

Facing Facebook: Social Networking and Worldview

Byron Barlowe digs beneath the surface of the various social networking phenomena like Facebook and Twitter.

It seems like everybody is on *Facebook*! At 350 million members worldwide and growing exponentially, this social networking community would be the third largest country in the world! One hundred million Americans,^{1} including 86 percent of American women, now have a profile on at least one social networking site, nearly double from a year earlier.^{2}

“...Twitter has radically changed the face of online communication. This year alone [2009], usage has grown by 900 percent...”^{3} But kids prefer the ever-popular YouTube video-sharing site. Two-thirds of Internet users around the world visit blogs and social networks, making it more popular than email. And older users are flocking to social sites. So this is about you and your friends, too, mom and dad!

So what is *social networking*? At a social site like Facebook.com, when you find another member, you click a button that says “Add as Friend.” Now, you and that person have a connection on the Web site that others can see. They are a member of your network, and you are a member of theirs. Also, you can see who your friends know, and who your friends’ friends know. You’re no longer a stranger, so you can contact them more easily. As the website Common Craft explains, “This solves a real-world problem because your network has hidden opportunities. Social networking sites make these connections between people visible.”^{4}

“These applications have given users an entirely new dimension of interactivity on the Web, as people are able to share videos, photos, links, ideas, and information at a heretofore

unseen speed and with uncanny ease that enhances the Web experience of every Internet user.”{5}

But some push back. “It’s just trivia, a waste of time,” they say. Silly games and self-centered platforms where folks can parade their lives. There is some truth in that charge. But it’s important to understand such a powerful, widespread medium and seek to redeem it.

One commentator said, “Time bends when I open Facebook: it’s as if I’m simultaneously a journalist/wife/mother in Berkeley and the goofy girl I left behind in Minneapolis.”{6} But the accessibility and immediacy is not always good or profound. Be ready to have your life history, long-lost friends and personal ghosts pop up in unexpected ways through social networking. In the same way, the future could be at stake with each post and link you put up: Whatever goes online, stays online. One’s reputation will be marked for years to come by her online life for good or ill.

However, the meteoric rise of social networking has occurred for good reason. In Facebook, Xanga or MySpace, research shows that we *extend* current relationships online. It can all be very trivial or fairly meaningful, depending on how it’s used. In this way, social networking is not unlike meeting up at a coffee shop or at the back fence. Younger generations are known to be more conversational than older ones. In my middle-aged circles, many seem to have written it off prematurely.

We’ll explore some worldview implications of social networking through the insightful book *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*.{7} Using a grid introduced by media professor and technology prophet Marshall McLuhan that traces media’s culture-shaping influence, we’ll briefly assess how this technology enhances our capabilities, retrieves lost ones, makes obsolete other things, and reverses into unintended consequences. In other words, we’ll ask and partially answer basic questions like: What will this

blossoming media change? What am I giving up if I use it? How can I control it for myself and my kids? Will it end up controlling me—or has it already?

“Hanging out” online, for all its similarities to in-person conversation **is** fundamentally different. And those differences are sure to change not only our socializing, but our worldviews—maybe even our faith.

“The Medium is the Message”

McLuhan famously stated that “the medium is the message,” meaning that the content of media is overshadowed in its influence by the influence of the very medium (technology) through which it is communicated. Hipps believes media has been a fundamental change agent of culture, even faith. We’ll explain and explore a bit McLuhan’s grid of change and how it applies to social networking.

In discussing social networking sites like Facebook and their effect on people, it’s helpful to look back at other media to see their culture-shaping influence. Note that I didn’t write “the content of other media,” but rather, “other media.” For example, before Gutenberg’s movable-type printing press, faith was passed down orally and through imagery like stained glass windows and church icons. The concrete stories from the synoptic Gospels ruled the day; the Apostle Paul’s deep, abstract letters were virtually ignored. Then, print technology unleashed a new way to think and even to believe—an emphasis on *individual faith* accessed through *critical reason*. This print phenomenon *retrieved* the abstract, doctrinally rich letters of Paul from the dusty shelves of history. This, in turn, ignited the Reformation, writes Shane Hipps. One result: the church transformed from a highly communal body into a mass of individuals and put religious mystery largely out of touch.

Hipps writes that, *in its extremes*, the influence of print

reduced the gospel to incomplete abstract propositions and made many Christians arrogant about what we can know with certainty. [This is what some in the emerging church conversation react against, but we cannot pursue that topic here.]

Perhaps less controversially, Hipps shares the maxim that any media–social networking included–changes its users in a similar way print technology did. Marshall McLuhan famously stated that “the medium *is* the message.” He meant that the medium itself does more to affect people than even the content that it carries.

The adage, “We become what we behold”[{8}](#) seems to hold forth in social science and neurology, as well. Brain scientists are finding that exposure to and use of media of any kind changes the brain’s wiring, so there’s more at stake here than just bad content or how we use our time.[{9}](#)

While writing this transcript, I had to fight to get alone and maintain focus. I consciously avoided the distraction and fragmentation my mind easily undergoes while *Twittering* (or “tweeting”) and *Facebooking* (see, social networking even spawns new verbs, like “friending”!). The social networking experience is like walking around at a party filled with friends in various conversations: lots of brief comments, retorts and jokes. My need for individual, abstract thinking was at risk at the “Facebook party.” (Ironically, I was in the abstract writing mode regarding a very different sort of medium: non-abstract, simplistic, disjointed, visually based, online digital “communities.”)

New media may bring us to and keep us more “in the moment” and in touch with real people, all good things. But so-called *virtual communities* may create very unreal relationships. Not to mention a loss of in-depth thinking, conversation and fellowship to build current relationships. Two years ago a commentator wrote regarding American youth on social networks,

“The rules of relationship are...being rewritten, and...are being shaped by a distinctly media-centered worldview rather than a Christian one.[{10}](#) However, things may be changing, at least among Australian youth, where “they want more connections with their friends that aren’t digital, that are tangible. They’re starting to question the authenticity of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. They want technology to assist rather than dominate the way they communicate.”[{11}](#)

David Watson is an entrepreneurial “pastor” exploring the legitimacy of online shepherding. He believes it’s a general relationship issue not confined to online participation: “Any time you are not fully present with whatever community you happen to be with—whether online or offline—you can hurt people... We just notice the online stuff more because it is new and people tend to spend lots of time with new things before they figure out how everything balances out.”[{12}](#)

So what’s the big deal? Most Facebook, MySpace or Orkut members aren’t changing their entire view of reality, truth, God or mankind based on interactions with online friends. No, it’s not the obvious pitfall of cults or wild philosophies that people usually deal with day to day anyway. Under-the-radar ways of being and communicating can incrementally change who we are. It’s the subtle way that our *view* of life changes that concerns me most. Are moment-by-moment Tweets dumbing us down in various ways? Have we come to expect meaning in 140-character bits? Twitter shows the flow of life in tiny chunks some call a lifestream. But are those snippets, especially when seen intermittently, meaningful?

Media swirls around us and we become immune to the white noise. But McLuhan was a master at stepping back to study what is going on with media to see how to cooperate with and thus handle the vortex. Churches and ministries love to jump on new technologies to share the old, old story—but before diving in headlong, we need to remember McLuhan’s warning: we become like the media that we use.

Social Networking Redeems and Resurrects Good Things

What is the technology of social networking enhancing and bringing back from disuse? What are some redeeming characteristics of this new phenomenon? They include renewed friendships and acquaintances, helpful networking made easy, ministry possibilities and relational fun. Mainly, it enhances real-world relational communities.

McLuhan stated that new media always “enhances and retrieves” good things. For example, we long for the days of chatting with neighbors on the front porch. Social networking restores this dynamic to a surprising degree. One writer reflected, “It could be . . . that Facebook marks a return to the time when people remained embedded in their communities for life, with connections that ran deep. . . .”[\[13\]](#)

Reconnections frequently happen too. One former neighbor messaged me on Facebook, “Are you the Byron that lived beside us 25 years ago?” She was thrilled to know I was still walking with Christ and asked for prayer for her drug-addicted brother. She’d located me out of the blue a quarter century later and seven states away through the wonder of social networking.

Social networks have great potential for ministry. Yet Shane Hipps’ primary message for Christ-followers in *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* is that simply broadcasting the gospel message in an old style into this new medium will not be effective. The medium itself changes the way people perceive *and* receive the message.

Social media are *not* a kind of broadcast medium, but rather a *conversation medium*. Online social ministry pioneer Paul Watson tells incredible stories of fruit borne online. He shepherds groups who stay current on Twitter and Facebook. One online community of Christ-followers raised funds over the

Internet for a non-Christian tarot-card-reader to take her premature son to a hospital half a state away for medical treatment. A blogger, a practicing witch, warned her visitors not to harass Watson after he privately initiated prayer regarding her health issue.

Campus Crusade for Christ uses Facebook for campus ministry. They recently stated that 66 million students are active Facebook users. That's three times the population of Australia! In an outreach training video produced by Campus Crusade, the camera pans an empty library and the question "*Where are the students?*" flashes across the screen. Then it shows a computer lab chock-full of kids, most logged into Facebook, MySpace, Twitter or YouTube. Another banner reads, "The average college student spends three hours on Facebook each visit." Going where the people hang out is wise! But Campus Crusade knows you can't just post *The Four Spiritual Laws* tract on Facebook and be effective. Long-term engagement with a live person or social community is required to make a positive difference.

If relationships are healthy, they *can* be helped online. "A study published in 2007 in *The Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* suggested that hanging onto old friends via Facebook may alleviate feelings of isolation for students whose transition to campus life had proved rocky."[{14}](#)

A Christian apologist wrote regarding social networking and the Internet, "We should note well Thomas Morris's 'Double Power Principle'—'To the extent that something has power for good, it has corresponding power for ill.'"[{15}](#)Next, we'll discuss the downsides of social media.

Social Networking Makes Obsolete and Obscures Other Good Things

What is the technology of social networking making obsolete,

obscuring or obliterating? Taken to extremes, how might it make its users regress rather than progress? What other troublesome dynamics does it create?

Studies show that people tend to continue and expand their real-life relationships online. But people can be fooled. Nothing replaces face-to-face contact. Hipps writes in *Flickering Pixels* about mutual friends of his who live very nearby but who had not seen each other in months. They communicate online daily, yet their relationship has deteriorated. Hipps commented on so-called *virtual communities*: “It’s virtual—but it ain’t community. . . . Meaningful, missional Christian community” should consist of several essential things:

*1. **Shared history or experiences** that help establish a sense of identity and belonging*

*2. **Permanence** or relational staying power—“it’s how you get shared history.” Members of a transient community never get shared memories.*

*3. **Proximity**—“you have to be with one another in order to create the kind of meaningful connections to have community.”*

*4. **Shared imagination of the future** —a sense of “We’re all going in the same direction.” Hipps says this is the one thing you get automatically with online social networking—people flock together who already share a future vision. But it’s not community just because of that. If online “friends” are not able to meet together over time and share life experiences as they work toward a common vision, then it’s just an online affinity group.*

“Electronic culture disembodies and separates [yet]. . . . most of us. . . believe our technology is bringing us closer.”[\[16\]](#) The Bible exhorts believers not to forsake group gatherings.[\[17\]](#) Why? Because corporate worship and teaching,

personal shepherding, mutual encouragement, even non-verbal signals are irreplaceable. We can take our cues on being physically present from the incarnation: God's most powerful gospel medium was the Man, Christ Jesus.

Technology always makes something obsolete. It seems probable that too much online use compromises our ability to concentrate and think abstractly and form a coherent argument. Given a steady diet of fragmented imagery and spontaneous status updates, a new generation is losing the ability to think through issues from a coherent framework. "Through YouTubing, Facebooking, MySpacing . . . people take in vast amounts of visual information. But do they always comprehend the meaning of what they see. . . ? They are easily manipulated as students, consumers and citizens." [{18}](#)

Another endangered characteristic is deep conversation. Within the space of 140 character status updates and Tweets, all hope of profound, meaningful dialogue seems lost. Instead, images rule. ". . . Image culture is eroding and undermining imaginative creativity" which is "extremely important to our functioning as healthy, creative people." [{19}](#)

Social networking can steal your time. A friend recently told me that his wife's use of Facebook is hindering their family time and communications. This is likely a widespread problem. "2.6 billion minutes are used daily by the global population on Facebook." [{20}](#) If you already struggle with addictive tendencies or wasting time, think twice about launching into this absorbing lifestyle change. Get help for your online habit if it's destructive as you would for any addiction.

Balancing Social Networking, Keeping a Christian Worldview in Mind

What are some more guiding principles for using social networking (and the Internet)? How do users balance their

lives and retain a Christian worldview in a social networking age?

Remember Narcissus, the mythological character who was so enamored by his own image in the pool of water that it eventually became his undoing? Most people focus on his self-absorption. But the point Hipps makes isn't how stuck on himself Narcissus was, but rather his inability to perceive and control the low-tech medium of a reflective pool. He seemed oblivious to what was going on, as people tend to be regarding the media maelstrom that surrounds us. "When we fail to perceive that the things we create are extensions of ourselves, the created things take on god-like characteristics and we become their servants." [\[21\]](#) Media intake stealthily becomes idolatry.

The legendary Perseus, on the other hand, realized the power of a medium that if put under his control, could destroy the deadly effects of staring into the eyes of Medusa. Using a shield as a mirror, he deflected her deadly gaze and turned it into a chance to kill her. Even ancient Greek pagans understood the difference between these two fictional characters: Narcissus became enamored and then ensnared by a medium; Perseus, on the other hand, stepped back, realized the mirror was just an extension of his eyes, and so was able to master that medium. This echoes biblical commands to guard our heart and mind and not be conformed to the world. [\[22\]](#)

Remember, we're not really talking about what content goes *on* your Facebook page. Rather, it's the hidden power of the Internet and social networking that concerns us. Count the cost each time you use it.

One good use of the immediacy of Twitter is intercession. I got stuck in Delhi, India on a mission trip and *tweeted* a prayer request through my cell phone that in turn updated my Facebook page. Instant access and 140-character-long brevity can be good.

More advice from this worldview watcher trying to redeem social networking: read widely. Read deeply. Keep those parts of your mind and soul in shape while navigating the quick communications of social networking.

Guard your time like a night watchman. Guard your heart and mind like a jealous lover. Set “no unclean thing” before your eyes^{23} and if others try to, take down that post or don’t follow them. Also, guard against not only physical but “psychological nudity.”^{24}

Mix into everyday wall posts some meaningful thoughts, worthy articles and video clips that cause people to think. Become a fan at the Facebook or MySpace pages of organizations like Probe. Link to articles at Probe.org, Bible.org, or some good cause to help fund.

Balance is key: not everything is worthy of immediate broadcast or attention. “Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”^{25} Trivia can be genuine but tiresome.

Reach out: post a Scripture, share your faith.

As Shane Hipps said, “The most important medium, the most powerful medium is you, you are God’s chosen medium to incarnate the hands and feet of God in an aching world. . . . The more we understand [the hidden power of media], the more we can understand how to use our media rather than be used by them.”^{26}

Notes

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We Are Television

Todd Kappelman makes a powerful argument for the elimination of TV from an industry insider's perspective.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

In 1977 Jerry Mander wrote *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, a work that has since gained a cult following. It is a voice for all of those who know that something has gone terribly wrong, and that the television is a major part of the problem. It is not, as one might suppose, the ramblings of a Luddite or lunatic, but the careful considerations of an economics major who spent fifteen years as a partner at the

prestigious advertising firm Freeman, Mander & Gossage in San Francisco. He has an insider's perspective on the advertising business and how it relates to television and the culture at large.[\[1\]](#)

Mander says that according to statistics in the 1970's ninety-nine percent of homes in the country already had at least one television set. On an average evening more than eighty million people would be watching television and thirty million of those would be viewing the same program. During special events approximately 100 million viewers would simultaneously be tuned in to the same broadcast.

These millions of individuals believe they have blissfully escaped into their own unique ideal world in the comforts of their living rooms, isolated from interaction with the rest of society. Mander claims that this notion is an illusion manufactured by the television industry. In reality, each individual has been manipulated into a group activity mechanically lured into the same identical viewing experience of their peers, yet isolated from all spheres of influence outside of the staged television performance. He believes that this phenomenon, which he calls the unification of experience, is a strategic tactic created and skillfully used by the advertising industry to maneuver people into a controlled environment where they can be indoctrinated with the gospel of consumerism. The individual experience dissolves into the melting pot of the media's manufactured virtual world where they visually ingest their false idea of reality and accept it as the really real. A strategy this powerful and potentially destructive certainly merits our attention as our future individuality will be altered by our participation in or resistance to the media's attempt to dominate our minds.

In this article we will examine Mander's four arguments for the elimination of television to determine the relevance for our current culture and some possible responses. The first section considers how the media impacts our perceptions and

interpretations of life experiences. The second and third arguments focus on the role of advertising in television programming and how it affects society and culture. The fourth and final arguments looks at the advertising industry's method for usurping our attention in order to dominate collective consciousness. The conclusion will challenge Christians to consider a fast or hiatus from television as an act of moral responsibility.

The Mediated Environment

In his first argument Mander asks us to examine the implications of the television viewing experience as man's removal from his natural environment to an artificial one. He holds that television programming inherently deprives man of his natural sensory experiences of taste, smell and touch, replacing them with an artificial visual and auditory experience capable of capturing our attention and altering our desires and self perceptions.

The medium of television is psychologically programmed to isolate the viewer into a kind of sensory deprivation chamber where the experience of nature is recreated into the pixel-points on our screens. For example, we "see" the grass moving but do not experience the sensations of the wind on our skin, the gentle rustling, the dampness of the ground or the scent of the blades and decomposing material underneath. Television facilitates only a visual experience that is a highly reinterpreted experience from an artificial perspective. This simulation becomes our own new reality. We abandon the natural world created by God in favor of the one recreated by man. Rather than turn off the virtual reality machine to return to the natural world and walk barefoot in the grass, we choose to return again and again to the artificially simulated sensory deprivation chamber. Outside influences are illuminated and our environment is strategically replaced by the new television world. It is not long before the only world we know

is the television world. The television news becomes our source for information, the nature program our new environment, and the sit-com and serial dramas our entertainment. The knowledge we once gained through personal experience has been reformatted into outline form, psychologically modified, packaged and delivered with a smile by the most beautiful host the advertising dollar can buy. Mander's sarcastic list of the things we learn from television will serve as an illustration of how absurd and horrible things have become.

"Mother's milk is unsanitary. Mice like cheese. Mars has life on it. Technology will cure cancer. The stars do not have influence on us. A little X-ray is okay. Mother's milk is healthy. Mars has no life on it. Technology will clean up pollution. Preservatives do not cause cancer. Swine flue vaccine is safe. Swine flu vaccine causes paralysis. Humans are the royalty of nature. We have the highest standard of living. Touching children is good for them. And so it goes." [\[2\]](#) After sustained quantities of television viewing it is very likely that we may find ourselves people who are blown about by every wind of doctrine and unable to distinguish fact from fiction.

Television and the Commodity Man

The television is extremely instrumental in our understanding of our natural environment. It frequently satisfies us with artificial experiences of our world and drives us to understand reality as it is spoon-fed to us through images. We know that mother's milk is good for infants not because we made our own comparisons, but because the lead story on the evening news has assured us of this fact based on the latest study from the most prominent universities and specialists.

If our understanding of the external world has been significantly altered we should also suspect that television is capable of altering our self-perspective. In *Four Arguments*

for the Elimination of Television Jerry Mander argues that we have for some time treated the individual as a commodity, and now television allows this to be accomplished with an amazing efficiency.

Under a kind of spell, adults see people on television who are beautiful, driving fancy cars, live in magnificent homes, wear the best clothes, and live every imaginable life style in full autonomy and frequently without condemnation for any behavior. Adults and children both ingest media images that dictate what they should want, however it is the adults who have the power to go out and transform the world into a reality that will deliver the goods. Who it may be asked has the greater responsibility here? Television is used by the advertising agencies to create value by portraying human nature as something artificial and constructed rather than created by God. The natural state of man is characterized by those who would, or at least could, be reasonably satisfied with family, friends, and modest living accommodations. The unnatural man is a new standardized individual who wants the same cars, homes, and clothing that everyone else wants. We not only want to keep up with the Joneses who live next door, we now want to keep up with the Joneses who "live" in the television world.

The only problem with this scenario is that the real family must earn a living and pay the bills, while the television family is provided with a new Ford, clothes from The Gap, and a beautiful home that they did not purchase. We literally cannot win against, or catch up with these people. The TV generation finds itself in a never-ending quest to be remade into the image it sees on the television screen. Although it is cliché to say that "we are what we eat," it seems necessary to remind ourselves that we also are what we watch.

Man Made into a New Image

In the third argument Mander argues that the television media uses the power of the image to transform an individual into a

copy of what he or she watches on television.

In a section titled *Imitating Media* Mander recounts an early experience on a first date when he kissed a girl. Having witnessed very little real life kissing, and using the television as his only guide he imitated what he had seen.^{3} The media kiss became the primary model for the real. The result is that the imitation and mastery of television behavior becomes the standard by which we can judge success and failure. If a man can kiss a woman like Tom Cruise, or shoot a gun like John Wayne then he has passed the test for what a real man is according to television standards.

Like the child, the adult sees people on television who are beautiful, drive fancy cars, live in magnificent homes, wear the best clothes, and again the list continues. Adults and children ingest media images that dictate what they should want, however it is the adult that has the greatest moral responsibility and the power to initiate change.

The desire for all of these possessions is bought at a price far greater than the mere dollars used to purchase them. Parents frequently work long hard hours at jobs they dislike in order to provide such luxuries while they drown in massive consumer debt. This workaholic syndrome leads to strained family relationships and divorce. The failure to achieve the kind of computerized synthesized beauty found in the television world is viewed as a tragedy so profound that young and old alike resort to eating disorders, develop neurosis, and practice self-medication in order to cope.

As children watch television they become products of an image factory that tells them how to behave toward their parents and peers. They are also told what to want, what to ask for, what to expect, and even what to demand from others. It is no wonder that young people have such a profound sense of entitlement. They have come to believe the world should give them many luxuries as a birthright, that parents should pay

for cars, clothes, and college, that only the latest fashion is really fashionable, that the beautiful people are inherently more valuable than the average, that a good Christian really can look and act like Britney Spears, Tom Cruise, or “gangsta” rappers without any moral dilemma, that junk food is the primary food group for most people, or that a happy meal will make you happy.

Television Biases and the Culture of Death

Mander’s thesis throughout the book is that television is basically an irredeemable medium, and the belief that this particular technology is neutral (an idea popularized by the late Marshall McLuhan) is erroneous.^{4} We realize this is extreme, and would like to acknowledge that television can be used in a variety of ways that are believed to be good and profitable. However, Mander points out that in the thousands of books he consulted regarding television, he only found one that actually advocated abandoning the medium altogether. His thesis is a minority opinion but worthy of attention.

Mander’s background is in advertising, and while working on a campaign to promote awareness of the redwoods that were being cut down in California he noticed something that we all seem to be aware of, but are not certain why. Death is the world’s number one bestseller. This conclusion was drawn from the fact that when television pictures of redwood forests were shown in an effort to promote awareness of the problem and gain sympathy for the cause, few people responded. However, when pictures of acres and acres of stumps from a clear cutting were shown people wanted to know more. The same sympathy resulted with respect to the civil rights movement and Vietnam. Insiders in the media have characterized this phenomenon with the phrase: “if it bleeds, it leads.”

Businessmen, television executives, and advertising people

learned a valuable lesson; death sells. Negative emotions, violence, and carnage get the viewer's attention faster and hold it longer than the positive, the peaceful, or the beautiful. When we add to this the fact that the corporate structure behind television exists to make money through selling advertising space, we see that it is only a secondary concern, if it is a concern at all, that the viewers become enlightened about the humanities, the natural environment or religion. The purpose of the advertising is not to pay for the programming, as we are led to believe. The purpose of the programming is to isolate people in their living rooms in order to show them commercials in the hope that consumers will rush out to buy the products they have seen.

The conclusion of this examination should lead Christians, and all people, to seriously consider the cost benefit ratio of the medium. Mander may be correct in thinking that the elimination of television will have only beneficial effects.^[5] We could do little harm by calling for something along the lines of a television fast, remembering that the purpose of fasting is to mortify the desires of the flesh.

Notes

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Marshall McLuhan: The Medium is the Message

The High Priest of Pop-Culture

In this article we will begin an examination of someone who most people do not know, but who is considered by many to be the first father and leading prophet of the electronic age, Marshall McLuhan. A Canadian born in 1911, McLuhan became a Christian through the influence of G.K. Chesterton in 1937. He wrote his monumental work, one of twelve books and hundreds of articles, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, in 1964. The subject that would occupy most of McLuhan's career was the task of understanding the effects of technology as it related to popular culture, and how this in turn affected human beings and their relations with one another in communities. Because he was one of the first to sound the alarm, McLuhan has gained the status of a cult hero and "high priest of pop-culture".[\[1\]](#) This status is not undeserved, and McLuhan said many things that are still pertinent today.

His thought, though voluminous, is frequently reduced to one-liners, and small sound bites, which sum up the more complicated content of his probing and rigorous examination of the *media*, a word that he coined. Concerning the new status of man in technological, and media-dominated society, he said:

If the work of the city is the remaking or translating of man into a more suitable form than his nomadic ancestors achieved, then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?[\[2\]](#)

In statements like this, McLuhan both announces the existence

of a *global village*, another word he is credited for coining, and predicts the intensification of the world community to its present expression. All of this was done in the early 1960s at a time when television was still in its infancy, and the personal computer was almost twenty years into the future.

McLuhan is announcing what Lewis H. Lapham says is a world of people who worship the objects of their own invention in the form of fax machines and high speed computers, and accept the blessings of *Coca-Cola* and dresses by Donna Karan as the mark of divinity.[{3}](#) The fact that more people watch television than go to church is nothing new to us, but it was one of the tell-tale signs of a cultural shift in history for McLuhan; a shift which has been imperceptible to most, and devastating to all. If anyone doubts McLuhan's warning that "we become what we behold," he should reflect on the consuming desire of many average teenagers to be like Michael Jordan, Madonna, or Britney Spears: a desire that has resulted in a culture of plastic surgery and drive-by shootings to obtain tennis shoes.

Objects of Desire

In our continuing examination of Marshall McLuhan, the patriarch of media criticism, we will explore the totalitarian techniques of American advertising and market research on the unsuspecting consumer.[{4}](#) How this is accomplished, and the effects it has, were outlined in *The Mechanical Bride*, first published in 1951. The book dealt with the influence of print media on the male and female psyche. The objective of advertising men, said McLuhan, is the manipulation, exploitation, and control of the individual.[{5}](#) If this is true, then who, one might ask, was doing the controlling, and what was the desired effect?

The advertising companies were doing the controlling, and the desired effect was nothing loftier than selling products to unsuspecting customers. Making women into objects of desire by men, and then in turn selling the women the products to help

them achieve the effect of desirability, accomplished the entire enterprise. The advertising men succeeded in creating a market where one did not previously exist. The purpose here, and earlier for McLuhan, is not to vilify the advertising industry, rather it is to provide insight into how media functions. One such insight is McLuhan's description of the contemporary mindset of a woman under the influence of advertising geniuses. He said:

To the mind of the modern girl, legs, like busts, are power points, which she has been taught to tailor, but as parts of the success kit rather than erotically or sensuously. She swings her legs from the hip . . . she knows that a "long-legged girl can go places." As such, her legs are not intimately associated with her taste or with her unique self but are merely display objects like the grille on a car. They are date-bated power levers for the management of the male audience. {6}

What McLuhan correctly ascertains is not the fact that women try to look attractive for men (presumably women have been doing this for a long time), but the idea of "polishing" each and every part for a kind of optimal performance. The modern woman has been taught through advertising bombardments that every feature of her physical makeup can be enhanced for the specific purposes of gaining a husband, a promotion, or just getting a door opened.

As one might suspect, there is a male counterpart to this advertising bombardment. The overwhelming superwoman, the possessor of beauty and grace in degrees hitherto unimaginable, demands an impossibly high standard of virility from her male counterpart. The result says McLuhan, are men who are readily captured by the gentleness and guile of women, but who are also surrounded by a barrage of body parts. The man is not won over, but slugged, and beaten down in defeat. {7}

Technology as Extensions of the Human Body

In our continuing look at Marshal McLuhan, the man who coined the term “global village” and the phrase “the medium is the message,” we will reflect on what he had to say about the various ways human beings *extend* themselves, and how these extensions affect our relationships with one another. First, we must understand what McLuhan meant by the term “extension(s).”

An extension occurs when an individual or society makes or uses something in a way that extends the range of the human body and mind in a fashion that is new. The shovel we use for digging holes is a kind of extension of the hands and feet. The spade is similar to the cupped hand, only it is stronger, less likely to break, and capable of removing more dirt per scoop than the hand. A microscope, or telescope is a way of seeing that is an extension of the eye.

Considering more complicated extensions, one might think of the automobile as an extension of the feet. It allows man to travel places in the same manner as the feet, only faster and with less effort. In addition, this extension enables one to travel in relative comfort in extreme weather conditions. Most individuals already understand the concept of extension, but many are unreflective when it comes to what McLuhan calls “*amputations*,” the counterpart to extensions.

Every extension of mankind, especially technological extensions, have the effect of amputating or modifying some other extension. An example of an amputation would be the loss of archery skills with the development of gunpowder and firearms. The need to be accurate with the new technology of guns made the continued practice of archery obsolete. The extension of a technology like the automobile “amputates” the need for a highly developed walking culture, which in turn

causes cities and countries to develop in different ways. The telephone extends the voice, but also amputates the art of penmanship gained through regular correspondence. These are a few examples, and almost everything we can think of is subject to similar observations.

McLuhan believed that mankind has always been fascinated and obsessed with these extensions, but too frequently we choose to ignore or minimize the amputations. For example, we praise the advantages of high speed personal travel made available by the automobile, but do not really want to be reminded of the pollution it causes. Additionally, we do not want to be made to think about the time we spend alone in our cars isolated from other humans, or the fact that the resulting amputations from automobiles have made us more obese and generally less healthy. We have become people who regularly praise all extensions, and minimize all amputations. McLuhan believed that we do so at our own peril.

The Dangers of Over-extended Technology

We have discussed the idea of extensions and amputations caused by new technology, which is introduced into society. The automobile was previously mentioned as an extension of the foot. The car allows one to travel, just as the foot does, only faster and with less effort. The amputations which result would include loss of muscle strength in the under-utilized legs, and the reduction in the quality of air we breathe.

Something occurs when a medium like the automobile, used for transportation, becomes over-extended. The resulting amputations such as muscle atrophy, smog, and high-speed fatalities increase at a rate that challenges the benefits initially gained. Automobile fatalities, lung disease, and obesity caused by modern transportation begin to outweigh the benefits of getting to our destinations quicker and with less effort. The final movement is the reversal of the benefits. McLuhan said:

Although it may be true to say that an American is a creature of four wheels, and to point out that American youth attributes much more importance to arriving at driver's-license age than at voting age, it is also true that the car has become an article of dress without which we feel uncertain, unclad, and incomplete in the urban compound. {8}

To this observation might be added the fact that we train children from a very young age to stand within a few feet of high-speed vehicles without being afraid. Less than two hundred years ago a screaming locomotive or a high speed automobile would have caused a person to flee in terror for their lives. We have slowly conditioned ourselves to not be afraid of something that is in fact extremely dangerous. Similarly, we know that speed limits of twenty miles an hour would almost certainly eliminate most car fatalities, but we also consider the advantages of getting to our destinations quicker to be worth the resulting death rate. Proof of this casual acceptance of the disadvantages of the car could be imagined if one were to consider the fate of a political candidate who ran on a platform of reducing the national speed limit to twenty miles per hour. We know the advantages, even before implementation, but we choose to accept the disadvantages because there is a privileging of all types of technological extension, even deadly and horrific forms.

We are now prepared to consider the specific types of extensions realized by the television, mobile phone, and computer. If we take McLuhan's lead then all of these must be simultaneously considered as extensions with both positive and negative amputations of previous technologies.

Four Questions Applied to Media

We are concluding our considerations of Marshall McLuhan's pertinence with an examination of ideas found in his last work, *The Global Village*, published in 1989, twenty-five years

after his monumental *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. In his early works McLuhan focused on the rapid change in the five centuries since the development of the printing press and movable type, and the especially rapid developments of the twentieth-century. McLuhan died in 1980 and was beginning to see the first fruits of the television generations as well as the fulfillment of some of his predictions. He was deeply concerned about man's willful blindness to the downside of technology, yet McLuhan was not an irrational alarmist.

In his later years, and partially as a response to his critics, McLuhan developed a scientific basis for his thought around what he termed the *tetrad*. The *tetrad* allowed McLuhan to apply four laws, framed as questions, to a wide spectrum of mankind's endeavors, and thereby give us a new tool for looking at our culture.

The first of these questions or laws is "What does it (the medium or technology) extend?" In the case of a car it would be the foot, in the case a phone it would be the voice. The second question is "What does it make obsolete?" Again, one might answer that the car makes walking obsolete, and the phone makes smoke signals and carrier pigeons unnecessary. The third question asks, "What is retrieved?" The sense of adventure or quest is retrieved with the car, and the sense of community returns with the spread of telephone service. One might consider the rise of the cross-country vacation that accompanied the spread of automobile ownership. The fourth question asks, "What does the technology reverse into if it is over-extended?" An over-extended automobile culture longs for the pedestrian lifestyle, and the over-extension of phone culture engenders a need for solitude.

With the radio and television we have simultaneous access to events on the entire planet. However, television culture diminishes, or amputates, many of the close ties of family life based on oral communication. The simple act of turning on a television can reduce a room of people to silence. What is

retrieved is the tribal or interrelated view of man. What it becomes or returns to is the global theater, where people are actors on a stage. One need only witness the event status of an airplane crash or weather disaster.

On McLuhan's gravestone are the words "The Truth Shall Make You Free." We do not have to like or even agree with everything that McLuhan said, but we should nevertheless remember that his life was dedicated to showing men the truth about the world they live in, and the hidden consequences of the technologies he develops.

Notes

1. 1969 interview in *Playboy* magazine originally titled "A Candid Conversation with the High Priest of Popcult and Metaphysician of Media," pp. 53-74, in *The Essential McLuhan*, Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (ed.), (New York: Basic Books, 1995), pp.233-69.

2. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), p.61

3. Lewis H. Lapham in the introduction to the thirtieth anniversary edition of *Understanding Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), pp.xx-xi.

4. See McLuhan's work *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1951). This is an intensive examination of the effects of advertising and comics in producing new perceptions about what we should and do desire, as well as why we believe these things will bring us happiness.

5. "The Mechanical Bride," in *The Essential McLuhan*, Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (ed.), (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p.21.

6. "The Mechanical Bride," in *The Essential McLuhan*, p.24.

7. Ibid. p.25.

8. *The Essential McLuhan*, p.217.

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