

Social Media

Kerby Anderson assesses how social media's influence is changing our brains and the way we think. He also provides an overview of censorship within social media.

The influence of social media in our society has increased dramatically in the last decade. This leads to two very important questions. First, how are the various forms of social media and these digital devices affecting us? Second, should we respond to the documented examples of censorship on these social media platforms?

Social Media Influence

More than a decade ago, social scientists and social commentators expressed concern about how the Internet in general and social media in particular was influencing us. Nicholas Carr raised this question in an *Atlantic* article entitled "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" He observed that "Over the past few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory." He believed this came from using the Internet and searching the web with Google.

He later went on to write a book with the arresting title, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. He surveyed brain research that helped to explain why we don't read as much and why it is so hard to concentrate. The Internet and social media are retraining our brains. He says, "Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski."

A developmental psychologist at Tufts University put it this way. "We are not only what we read. We are how we read." The style of reading on the Internet puts "efficiency" and

“immediacy” above other factors. Put simply, it has changed the way we read and acquire information.

You might say that would only be true for the younger generation. Older people are set in their ways. The Internet could not possibly change the way the brains of older people download information. Not true. The 100 billion neurons inside our skulls can break connections and form others. A neuroscientist at George Mason University says: “The brain has the ability to reprogram itself on the fly, altering the way it functions.”

The proliferation of social media has also begun to shorten our time of concentration. Steven Kotler made this case in his *Psychology Today* blog, “How Twitter Makes You Stupid.” He once asked the author of the best-selling book why he called it the “8 Minute Meditation.” The author told him that eight minutes was the length of time of an average segment of television. He reasoned that “most of us already know exactly how to pay attention for eight minutes.”

Steven Kotler argues that Twitter was reducing the time of concentration to 140 words (back when that was the word limit). He showed how Twitter was constantly tuning “the brain to reading and comprehending information 140 characters at a time.” He concluded that “[I]f you take a Twitter-addicted teen and give them a reading comprehension test, their comprehension levels will plunge once they pass the 140 word mark.”

Not only is there a problem with concentration; there is a problem with distraction. A study at the University of Illinois found that if an interruption takes place at a natural breakpoint, then the mental disruption is less. If it came at a less opportune time, the user experienced the “where was I?” brain lock.

Another problem is what is called “continuous partial

attention.” People who use mobile devices often use their devices while they should be paying attention to something else. Psychologists tell us that we really aren’t multitasking, but rather engage in rapid-fire switching of attention among tasks. It is inevitable they are going to miss key information if part of their focus is on their digital devices.

There is also the concern that social media and digital devices are reducing our creativity. Turning on a digital device and checking social media when you are “doing nothing” replaces what we used to do in the days before these devices were invented. Back then, we called it “daydreaming.” That is when the brain often connects unrelated facts and thoughts. You have probably had some of your most creative ideas while shaving, putting on makeup, or driving. That is when your brain can be creative. Checking e-mail and social media sites reduces daydreaming.

These new media platforms present a challenge to us as Christians. As we use these new forms of media, we should always be aware of their influence on us. They can easily conform us to the world (Romans 12:2). Therefore, we should make sure that we are not taken captive (Colossians 2:8) by the false philosophies of the world.

Christians should strive to apply the principle set forth in Philippians 4:8. “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

A wise Christian will use discernment when approaching the various social media platforms. They provide lots of information and connect us with people around the world. But we should also guard against the worldly influence that is also promoted on many of these platforms.

Social Media Censorship

Big Tech companies have been censoring content for many years. Many years ago, the National Religious Broadcasters began monitoring censorship on these social media platforms through their John Milton Project for Religious Free Speech. Even back then, their report concluded that “The free speech liberty of citizens who use the Internet is nearing a crisis point.”

A recent Senate hearing provided lots of additional examples. Senator Marsha Blackburn asked why her pro-life ad was pulled during the 2018 campaign because Twitter deemed it “inflammatory.” It is worth noting that she did receive an apology from the executive who added that they made a “mistake on your ad.” Senator Ted Cruz pointed to a Susan B. Anthony List ad that was banned. It had a picture of Mother Teresa with her quote: “Abortion is profoundly anti-woman.” At the top of the poster in the committee room was the word: CENSORED.

A number of commentators (Laura Loomer, Milo Yiannopoulos, Alex Jones) have been banned from Facebook and Instagram. Steven Crowder’s YouTube channel has been demonetized. Nearly two-dozen PragerU videos have been slapped with a restricted label on YouTube. The list goes on and on.

Big tech does control much of the media world. Google controls 90% of worldwide search, 75% of smartphone operating systems, 67% of desktop browser, and 37% of digital advertising. Add to this other platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube that also have a profound influence. At the Senate hearing, Ted Cruz noted that these big tech companies “are larger and more powerful than Standard Oil was when it was broken up” and “larger and more powerful than AT&T when it was broken up.” But does that mean government should get involved?

Those who are advocating government intervention make the case that “platform access is a civil right.” The argument is that

private companies are actually violating the civil rights of Americans in the same way that preventing someone to speak in a public park would be a violation. They argue that the big tech companies are a monopoly. And they call for federal and state regulation of these social media platforms arguing that the Supreme Court has argued in the past that government cannot restrict your access to the public square.

The problem with that argument is two-fold. First, these big tech companies are private companies not the government. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube platforms are private property and not the public square. We may not always like what they do, but they are privately owned technology companies and not the federal government, which is governed by the First Amendment.

Second, these companies are protected by a section of the 1996 Communications Decency Act that keeps them from being exposed to potentially crippling liability for something posted on their platform. Some politicians have called for changing that legal protection, but Congress seems unlikely to do anything like that in the near future.

Many conservatives are wary of having the government get involved in patrolling social media platforms. They remind us of the 1949 FCC Fairness Doctrine. This regulation was supposed to provide an opportunity for media outlets to provide content that was fair, honest, and balanced. Talk radio and other forms of media exploded once the Fairness Doctrine was removed. In most cases, government regulation of the media hurt conservative voices more than helped them.

Even if government were to regulate content on social media platforms, it is worth mentioning that the major tech companies would probably have lots of influence. Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg would have a place at the table as government drafted various media regulations. It is likely that company and many others might even help craft regulations that would

protect them from future competitors. We have seen this picture before in other instances when government intervened.

Some have even suggested that we close our social media accounts. If you don't like the way the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* reports stories or provides commentary from people on your side, you don't have to subscribe to those newspapers. If you don't like how MSNBC or Fox News covers stories, you don't have to tune to that TV network. Media outlets are already choosing what to print or broadcast. Social media platforms are no different.

Sam Sweeney has this advice: "Delete your Facebook, yesterday. Don't get your news from Twitter. The issues of free speech on social media will no longer matter to you. They don't matter to me. I've made a decision not to subjugate myself to the whims of our new overloads."

I think most of us want to keep our social media accounts because of the benefit we receive. But I also realize that in light of what we have discussed in this article, many will decide to follow his advice and drop one or more of these social media accounts. We leave that decision to you.

Additional Resources

Kerby Anderson, *Arts, Media, and Culture* (Cambridge, OH: Christian House Publishing, 2016).

Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *Atlantic*, July/August 2008.

David French, "Social-Media Censorship is the Product of Culture and Commerce," *National Review*, 6 June 2019.

Stephen Kotler, "How Twitter Makes Your Stupid," *Psychology Today*, 15 May 2009.

Jessica Melugin, "Conservative who want Facebook, other social media regulated should think twice," *Foxnews.com*, 11 June

2019.

Sam Sweeney, "Close Your Social-Media Accounts," *National Review*, 10 June 2019.

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When Things Get Crazy on Social Media: Responding Biblically to Firestorms

Recently, a firestorm erupted over some viral videos of some high school students allegedly harassing a Native American veteran who was chanting and banging a drum. In a frenzy of name calling, people quickly ascribed disrespect, racism, and hatred to the students. The veteran made statements about the event that were also shared virally. Some media figures and a lot of Twitter users blew up the internet, condemning the students for their interpretation of what they saw.

But then, more and longer videos showing the true picture of what happened became available online, and the student at the center of the original viral video released an articulate statement explaining what really happened. It has become apparent that the media had mischaracterized the event, and some media figures have actually apologized for jumping to premature conclusions.

We are in a new place in history, where the internet makes news available immediately, faster than the speed of thought and analysis. At least in the United States, we now live in a culture of criticism and rush to judgment before all the facts

are in. This is fed by our postmodern loss of belief in truth. Without recognizing it, many many people no longer believe in Truth with a capital T, just individual truth with a lowercase t. We are encouraged to find and hang onto “our own personal truths” rather than pursue knowledge of what is actually True. (Ever heard the phrase “true for you, but not for me”?)

This loss of confidence in ultimate truth, combined with the technology to record and edit videos that provide what someone wants others to see disconnected from context, has brought us to this place where “fake news” is only distinguishable from real news by investigating the details, assertions and context of what is published and promoted.

That takes time. And deliberation. Neither one is a friend of those who want to manipulate how others think and react.

But we can protect ourselves from this manipulation if we will install a filter of the Bible’s sage wisdom that is even more true today than it was 2700 years ago when Solomon wrote Proverbs 18:17:

The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.

As [Dr. Phil](#) loves to say, no matter how flat the pancake, it always has two sides. And particularly with stories and videos going viral, there’s always more information, there’s always context, and there’s always the worldview and agenda of those pushing the virality. The deeply beautiful truth of this proverb makes for an exquisite filter for every aspect of life. (See my blog post [Headed to the Courtroom](#))

What creates an online firestorm is people quickly jumping onto social media to comment, judge, and share. The immediacy of the social media universe feeds the bad habit of reacting instead of responding, of blurting out one’s first thoughts before giving time to consider alternative explanations or perspectives. This is why the wisdom of the Lord’s brother

James shines through for us in 2019:

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. (James 1:19)

We should also take note of the keen observation that God gave us two ears and one mouth, so maybe we should listen twice as much (and as long) as we speak. Or tap. All three parts of this verse would have a profound effect on the frenzy of social media if more of us followed it!

One final suggestion for a filter as we experience this new post-truth, super-immediate, easily-manipulated world:

So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

How do we read a Twitter or Facebook or Instagram feed to the glory of God? By inviting Him into the experience, lifting people and situations before His throne and asking for His blessing, asking Him to show ourselves and others what's true, and remembering that He sees all, knows all, and loves all.

How do we respond to social and news media accounts, rumors and stories to the glory of God? By inviting Him into the way we process these, remembering His word that there's always more to whatever story we are hearing in the moment, and waiting to draw conclusions and take a position.

How do we post and comment on social media to the glory of God? By following His command in Ephesians 4:29—

You must let no unwholesome word come out of your mouth, but only what is beneficial for the building up of the one in need, that it may give grace to those who hear.

God's word has always been a source of great blessing, teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). But perhaps never more than right now!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/when_things_get_crazy_on_social_media_responding_biblically_to_firestorms on January 22, 2019.

Social Media, You and Your Family

Probe Ministries hosted a presentation by Kerby Anderson on “Social Media, You and Your Family” on October 16, 2018 at the Hope Center in Plano, Texas. All attendees received a free copy of the new book *Arts, Media, and Culture: A Biblical Point of View*. (You can order it from our online store [here](#).)



You can download a recording of Kerby’s message [here](#).

We are all the beneficiaries of the information on the Internet. But scientists have also been able to document that

our digital devices and social media are altering the way we think and altering our ability to concentrate.

As one psychologist at Tufts University explains, “We are not only what we read. We are how we read.” The style of reading on the Internet is different and profoundly changing the way we read and acquire information. Our brains are able to reprogram themselves on the fly through a process called “neuroplasticity.”

There is a crucial need for Christians to evaluate the impact of media in their lives. We need to develop discernment and pass those biblical principles to our children and grandchildren.

The new media represents an even greater threat to our discernment processes and can easily conform us to the world (Romans 12:2). Media is powerful tool to conform us to group think and thus to a secular worldview taking us captive to the false philosophies of the world (Colossians 2:8).

Let’s look at how we can harness social media to use for good while, at the same time, protecting ourselves and our children from potentially harmful effects.

The Church and the Social Media Revolution

Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese examines social media’s massive communication shift, with insights for the church.

What is Social Media?

Any media that uses two-way communication as opposed to one-way communication is *social media* rather than *mass media*, such as TV, radio, and print which deliver a message to a mass audience. Mass media is not personal like the telephone, or letter writing; it is directed to the crowd or to a particular niche in the crowd that does not allow for the audience to talk back, with some exceptions. Mass media is not social because it does not permit a conversation with its audience. Social media, such as social websites like Facebook, Twitter, and the new Youtoo Social TV website, allows for dialogue and two-way communication between speaker and audience. It is dialogue rather than monologue. Social media use is not limited to just the popular websites. Any form of electronic communication involving computers and cell phones is part of the social media revolution because these technologies offer the individual the ability to respond.



It is estimated that one-third of the world is now connected to the internet. If you have an email address you are involved in social media. This sizeable amount constitutes a revolution in communication because it changes the way we communicate and it changes *what* we communicate. In calling social media a revolution we simply mean this is a new way of communicating. It does not mean mass media will be abolished. Media, along with most technological progress, operates in a layering system where a new layer or technology builds on the old one rather than abolishing it. Mass media begins with the printing press. The telephone, radio, and TV come later. Television remains the most prominent mass medium; while the printed word has not disappeared, it is certainly not as central as it was in the nineteenth century. The computer adds another layer to our media and brings them all together. It

will overshadow them all, but not abolish them.

With about a third of the actual world online or engaged in social media, it is necessary that the church, which is in the business of communication, makes sure its message is accurately represented there. But the task is not as easy as starting a new profile page since there are certain problems that must be addressed as we communicate.

The Medium Is the Message

Close to 2,247,000,000 people use social media worldwide. This is a remarkable change in just a few years and easily qualifies as a new way of communicating, unprecedented in the history of the world. It is a revolution because it changes the way we communicate from face-to-face individual contact to an electronic mediation with certain advantages and disadvantages.

We have all heard the saying, “the medium is the message.”^[1] This means the way we say something is as important as what we say, or that the medium affects the content of what is said. Preaching is not unaffected by this principle. Simply because someone preaches the word of God does not mean immunity to the potential negative aspects of his chosen medium just as with radio, TV, and the internet. For example, radio and TV are effective in reaching a mass audience, but this usually must come at the expense of the quality of the message; it must be toned down to fit these media. Any subject with many ideas and complex logic may work in a book format but not on TV. Telephones put you in touch with a disembodied voice, superior to not talking or letter writing, but still not as good as actually talking to someone in person. Anyone involved with persuasion in business deals where you absolutely must communicate a convincing point knows the importance of body language, tone of voice, eye contact, appearance, and attitude—all conveyed by personal presence but lost over the

phone. The phone itself shapes what you say by how it is said. It reduces communication from all five senses to one: hearing. The results are predictable: the phone reduces communication compared to actually being there.

A basic law of media says the wider the audience the less substantive a message simply because it must appeal to the common denominator in the general audience. The more people you want to reach, the less of a message you will have, which means keep it simple when it comes to a general audience so the majority of people can understand it. This is the drawback of instant and mass communication. We sacrifice quality of thought and depth of analysis for instant access to a mass audience and for immediate applicability of a general principle. In other words, we are telling people what to do without reflection, which is time consuming, slow, and simply awkward. Analysis is meant for the personal level, and mass communication is not personal. The reductionist trend in media can be circumvented to some extent through niche audiences which many social media sites actually represent. This is a fair reflection of actual communities. What is society but the collection of smaller groups put into a whole?

Disembodiment

Social media represents a disembodied form of community. This of course is the nature of long distance relationships and communication. The reduction of knowledge to its simplest forms brings with it the sense that knowledge or community is simply information. The gospel can be communicated as information but it is more than that. The same is true with traditional forms of preaching, books, or even TV. We know after all has been said there still remains a side of the gospel that must be experienced or encountered in real people. The gospel must be embodied and not simply read about or talked about. This was the gist of Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians: "you are a letter of Christ . . . written not

with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor. 3:3-4). We might as well say written not electronically on the transient screen with flickering pixels, but in flesh and blood and in one-to-one encounters with friends, family, and neighbors. Media, as good as it is, cannot substitute for personal experience of God and fellowship with others. This brings the idea of an online community, church or school into question. There is no doubt that people communicate effectively this way, even on Facebook, and they can learn through this medium just like any traditional means, but there is a doubt as to how qualitative one's learning or one's community will be if there is no personal encounter. Can long lasting bonds and relationships form strictly through electronic means?

Social media is excellent at giving you a wide audience just like TV and radio and even meeting new people, but it is not a replacement for face-to-face contact. Media technology may best be seen as an excellent supplement to relationships and community, but not a replacement. It can be used to stay in touch and keep people connected, but it cannot ultimately replace our community and social network of actual people. I think the goal of an online church should be to get people out from behind a computer and into contact and fellowship with others. Social media can facilitate friendship, but it cannot replace it. We are warm-blooded creatures and need other warm-blooded people to have community, something a computer screen cannot provide. Social media serves as a supplement to community, not a substitute!

Social Media and Privacy

What happens in Vegas stays on Youtube, Facebook, and Twitter. Privacy is dead. The computer killed it, and no one cares. Every step forward in technological progress has a price to pay. We have moved forward in creating social media which

enables us to communicate with a wider audience, but society has paid a terrible price with the loss of privacy. The computer remembers everything. This reality should cause some pause and reflection on what we say simply because it can be potentially recalled and even used against us. Employers routinely check Facebook pages of potential employees. Creditors use Facebook to collect debts. The police use Facebook to find people and build cases against them. We think of social media as fun and games, much like a video game, when in fact it is much more serious. All social media communication such as email or texting exists in a nether world between an illusion of privacy and the potential public access by everyone. The user falsely assumes his message is private without realizing it may be available to anyone. Future generations will archive and access all that we say today.

Even more seriously, the NSA is currently building a supercomputer called the Utah Data Center scheduled to go online in 2013 that will monitor all your digital actions including email, cell phone calls, even Google searches.[\[2\]](#) It will be able to track all your purchases electronically. Whatever you do digitally will be available for scrutiny by the government. I know you wanted to hear how great social media is for communicating, evangelism, and so forth, and it is great, but there are pitfalls and dangers that we must also confront. Let's not get so swept up with our enthusiasm for social media that we stick our head in the sand when it comes to the dangers. This is the greatest problem I see Christians make when they analyze technology. They see only the advantages and positive sides of their technological involvement and refuse to consider what may go wrong. It will not create a damper to analyze the potential problems of our technology use, rather it will make us sober-minded as we are commanded to be (1 Peter 1:13, 4:7 and 5:8).

Dialogue vs. Monologue

Social media does offer a great advantage over the traditional means of mass communication that the church has used in print, TV, and radio. Social media represents a democratization of media including TV. Mass media is traditionally one-sided communication or monologue where one powerful voice does all the speaking, especially on TV. Social media allows for multiple voices to be heard at once and in contrast with each other, allowing for a dialogue and conversation as opposed to the pedagogy of monologue. This is significant because, as we are told by media experts like Marshall McLuhan and Jacques Ellul, propaganda is usually the result of only one voice being permitted in a discussion or the absence of dialogue, much like in a commercial where only one view point is promoted. McLuhan notes the importance of dialogue with media: "The environment as a processor of information is propaganda. Propaganda ends where dialogue begins. You must talk to the media, not to the programmer. To talk to the programmer is like complaining to a hot dog vendor at a ballpark about how badly your favorite team is playing."[\[3\]](#)

Really, for the first time in history does the general public have a chance to talk back to knowledge brokers and those creating information and to those creating faith. A few tell the many what to think through mass media; through social media an individual tells the mass what he thinks. Social media offers a multitude of voices on all topics. It may appear chaotic and directionless at times, and at other times there appears incisive wisdom. Social media reflects the turmoil and sanity of its users. Social media is many things, but unlike its big brother mass media, social media is not propaganda. The church needs to soberly join this conversation.

Notes

1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of*

Man (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).

2. James Bamford, "The NSA is Building the Country's Biggest Spy Center (watch what you say)" in *Wired* March 17, 2012.

3. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam, 1967, 142); Jaques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1965).

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New Media and Society

Kerby Anderson provides an overview of the ups and downs of the new media such as Facebook and Twitter, and their impact on us.

How is the new media affecting the way we think and the way we interact with others in society? I want to look at the impact the Internet, social networks, and portable media devices are having on our world.

Rachel Marsden doesn't think it is positive. Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* she says:

Spare me the stories of your "genius" tech-savvy child who can name every country on Google Earth, or how, because of your iPhone, BlackBerry and three cell phones, you juggle 20 tasks at once and never miss any business—even at 4 a.m., because you sleep with your portable devices. Does anyone care that technology is destroying social graces and turning people into rude jerks?[\[1\]](#)

She isn't the first to notice that the new technology and new

mobile devices are changing the way we interact with others. And, as we will discuss later, they apparently are also changing the way we think, affecting everything from creativity to concentration.

Rachel Marsden wonders, "When did it become acceptable for technological interaction to supersede in-person communication?" I have news for her. It happened long before cell phones were invented. When I was a graduate student at Yale University, I noticed something odd about my academic advisor. Whenever the phone would ring, he felt he had to answer it. He could be advising me or we could be deep in the midst of a discussion of a research project. But if the phone rang, he stopped the conversation and answered the phone, staying on the phone until that conversation was over. I began to think that the only way I could ever have a sustained conversation with him would be to call him on the phone.

Of course, mobile devices make it even easier to ignore face-to-face interaction. Now the world revolves around the person who has instant access to others using these devices. Rebecca Hagelin says that narcissism has crept into our world. In 2006, *Time* magazine voted "You" as the "Person of the Year." So much of media and advertising today is about indulging your fantasies.

Rebecca Hagelin is concerned about the impact this is having on our children. "Young people spend hours every day updating their Facebook pages, post and e-mail countless pictures of themselves, and plug their ears with music to create a self-indulgent existence shut-off from everyone around them."[2](#)

While some of the impact is positive, much more should concern us and cause us to change our behavior.

The Internet and the Way You Think

Can the Internet change how you think? That was a question columnist Suzanne Fields asked recently.[\[3\]](#) If you go to Edge.org, you will notice that the question they pose for this year is slightly different. It is, “How is the Internet changing the way you think?” They pose this provocative question because of the impact of computer chips, digitized information, and virtual reality on the way we think and how we receive information in this “collective high-tech electronic ecosystem for the delivery of information.”

I have also been wondering about the impact of the Internet and the new media on our thinking. Unlike Suzanne Fields, I wasn't wondering *if* the Internet was changing our thinking but *how* it is already changing the way we think. There were two reasons why I have been thinking about this.

First, look at the younger generation being raised on the Internet. If you haven't noticed, they think and communicate differently from previous generations. I have done radio programs and read articles about the millennial generation. They do think differently, and a large part of that is due to the Internet.

A second reason for my interest in this topic is an *Atlantic* article by Nicholas Carr entitled “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” He says, “Over the past few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory.”[\[4\]](#)

It's not that he believes his mind is going, but he notices that he isn't thinking the way he used to think and he isn't concentrating like he used to concentrate. “Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose.

That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages."

He believes this comes from using the Internet and searching the web with Google. And he gives not only his story, but he also gives many anecdotes and as well as some research to back up his perspective.

For example, a developmental psychologist at Tufts University explains, "We are not only what we read. We are how we read." The style of reading on the Internet puts "efficiency" and "immediacy" above other factors. Put simply, it has changed the way we read and acquire information.

Now you might say that would only be true for the younger generation. Older people are set in their ways. The Internet could not possibly change the way the brains of older people download information. Not true. The 100 billion neurons inside our skulls can break connections and form others. A neuroscientist at George Mason University says, "The brain has the ability to reprogram itself on the fly, altering the way it functions."[\[5\]](#)

The Internet does appear to be altering the way we read and think, but more research is needed to confirm if this true. If so, parents and educators need to take note of what is happening in our cyberworld.

BlackBerries, Twitter, and Concentration

Have portable media devices altered our ability to concentrate? That certainly seems to be the case. Nearly all of us have noticed that people with a BlackBerry sometimes seem distracted. And after they answer an e-mail, they seem to spend a few minutes trying to recollect their thoughts before they had the interruption.

An article in *Newsweek* magazine documents what many of us have

always suspected: there are two major drawbacks to these devices.[{6}](#) The first is distraction overload. A study at the University of Illinois found that if an interruption takes place at a natural breakpoint, then the mental disruption is less. If it came at a less opportune time, the user experienced the “where was I?” brain lock.

A second problem is what is called “continuous partial attention.” People who use mobile devices (like a BlackBerry or an iPhone) often use their devices while they should be paying attention to something else. Psychologists tell us that we really aren’t multitasking, but rather engage in rapid-fire switching of attention among tasks. It is inevitable they are going to miss key information if part of their focus is on their BlackBerry.

But another hidden drawback associated is less creativity. Turning on a mobile device or a cell phone when you are “doing nothing” replaces what we used to do in the days before these devices were invented. Back then, we called it “daydreaming.” That is when the brain often connects unrelated facts and thoughts. You have probably had some of your most creative ideas while shaving, putting on makeup, or driving. That is when your brain can be creative. Checking e-mail reduces daydreaming.

We also can see how new technology affects the way we process information and react to it emotionally. The headline of one article asked this question: Can Twitter make you amoral?[{7}](#) Research was done at the Brain and Creativity Institute of the University of Southern California to see the impact of social networks like Twitter.

What the researchers found was that human beings can sort information very quickly. And they can respond in fractions of seconds to signs of physical pain in others. But other emotions (like admiration and compassion) take much longer to register. In fact, they found that lasting compassion in a

relationship to psychological suffering requires a level of persistent, emotional attention.

So how does that relate to a technology like Twitter? The researchers found that there was a significant emotional cost of heavy reliance on a rapid stream of news snippets obtained through television, online feeds, or social networks such as Twitter. One researcher put it this way: "If things are happening too fast, you may not even fully experience emotions about other people's psychological states and that would have implications for your morality."

The point of these studies is that media does have an impact. A wise and discerning Christian will consider the impact and limit its negative effects.

Social Networks

Social networks such as Facebook and MySpace create an interconnected web of friends and family. People who study these networks are beginning to understand the impact they are having on us.

At a social networking site, you find someone and ask to be his or her friend. Once you are accepted, you become a member of their network, and they become a member of your network. This opens the door to finding and making additional friends. The ability to extend your circle of friends is one of the many benefits of social networking.

One concern about social networking is that it, like most of the new media, increases distraction and fragmentation of thought. The quotes, stories, jokes, and video clips come at an increased rate. A concentrated conversation with one person is difficult. Look over the shoulder of someone in a social networking site who has lots of friends. Content quickly scrolls downward, and it feels like you are at a party where lots of people are all talking at once.

Also these networks tend to shorten our time of concentration. Steven Kotler makes this case in his *Psychology Today* blog, "How Twitter Makes You Stupid."[\[8\]](#) He once asked the author of the best-selling book why he called it the "8 Minute Meditation." The author told him that eight minutes was the length of time of an average segment of television. He reasoned that "most of us already know exactly how to pay attention for eight minutes."

Steven Kotler argues that Twitter is reducing the time of concentration to a few dozen words. He thinks that constantly using Twitter will tune "the brain to reading and comprehending information 140 characters at a time." He predicts "that if you take a Twitter-addicted teen and give them a reading comprehension test, their comprehension levels will plunge once they pass the 140 [character] mark." I am sure someone is already testing that hypothesis. Soon we should know the results.

Social networks do help us keep track of people who do not live near us, and that's a plus. But we are kidding ourselves if we believe that social networks are the same thing as true community. Shane Hipps, writing in *Flickering Pixels*, says this about virtual communities: "It's virtual—but it ain't community."

Social networks also have a great deal of power to influence us. Sociologists Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler document this in their new book, *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*. They believe that happiness is contagious and so is obesity and quitting smoking. We are not only influenced by our friends, but are even influenced by our friend's friends. They say the world is governed by what they call "three degrees of separation."

Addiction is another concern. Years ago, counselors discovered Internet addiction. Now they are starting to talk about Facebook addiction. Lots of youth and adults spend too much

time in front of a computer. Social networks are wonderful tools, but wisdom and discernment are necessary in order to use them correctly.

Media Addiction

The Barna Group does lots of surveys, and that has led George Barna to conclude that “media exposure has become America’s most widespread and serious addiction.”[\[9\]](#) I have always been hesitant to label our high levels of media exposure an addiction. We seem to have an addiction label for every behavior. But George Barna makes a convincing case.

Addiction changes our brains by altering the chemical balance and flow within the brain and by even altering the structure of the brain. According to the American Psychiatry Association, we can legitimately call something an addiction when certain symptoms manifest themselves.

For example addictions change our brain structure, altering emotions, motivations, and memory capacity. Addictions cause withdrawal symptoms when exposure to the addictive item is eliminated. Addictions cause the people to abandon or reduce their involvement in normal and healthy activities.

Certainly media can be positive in terms of education and relaxation. But most media content, Barna argues, “winds up serving the lowest common denominator because that’s where the largest audience” is to be found.

There is a generational trend. The builder generation did not grow up with media and never became accustomed to it. The boomer generation embraced media, and the following generations expanded it use in ways unthinkable a few decades ago.

If we were truly serious about controlling the media input in our lives and our children’s lives, we would see examples of

parents putting boundaries on media exposure. We see nothing of the sort. Expenditures on personal media, in-home media, and mobile media continue to increase.

It is not that parents don't understand the dangers. Barna reports that three-quarters of parents say that exposure of their children to inappropriate media content are one of their top concerns. But they continue to buy their kids the media tools and continue to allow them to be exposed to inappropriate content.

By the time a young person reaches age 21, he or she will have been exposed to more than 250,000 acts of violence through TV, movies, and video games. He or she will have listened to thousands of hours of music with questionable lyrical content. Most parents know that much of what their children see or hear isn't wholesome

This may be one of the biggest challenges for society in general and even the church in particular. Most parents recognize the danger of the media storm in which they and their children live. But that are unwilling to take the necessary steps to set boundaries or end their media addiction.

Some Concluding Biblical Principles

In a previous article on [Media and Discernment](#), I talked about the need for Christians to evaluate the impact of media in their lives. We need to develop discernment and pass those biblical principles to our children and grandchildren.

The new media represents an even greater threat and can easily conform us to the world (Rom. 12:2). Media is a powerful tool to conform us to a secular worldview and thus take us captive (Col. 2:8) to the false philosophies of the world.

Christians should strive to apply the following two passages to their lives as they seek discernment concerning the media.

The first is Philippians 4:8. “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

The second is Colossians 3:2–5. “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”

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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}

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