

Devices of the Soul: Battling for Our Selves in an Age of Machines

By Steve Talbott

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Devices of the Soul: Battling for Our Selves in an Age of Machines is a book about how the construction of modern human identity is being perverted by the excessive use of the Internet and computers in the twenty-first century. The book focuses on the effects of technology through a sociological lens, but various legal issues are explored as well. Specifically, Talbott discusses issues with regards to pornography as they pertain to the rights of children, privacy rights, and free expression rights on the Internet. The crux of his argument is that we must try to remove ourselves more and more from the everyday uses of the Internet. Talbott believes that we need to make the Internet less of a necessity in our society. By doing so, human kind will learn to grow in a more positive way, resulting in a benefit to all of society.

Steve Talbott's critique of our overly technologically dependent society may come as a shock, as he himself actually began his career in the high-tech industry, serving as a software programmer. In his more recent work, Talbott asks us to pry ourselves from the confines of our computers for just a few hours a day to "meditate" and philosophize about our identity in a state of nature. His other books, such as the award winning *The Future Does Not Compute: Transcending the Machines in Our Midst*, have questioned how our human identities have been negatively shaped by technology. He has also written for the much esteemed online newsletter *NetFuture: Technology and Human Responsibility*.

In *Devices of the Soul* Talbott writes that technology is an instrument for a “necessary detachment of the individual self from a nurturing surround that otherwise can become stifling, as when an infant remains too long in the womb.” Or, to put it frankly, technology brainwashes mankind. Technology makes humanity behave “not as a ruse devised by our awakening selves, but as a denial of ourselves.” While he offers few examples of why and how technology changes our identity, he does seem to imply that this technological altering of our identity is obvious, Talbott writes “...today it is technology that cocoons us and promises us endless entertainment, distraction, and freedom from cares. There is scarcely a need to elaborate this point. Just watch the advertisements on television for a half hour.” Furthermore, he believes that technology separates mankind from the natural world, which in turn makes our human view of society, reality, and nature seem more alien and less connected to our collective consciousness and our self identity.

This argument may seem to be a simple philosophical statement bearing no practical methods to change our society. However, Talbott doesn't leave off where most philosophers do; he gives us practical solutions to the problem of technology's stranglehold on our consciousness and collective human identity. His solutions for the breakdown of human identity due to technology seem overly simplistic to solve all the economic, social, and even legal problems with the Internet, but perhaps his statement is necessary.

There are three major, specific topics that Talbott believes are in critical condition due to the warped reality created by our technological dependence: bioethics, education, and privacy. (Note: there are many other topics discussed in the book, but these three relate most to current legal issues.) Talbott writes of solutions to these three very important issues that have affected our society and also our legal culture.

Talbott has a refined and somewhat paradoxical view of how technology has affected our way of looking at issues like disabilities, abortions, and stem cell research. Though Talbott is a proponent of using technology to help cure disease, he believes that too many people in the legal and health fields attempt to make disabilities a flaw in our society. While Talbott states that he would never ban the use of stem cells to cure an illness or disease because a stem cell used in research takes an “innocent life” he also believes that this is not the only option. Talbott is indeed a strong supporter of stem cell research and using technology to cure diseases, illnesses, and mental and physical disabilities. However, Talbott also believes that alternative, non-technological forms of healing and therapies need to be explored and should not be ignored. For example, Talbott tells the true story of the blind French resistance leader, Jacques Lusseyran, who was able to survive the prison camps of Nazi Germany after being caught for fighting for the French resistance. Talbott, tells of how Lusseryran was able to sense the locations of trees on roads even though he was completely blind. Talbott explains that the sixth sense that Lussyran had that allowed him to sense the placement of things in spite of being blind was caused by his closeness to nature and his own consciousness as a human being. Talbott writes that “diseases” and “disabilities” should not just be looked at as deformities that need to be cured through technology, but instead, people should be able to learn to live with their “disabilities” to acknowledge that their “disabilities” are just differences and that people should overcome them through their own consciousness, not through technology.

Education is another issue where Talbott focuses his arguments that technology is destroying mankind’s consciousness and sense of self. Talbott believes that schools should not have computers in every classroom. He describes how children are becoming less socially aware of each other and how computers have added to the anti-social personality of children of the

Internet generation. He also states that we should not attempt to solve the availability to children of sexual content on the Internet through the blocking of websites or through excessive and unconstitutional regulation such as the 1996 Communications Decency Act and the 1998 Children Online Protection Act, which destroy the freedom of access to the Internet. Instead, parents should learn to be less dependent on the Internet. He wants children to be educated with more social programs, hands on educational programs, and other non-technologically dependent forms of education. While Talbott insists he is not *technophobic*, he makes a good argument that children and our society in general is overly dependent on technology and therefore we need to take a step back, and look into ourselves without the help of a computer.

The issue of privacy on the Internet has also become a major concern to politicians and lawyers and Talbott tackles the privacy on the Internet debate head on. People have lost their privacy at the expense of the rapid availability of a multitude of information that is only a click away. Identity theft has become one of the fastest growing crimes in the United States. Talbott believes that the lack of privacy on the Internet is due, in part, to the loss of social identity. Talbott discusses anthropologist Elena Padilla's report on a poorer area of New York City, where there is a relative feeling of trust among most of the members of a very large, very dense community. Padilla mentions how the individuals know each other on a personal level and therefore, with that trust, they keep an eye out for each other. For example, people leave the keys to their apartment at the local grocer's store to allow friends to enter their homes. Talbott believes that the Internet's anonymity reduces trust and that, as a result, there is a lack of privacy that fosters crime. Whereas before, people could leave their keys at a friends and their friends would never enter their homes and rely on community watch groups help prevent crime, the Internet makes individuals so inhuman, that people feel they can invade other's personal lives

because of a disconnect between themselves and other people. Talbott believes in order to protect privacy, we need to stop being so dependent on the Internet. The virtual community should be diminished and the real human community should be growing. When this occurs, the problems of cyber crime will decrease.

In conclusion, *Talbott's Devices of the Soul: Battling for Our Selves in an Age of Machines* is a discussion about the over dependence on the Internet. Although he claims that he is not against the Internet and he supports the use of the Internet (he has worked as a programmer), Talbott wants human identity to be based upon real human interaction. While lawyers and politicians are attempted to solve the problems of the Internet by regulating the Internet, Talbott believes the best way to solve the problems of the Internet is by removing ourselves from dependence on it. Whether or not Talbott's suggestions will ever be implemented, the book would be beneficial and interesting reading for high technology lawyers, especially those doing policy work, who are trying to advance solutions to the many negative influences that the Internet has brought upon society.