and people tend to view problems as stemming from personal weakness or failure. Typically, people do not see how our digital usage is tied into the broader forces of the market, digital systems, and digital culture. But people become empowered when they see the larger picture and are suggested a few conceptual handholds for reimagining practical strategies for addressing their concerns. I hope this book helps people move beyond lament and frustration and casts a generative vision for moving forward.

What kind of people are we becoming with personal technologies in hand? In other words, what drives our habits?

Felicia: While there is hardly anything new about being preoccupied or having one's mind be somewhere else that our bodies are not, I believe that the ubiquitous nature of our smart devices and their constant stream of new content leads us to a kind of existence in which we are enveloped in such preoccupation, where the priority always lies in what is to be found on our screens over and above what or who is proximate to us in the flesh.

In similar fashion, to the extent that we let our social media platforms become our primary source of social affirmation and recognition, we are becoming people who depend on those spaces for our constructions of the self and well-being. And because the platforms are not invested in our well-being but exploiting those very human desires for significance in order to keep us tethered to their sites, we are prone to fall prey to their well-researched strategies of delivering digital notifications that foster compliance and compulsions, and we become strangers to our own sense of inwardness and untrained in the capacity to be alone with oneself.

What personal choices or changes have you personally made with regard to your digital practices, and why?

Felicia: One small but meaningful commitment that I make for myself is protecting the fifteen to thirty minutes before I go to sleep and when I wake up by avoiding the use of my phone or laptop. I am trying to create a time and space of freedom in which I can have my own thoughts bookend my day and avoid being driven by whatever I might encounter on my screens.

A more significant decision has been completely removing my account from Facebook. There are a number of reasons why I did this, but one reason why I stopped using that platform was because I was increasingly troubled by how I felt my interiority and thought-life prioritizing what was going on in my social media feed and what responses I was getting on my posts, over and above what was transpiring in my proximate reality.

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What is the main thesis of *Restless Devices*?

Felicia: Our digital dilemmas cannot be wholly explained by moral inadequacies or failures of adaptations. Rather, it is helpful to recognize our problems as being rooted in not only a system of permanent connectivity bent on keeping us tethered, but also how digital technologies are deeply embedded in our institutional practices of work, school, family, and community. Working toward solidifying a more robust vision of personhood is what helps us know how to properly assess and make changes to these systems and institutions. *Restless Devices* argues that Christianity offers viable resources for casting this vision. This book distinctively pairs sociology and theology, along with combining the scholarly with the practical.

What do you hope *Restless Devices* contributes to discussions about digital practices?

Felicia:
- When we view digital practices as a form of liturgy (as a secular liturgy that shapes us towards certain loves), we can better appreciate how it is forming us and how we can be more intentional about what practices we choose to engage.
- Our contemporary digital ecology functions to reproduce and amplify longstanding features of modern industrialization: efficiency, individualism, reification, and control. In this way, there is little that is fundamentally new about its long-term effects, but the degree to which it is institutionalized and ubiquitous in our social landscape is particular to our times.
- Because social media platforms and much of the digital media system are sustained by collective buy-in and participation, any sustainable change in the digital landscape will require collective and organizational effort.

Most of us just make small changes to our digital practices in hopes of lessening their effect on us. Why is that not enough?

Felicia: While temporary stop-gap measures may not ultimately make a substantive dent in the atrophying effect that our digital practices can have on us, I do believe that if we are prepared to genuinely use small adjustments as ways to become more self-aware or catalysts for further reflection on how our habits and practices are forming us, such minor shifts *can* be transformative if we are willing to let them inform bigger (and more costly) changes that we might need to eventually make.

The reason why small stop-gap measures are not enough is because even though we might stop using a social media app for a season, for example, the entire digital ecology and all of its coercive power is still pressing on us in ways that are largely taken for granted. In the end, we have to accept that some necessary changes may indeed be costly, but if we have come to firmly grasp what freedom or flourishing is worth pursuing in our lives, the change will be worth it.

What are some practices from Christian tradition that can help us change how technology is affecting and/or shaping us?

Felicia: Traditional spiritual disciplines like solitude, fasting, silence, sabbath, and contemplative prayer can prove helpful when pointedly directed at our tendencies to be constantly in the slipstream of the digital. While we may often view these disciplines as somewhat punitive because of their asceticism or sobriety, I believe the heart of their formative power comes from being practices that train us for freedom, freedom from the tyranny of our own appetites, fears, and compulsions, because they are grounding us in the presence and divine love of God.

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