

## Positioning Our Everyday Lives over Modern Technology

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### ABSTRACT

The problem this article addresses is that we neglect the ordinary and everyday aspects of our lives in our world of modern technology. Our modern world is saturated with technology. Even simple things like walking down the street or boiling a pot of water use technology. Technology benefits our general human development because it helps provide shelter, education, and medicine for people throughout the world. However, modern technology also can be a burden. The amount of information we receive about political elections, regional wars, and the latest celebrity entanglements is often more than we want. In other words, more than we can handle. This research aims to consider whether we can be aware of our everyday living in a world of technology and whether it is possible to place our everyday lives above modern technology. The research considers literature in the context of the everyday and technology. This article hopes to show that we can position our everyday lives above the constant presence of technology and its barrage of information. By seeing the contrast between our everyday living and our relationship with technology, we may be able to disconnect ourselves from the constant consumption and instant gratification that modern technology has provided.

**Keywords:** everyday, technology, Thoreau, Walden, consumption, humanity

### INTRODUCTION

This article addresses the problem of neglecting the ordinary and everyday aspects of our lives in our world of modern technology. Indeed, our modern world is infused with technology. We communicate with each other through cell phones and social media. We drive to work and school in vehicles with engines regulated by miniature computers. When we are sick, doctors examine us with medical devices that inspect our blood levels, bone density, and the activity of our heart. It feels like technology is everywhere. Even simple things like walking down the street or boiling a pot of water use technology. It is easy to forget that shoes and stoves are also technologies, though they were developed generations ago and seem so simple today. In short, the everyday world we are constantly engaged in is a world of technology.

In many ways, technology benefits our overall human development because it helps provide shelter, education, and medicine for people around the planet. Additionally, in our daily lives, technology is valuable because it enables us to go to work, get food at a store, and do things that may be more interesting, like reading about new technologies.

However, modern technology may seem like it is too much. That is, the amount of information we receive about political elections, regional wars, and the latest celebrity entanglements is more than we prefer to accept. Or more than we can handle. Moving away from the onslaught of information is difficult because its source is closely connected to how we live today. As many of us know, putting down our phones when we must be available to pick up a child is difficult. It is impossible to avoid advertising when it is plastered on billboards along highways and screens that come alive when we pump gas at a station. With this barrage of information and constant noise, it is difficult to enjoy our daily lives — just to be ourselves and who we are while appreciating our lives that day.

This research aims to consider whether we can be aware of our everyday living in a world of technology and whether it is possible to position our everyday lives above modern

technology. However, the scope of our everyday lives is broad. Accordingly, this article narrows the scope by concentrating on technology in our everyday lives. Within this scope, the objectives of this research are the following:

- 1) Examine the everyday aspects of our daily lives.
- 2) Investigate why the everyday aspects of our daily lives are important.
- 3) Explore how modern technology takes us away from the everyday.
- 4) Identify the interconnections of the everyday and modern technology.
- 5) Consider how we can position everydayness above modern technology.

The research considers literature in the context of the everyday and technology. Accordingly, it employs literature that regards our everyday lives and how we exist in a technology-focused modern world. This research hopes to show that we can position our everyday lives above the constant presence of technology and its barrage of information. By seeing the contrast between our everyday living and our consumptive relationship with technology, we may better disengage ourselves from the constant consumption and instant gratification that modern technology has offered us.

### RETURNING TO THE BASICS

Living in the everyday and going back to the basics of our daily life is a shift away from the hectic pace and constant noise of our modern world. Walking along a woodland path and listening to the leaves rustle in the trees above is an example of enjoying the everyday. So too, is standing quietly at a pond's edge and watching painted turtles bask in the sun.

Unfortunately, these simple activities are not always available. However, we can participate in the everyday through the writings of others who transport us into their examination of daily living. One such writer is Henry David Thoreau, who provides a glimpse of his life in a small hut in the Massachusetts woods.

In his book *Walden*, Thoreau shares his observations and experiences in the woodlands at Walden Pond. The book, as well as Thoreau's experience in this natural setting, focuses on the ordinary aspects and circumstances of the pond and its surrounding woods. It is a focus on the everyday:

The phenomena of the year take place every day in a pond on a small scale. Every morning, generally speaking, the shallow water is being warmed more rapidly than the deep, though it may not be made so warm after all, and every evening it is being cooled more rapidly until the morning. The day is an epitome of the year. (Thoreau, 2015, p. 153)

Thoreau's writing is about the everyday because he describes everyday aspects of this natural environment. However, Thoreau conveys everydayness through more than natural settings. His writing is an attention to the details of ordinary things and sounds at the serene pond and dense woods near his simple dwelling. Sounds are characteristics of our ordinary lives:

As I climbed the hill again toward my old bean-field, I listened to the ancient, familiar, immortal, dear cricket sound under all others, hearing at first some distinct chirps; but when these ceased I was aware of the general earth-song, which my hearing had not heard, amid which these were only taller flowers in a bed, and I wondered if behind or beneath this there was not some other chant yet more universal. Why do we not hear when this begins in the spring? and when it ceases in the fall? Or is it too gradual? (Thoreau, 2009, p. 57)

In our modern world, we tend to tune out sounds. Leaf-blowers in a nearby yard and rushing cars on a busy street are suitable sounds to tune out. However, other sounds are intriguing. Paying attention to sounds, where they come from, and how far away they are connects us to the world around us in a close and personal way:

I heard my old musical, simple-noted owl. The sound of the dreaming frogs prevails over the others. Occasionally a bullfrog near me made an obscene noise, a sound like an eructation, near me. I think they must be imbodyed eructations. (Thoreau, 2009, p. 57)

When we read Thoreau, we can imagine the wooded paths he walked. We can see the sun filtering through the trees and the sounds he pauses to hear in the woods. His words bring us into the everyday, yet words and descriptions cannot fully explain our experiences. Thoreau's depiction of dreaming frogs reminds us that our human senses and thinking may not correctly convey the world around us. In an interesting turn, Thoreau later discovered that his frogs were, in fact, woodland toads (Hesford, 2015, p. 50). The case of mistaken identity is slightly humorous, yet it highlights the challenges of our daily lives and how new insights arise, even in situations we have experienced countless times.

Tauber (2014, pp. 59-60) suggests that Thoreau's writing was a philosophy based on ordinary experience. Indeed, we can imagine the ordinary experiences of Thoreau's daily walks and observations in his woodland setting. However, we may not be comfortable with a philosophy that is a journal of walks and observations. Tauber suggests that Thoreau's writing may not appear to be a philosophy at first glance. For instance, it does not contain the structures of hierarchy, the expositions of knowledge, and the machinations of logical processes that we usually associate with philosophical works. Yet, Thoreau's writing depicts a valuable way of viewing and living in the world because it responds to our need to reconnect to the everyday. As Tauber (2014, p. 59) notes, Thoreau's writing is timely because it coincides with our quest for simpler living. It also aligns with twentieth-century movements to regain ordinary experience.

### THE EVERYDAY IS IMPORTANT

The everyday is valuable because it is where we work, play, and live. In our modern world, the everyday is also where we use technology and write about it.

As I write now, I do so in a room that overlooks a marsh. It is the room where I tend to do most of my writing. I do that writing on an old laptop where the keys are worn, and I wonder how much longer the hard drive will bid me well.

In a sense, my description of writing shows how we can use technology in different ways. Indeed, technology is a tool that we use in our daily lives. Yet, we can also use technology to initiate a moment of reflection — to pause and take the time to notice our worn keyboards or look out windows to watch swaying trees dance with the wind. This time of pausing, of quiet observing, is a time of being away from the rush and noticing our own selves. That is, being with ourselves. We tend to take this aspect of the everyday for granted. Moreover, we neglect the opportunities throughout our day to experience these moments of peace and respite from the rush of our modern lives.

Our daily lives are infused with the pervasiveness of the everyday. The everyday is where our homes, friends, and families exist — the vital things in life. For Pink (2012), the everyday is the “centre of human existence, the essence of who we are and our location in the world” (p. 143). Yet, the scope of the everyday goes beyond our human existence and relationships with friends and family. In other words, things in our world are also important to us, and they are important because they are meaningful to us. One way everyday objects become meaningful is by their connection to a loved one or special event. A photograph, an old baseball glove, or a set of silverware are ordinary things that can become meaningful through our memories.

Everyday things also become meaningful when we find beauty or artfulness in them. As Saito (2013) suggests, “There are many aesthetic gems hidden in our everyday life, but we do not notice, let alone appreciate, most of them because we usually do not engage with them as aesthetic objects” (p. 244).

The everyday is ubiquitous in our daily lives, yet it is easy to overlook even though it brings vibrancy to our day. Henri Lefebvre describes the vibrancy of the everyday in his book *Critique of Everyday Life*:

Thus bit by bit there is a growing conviction that in one sense lavish institutions and grandiose ideas were façades – theatrical costumes. . . . And yet, where is genuine reality to be found? Where do the genuine changes take place? In the unmysterious depths of everyday life! (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 157)

For Lefebvre, the everyday is where life happens. Yet, the everyday is meaningful because it is genuine — without the fakery of celebrities and commercials coercing us to buy products and services for the purpose of profit. It is a genuine life where real change occurs and where we pay attention to ordinary things. In a way, it is an acceptance and appreciation of ordinary things, the present moment, and our own selves (Suereth, 2023, p. 83). Such acceptance is valuable because the ordinary day and the present moment are rich with genuine living. As Merton (2012, pp. 40-41) notes, the present moment is the place of our human growth.

### **TECHNOLOGY TAKES US AWAY FROM THE EVERYDAY**

Centuries ago, hearths were the centerpieces of homes. Families depended on hearths to keep warm and cook food. Borgmann (1984) describes the hearth as the focal point of the home: “The family ate by the hearth and made sacrifices to the housegods before and after the meal. The hearth sustained, ordered, and centered house and family” (p. 196). Roles and chores revolved around hearths; tending them was an everyday event for families and communities.

Today, hearths are rarely found in modern homes, and with their loss, the focus on family and home has lessened. Our modern homes now have central heating systems that provide warmth in an innocuous and invisible way. We only notice them when they break down (Heikkerö, 2005, p. 252).

Modern technologies, such as central heating systems, have significant advantages over older technologies — modern systems are more efficient and easier to use. However, there is something about technology that seems to have run askew.

For Heidegger, our current approach to technology, which is a mode of efficiency, of processing volumes of things, and getting the most out of resources, puts everything associated with technology in a state of availability to be processed (Dreyfus & Spinoza, 1997, p. 163). Heidegger refers to this mode as standing reserve. “The essence of modern technology starts man upon the way of that revealing through which the real everywhere, more or less distinctly, becomes standing-reserve” (Heidegger, 2013, p. 24).

This control of the resources, the standing reserve involved in the technology, changes how we view those resources. Through this mode of control, we begin to look at all the resources that go into technology as objects to be used. In this way, the natural resources of our earth and ocean and the crudely named human resources become objects for consumption and profit (Dreyfus & Spinoza, 1997, p. 163).

On the other hand, craft-making uses a variety of human faculties, including emotions, thinking abilities, and motor skills — especially those associated with our hands. Heidegger notes the importance of our hands in our daily lives and in our making:

But the craft of the hand is richer than we commonly imagine. The hand does not only grasp and catch, or push and pull. The hand reaches and extends, receives and welcomes — and not just things: the hand extends itself, and receives its own welcome in the hands of others. (Heidegger, 1976, p. 16)

Craftmaking employs our human capacities, and in so doing, it engages our human selves in the making. In our modern technological world, it may come as no surprise that there have been declines in the skill and care of making things. Indeed, such declines would arise in a

modern world that pushes countries toward being "developed." Unfortunately, in developed countries, crafts and even art have a lower status than technology (MacEachern, 2004, p. 141).

The difference between craft-making and technology is evident. Craft making builds things, not devices (MacEachren, 2004, p. 144). On the other hand, technology and its conspiring devices require no holistic human skills. Instead, such devices are assembled by other machines or through the repetitive movements of someone who acts as a human drone in an assembly line.

The ubiquity of devices has transformed our world into one of immediate availability. That is, we now live in a world of instant gratification where devices provide our every need or at least a rendering. For Chughtai (2020, 32, p. 34), the result is that our connection of real-world → satisfaction has been supplanted by a connection of device → satisfaction, with little need for anyone to return to the everyday. Consequently, we no longer obtain meaning from our everyday living; instead, we are left with devices to show us the meaning in our lives.

### **THE INTERCONNECTIONS OF THE EVERYDAY AND TECHNOLOGY**

Technology is twined with our daily lives in apparent ways, such as the computer you may use now to read these words. Yet, the connections between technology and the everyday are sometimes concealed, though they may be hiding in plain sight.

#### **Technology Exists within the Fabric of the Everyday**

Technology is closely connected to our everyday lives because we use it throughout our day. For example, simply going to the store involves some type of technology. If we ride a bicycle to the store, we use a technology that is centuries old. Walking uses technology when pedestrian signals allow us to cross the street. The shoes we wear are a technology that is thousands of years old. There seems to be no escape from technology when just going to the store is infused with it.

Similarly, there is no escape from our connection with others when a defining aspect of cell phones is their ubiquity. However, their significance is due to more than their high numbers. There is also a constant sense of them — that they are always present. We feel this presence when, at any moment, we could receive a call from a relative or a text from a friend. Our phones are always available for directions to a bus station, a check on the weather, always available to satisfy our needs. The presence intensifies when we are with others. Anyone standing next to us or walking toward us could start using their phones at any point in time.

#### **The Everyday Exists in the Designs of Technology**

Some technologies are developed purposefully to be used in our daily lives; in that sense, the everyday is built into them. For example, watches, vehicles, and even forks and knives have components that enable those technologies to be helpful in our activities throughout the day. In a way, the everyday aspects of our daily lives exist in those technologies because the ordinary things we do in our daily lives are closely connected to them. Another example is the technology of clothing, which keeps us warm and sheltered from the elements. The infusion of technology into our daily lives has few boundaries.

When we consider technologies like shoes, clothing, and cell phones, we see nothing inherently harmful about them. Indeed, those technologies protect our feet and keep us warm, enable us to connect with friends, and are valuable components of our ordinary human lives. The problem, then, is not the existence of technologies but how we approach and use them. That is, when we give greater importance to technologies than our everyday lives, our everyday lives are minimized. We may think this minimization is trivial; however, everydayness is where we obtain meaning in our lives.

The everyday and technology are twined together — they inform one another through avenues of needs and capabilities. That is, the needs of our everyday lives and the capabilities of technology. Giving precedence to technology denigrates the everyday and, in so doing, barricades avenues of the everyday from ourselves.

### EVERYDAYNESS ABOVE MODERN TECHNOLOGY

One way to resolve the importance we place on technology is by realizing that the everyday is primary. That is, we should experience the everyday before experiencing technology. Another way of looking at it is to go through the everyday to get to technology. This primacy on the everyday is essential because it focuses on ordinary things and our daily activities.

This concept of focusing is certainly not new and is shared by Borgmann and Heidegger, as well as Eastern philosophies (Hanh, 2020, pp. 61, 110). Borgmann describes this focusing as an attention to ordinary things in our world, yet he says that these things do not oppose technology. Instead, focal things are in harmony with technology:

Still we might say this about focal things in general. They are concrete, tangible, and deep, admitting of no functional equivalents; they have a tradition, structure, and rhythm of their own. They are unprocurable and finally beyond our control. They engage us in the fullness of our capacities. And they thrive in a technological setting. (Borgmann, 1984, p. 219)

Heidegger also describes focusing, but his description is more about the natural world around us and the benefits of simpler technologies such as old stone bridges. Such technologies are valuable because they enable us to do human things:

The old stone bridge's humble brook crossing gives to the harvest wagon its passage from the fields into the village and carries the lumber cart from the field path to the road. The highway bridge is tied into the network of long-distance traffic, paced as calculated for maximum yield. (Heidegger, 2001, p. 150)

Focusing on things can help us see them for what they are — everyday objects that we can use in our daily lives. A wine jug, a stone bridge, and a family meal are not only things in our everyday lives. They also mark a craft made nearby, a pathway toward a market, and skillful cooking — things that make our everyday lives interesting and meaningful (Dreyfus & Spinoza, 1997, p. 166).

We may understand the significance of holiday meals with family and friends. Yet, in our busy lives, we are challenged to find the time or energy to have those meals. Borgmann remarks on this challenge when he says, “technology shows its force most disturbingly as it dissolves the tradition of cooking and the celebration of family meals, both ferial and festal” (Borgmann, 1984, p. 59). These meals are important because they help us reconnect with each other. In the context of technology, these meals take us away from the haste of consuming and enable us to focus on human conversations and the preparation of food.

Cooking is vital because it culminates in meals we often share together, and accordingly, these ordinary meals become human moments (Volf, 2017, pp. 60-61). Borgmann describes the significance of sharing meals:

In a festive meal, however, the food is served, one of the most generous gestures human beings are capable of. The serving is of a piece with garnishing; garnishing is the final phase of cooking, and cooking is one with preparing the food. And if we are blessed with rural circumstances, the preparation of food draws near the harvesting and the raising of the vegetables in the garden close by. This context of activities is embodied in persons. (Borgmann, 1984, p. 205)

A focus on meals is an example of Borgmann's focal practice that detaches us from the way we use modern technology. Here, we see how family meals are a pathway to better our

lives. It is a pathway contrasting to the constant seeking and consuming associated with devices (Heikkerö, 2005, p. 253).

These occasions of focus, such as meals with family, tending to a garden, or walking a woodland path, are valuable because they provide a sense of authenticity. They are further valuable because they are practical things we can do today in our own homes, yards, or neighborhoods. In a way, Borgmann extends the human focus that Heidegger notes about wine jugs and stone bridges. Borgmann's extension is interesting and beneficial because it expands the dialog of the things of focal practice (Heikkerö, 2005, p. 254).

For both Borgmann and Heidegger, our focus on things and events, like old stone bridges and family meals, helps us move away from modern technology's consumptive and on-demand aspects. However, these traditional things of our focus could be viewed as romantic or even nostalgic (Dreyfus, 2009, p. 32; Heikkerö, 2005, p. 254). Indeed, this view makes sense when such focal things are hard to find in our lives. Perhaps this romantic view may not be a criticism as much as a highlight of the inauthenticity that has reached our daily lives today.

Heikkerö (2005, pp. 255-257) describes another focus but from a perspective of Japanese culture. The tea ceremony is an occasion to observe harmony and tranquility while focusing on the tea. It is easy to imagine such a ceremony disentangled from our hectic world in a quiet room of bamboo, soft voices, and trickling water. In a way, it is an activity of focus — a focus on being in the room, the things in the room, and the tea. As Heikkerö (2005, p. 255) notes, the ceremony and other focal practices are occasions set aside to gain a better understanding of ourselves, others, and our reality. In striking contrast are the circumstances that arise with technology: situations filled with seeking, obtaining, and urgent gratification.

In our modern world of suburban haste and city commotion, it is difficult to find the respite that Thoreau describes in his woodland walks and pond contemplations. However, even in city living, spaces and moments of respite are possible. Green spaces are vital in city living because they help us connect to the natural foundation of our human existence (Lee, 2023, pp. 4-5). If access is available, rooftops can be a peaceful getaway from the street life below. Quiet spaces in libraries can help us unwind even if we are not looking for a book. Of course, an occasional tearoom could be a fine place to focus on the serenity that Heikkerö mentions (2005, p. 255).

City life is hectic and often clamorous, though it also may be a place of focus. If we pay close attention to daily life in a city, we can see that rhythms exist (Borgmann, 1999, p. 225). There is a rhythm of vehicles starting and stopping and traffic lights turning red and green — a rhythm of pedestrians parading on sidewalks and crossing streets. Rhythms of the city also include sounds, though not the soft sounds of a tearoom. Instead, bleating horns and the rush of tires against hard pavement are typical. Sometimes, these sounds are so familiar that they move to the background and become almost unnoticeable, like the trickle of a small bamboo fountain. Focusing on these rhythms accentuates them, and they seem to become a fabric of the habitat. However, these rhythms also can be a respite — a step away from the noise and a focus on the pulse of human living.

Focusing on anything can be challenging. Focusing requires concentration and energy, and it is difficult to remain focused over long periods. Furthermore, focusing on things like the rhythms of city living is not practical when crossing a busy street. It is essential to know when to focus and what to focus on. Driving to a store for groceries, talking to customers at work, and sawing wood in the shop all require a concentration that is crucial in those environments.

Each of us lives and works in the best way for ourselves. We live and work in different daily spaces that require us to concentrate in different ways. However, moments of respite are still possible in these spaces. For example, we may notice the trees swaying in the wind at a stoplight. At work, we may spend a moment watching clouds outside a window or simply focus on the feel of our bodies sitting down.

Living and working in these different environments suggests we must see ourselves in multiple ways. That is, we should realize that we live through different roles and, accordingly, see ourselves in those roles (Dreyfus & Spinoza, 1997, pp. 173-174). Borgmann remarks on this need to be flexible in a variety of environments, and he depicts our changing focus as a recentering of ourselves and our reality:

Musicians recognize gardeners; horse people understand artisans. . . . The experience. . . opens up a wider reality that allows one to refocus one's life when failing strength or changing circumstances. (Borgmann, 1992, p. 122)

This recentering makes sense because we must recenter ourselves in many situations. We should remember that few things, if any at all, remain constant. The seasons and settings of the sun change our environment. We change our minds about what we like and do not like. Additionally, looming in our lives is the persistent process of atrophy, which changes our bodies and minds and apparently attends to everyone. Through all these changes, we must constantly adjust our thoughts, feelings, and the pathways upon which we travel.

These ways of living, focusing on meals with friends, the respite from noise and consumption, and the recentering of ourselves, describe how we live in our everyday lives. They are ways of living that are already part of our lives, though we may not notice these ways or notice them enough. Yet, being aware of our everyday living highlights the benefits of everydayness. It highlights the relationships, the respite, and the recentering in our lives, which, at the end of the day, provides meaning to our everyday living.

## CONCLUSION

This article began by describing the challenges we encounter with modern technology in our everyday lives. It discussed what everydayness is and what going back to the basics means in consideration of Thoreau's writings at Walden Pond. It describes why the everyday is important and how modern technology takes us away from the everyday. The article then depicted the interconnections between the everyday and technology. It showed that technology exists in the fabric of the everyday, yet the everyday exists in technology. Finally, the article considered how we can position the everyday aspects of our daily lives above modern technology.

The findings show that we can prioritize our everyday lives over modern technology. Focusing on human activities like cooking meals for friends and family is one example of prioritizing our everyday lives. Finding moments of respite in quiet spaces like libraries and tea rooms can offer time away from hectic schedules. In city living, focusing on the rhythms of city life can help us detach from the mass of noise and movement. Moments of recentering allow us to check ourselves and our pathway in a fast and furious world. These are some ways we can prioritize our everyday lives over technology. Yet, other ways of prioritizing our everyday lives are also possible.

Further investigations could consider everydayness in the context of particular technologies like synthetic biology and artificial intelligence. Such technologies can be relevant to our everyday lives because they apply to the food and devices we use on a daily basis. However, they are also technologies we can design and shape in detailed ways and could be used to enhance or highlight some everyday aspects of our daily lives.

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