Humanum
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Technology in the Home

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Contents

Page

EDITORIAL

STRATFORD CALDECOTT — Editorial: Technology in the Home 4

FEATURE ARTICLES

ALLAN CARLSON — The Electronic Cottage 6

JONAH LYNCH, F.S.C.B. — Technology and the New Evangelization 13

WITNESSES

BENEDICT KOBUS — Witness: The Challenge of Discernment 28

BOOK REVIEWS

JULIANA WEBER — Facebook and Philosophy 33

CATHERINE SIENKIEWICZ — Last Child in the Woods 36

RACHEL M. COLEMAN — Divining a Digital Future 39

DANIEL BLACKMAN — Breaking Free of Internet Addiction 41

JAMES STANLEY — Destroying the Imagination of Your Child 45

WILLIAM R. HAMANT — Scent of Lemons 49

CARLY O'CONNOR — iDisorder 54

BENJAMIN PETTY — Wired and Pornified 57

KRISTINE CRANLEY — Noise 62

MICHAEL CAMACHO — iPod, YouTube, WiiPlay 66

CONOR HILL — Rewired and Second Self 71

EDWARD TRUDEAU — What the Internet is Doing to Us 75

Editorial: Technology in the Home

STRATFORD CALDECOTT

Like almost everyone I know, I was brought up with television. I was lucky not to be brought up by television. Of course, over in England we got it later than the Americans. I remember the first TV program I saw: it was Popeye, in black and white. Some years later we had color TV at last. During the day the BBC ran endless "trade test color films" – documentaries about flowers, for example – to make sure the system was working, and we sat around all day watching the bright colors on the screen glowing like magic. Or that's how I remember it. In math class we used slide rules, not calculators. If we went away from home it felt like away. No cellphone, no skype – coins in a slot, if you could find a public phone.

My children's world is permeated with electronics. There's no need to describe it. Reading these words on a screen, you are part of that world too. Yet they lived their formative early years without full exposure to it. We kept the TV at bay as long as we could, and though we never isolated them completely from the revolution going on around them, we made sure to read to them every night. We believed, and still do, that the love of books is a saving grace. Whatever else is going on, at least that provides a lifeline back to civilization. Not only that, but a book stimulates the imagination and the intelligence in a way that a film or a TV show can never do.

Technology is not neutral. That is one of the frequent and alarming lessons of this issue of Humanum. It affects us in subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways whether we like it or not. Technology itself uses us, quite apart from the fact that we are also being used by the purveyors of technology, who need to turn us into consumers and customers. Spied upon, manipulated, corrupted – all in the name of easier communication – and we don't even know where it is leading. The conjecture known as Moore's Law suggests that computer performance doubles every couple of years or less, so that in a few more decades "our computers will be wearing us." It is all a vast experiment we are performing on our children. Certainly (unless this is what destroyed Atlantis) there has never been such a technologically advanced civilization on earth, and we have no precedents to guide us.

There is no escape. We are committed. The "transhumanists" will say that is a good thing. We are on the road to something wonderful – a new stage of evolution – and our fears of the unknown cannot prevent it. But in this moment of reflection, let us step back and consider the evidence, and the effects that today's (soon to be regarded as) primitive technology is having on our way of life, our minds, and our homes. Perhaps we should even read a few books – those under review here, or the classics on technology by Marshall McLuhan and Jacques Ellul.

Our lead article by Fr Jonah Lynch argues that, while technology is not "neutral," neither is it invented by the devil, and we remain responsible for making the best possible use of the new media, within the home and elsewhere – not naively, but with as much wisdom and discernment as we can muster. But in our other lead article, Dr Allan C. Carlson, adopts a more negative tone. Dr Carlson is a well-known lecturer, author, and broadcaster especially on issues concerning the family, Professor of History at Hillsdale College, and President of the Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society. In his article, he traces the history of the advance of new technologies into the home and the takeover of the home economy, warning that "only a radical 'separation from the world,' with eyes firmly fixed heavenward, gives sufficient power to individuals in homes and intentional communities to overcome the lures, appetites, and pressures of technological change and the full industrialization of human life."

This is the fear that underlies much Catholic writing on the subject since the Second World War. Romano Guardini, in his The End of the Modern World, had already written in the 1950s about the evolution of "mass man" and the decline of human personality – a development that, one fears, may be accelerated by the advent of social media. One recalls the anecdote about Canadian philosopher George Grant, who, when asked why he was being so pessimistic about scientific progress, replied: "I'm not being pessimistic at all. I think God will eventually destroy this technological civilization. I'm very optimistic about that."

Not everyone is of the same mind. Our Witness piece is by a father struggling to bring up his children in the modern world, refining his (and their) discernment as best he can, and subordinating the technology he allows into the home to the development of personality. The reviews featured in this issue cover a range of attitudes and ideas, from the pessimistic to the optimistic. It is a question that we all have to wrestle with, whether or not we have children, since the future of our civilization is at stake. The present issue of Humanum is intended to help us all in this process of reflection.

The Electronic Cottage

ALLAN CARLSON

The human family, it might be said, found its natural place in the pre-industrial home. For the vast majority of the human race, and over hundreds of generations, workplace and home were united. On a peasant – or family – farm, in an artisan's or merchant's shop, in a fisherman's cottage, or in a nomad's tent, men and women worked together to advance and sustain their small enterprises. Taking advantage of each other's talents and strength, they crafted a natural complementarity. In these places, children and the aged usually found useful tasks as well, so completing the home economy.

Such homes witnessed little, if any, technological change. The daily life within a normal eighteenth-century European home differed little from the home life experienced by the Holy Family in first-century Palestine or by the agrarian families found in Homer's Greece. Such households strove for a meaningful self-sufficiency. They wove their own cloth and sewed their own garments. They raised and preserved their own food. They crafted their own furniture and built their own shelters. Again, for the vast majority, home life and economic life were united.

The Industrial Revolution came when technological innovations in machine tools were harnessed to centralized power sources: flowing water and steam engines. Among the innovators, a new mindset was involved as well, a relentless tinkering which launched the limitless quest for improvement of the machines.

The emergence of modern factories – first in England, then on the Continent and North America – shattered the ancient regime of the home economy. Most directly, households were emptied of their able-bodied residents: the men going to one kind of factory; the women to another; the older children perhaps to a third. Most workers faced ten to twelve hours of factory labor per day, six days a week. New problems emerged: Who would care for infants and small children? Who would care for the elderly? Then, as now, there were no clear and good answers.

By definition, industrialization also meant the rapid dismantling of home economies, as cheap factory goods replaced the products and crafts which had defined functional households. The process began with spinning and weaving; yet it was soon apparent

that it would have no end, until homes had been stripped of all productive tasks. The material base of the natural family disappeared, to be replaced by the bric-a-brac of a consumer economy.

After rough early decades, when dirty and dismal factories were populated by dirty and bewildered workers, living standards did begin to rise. Relying on an ever more elaborate division of labor and new spurts of technological innovation, the industrial process produced a staggering array of consumer goods, as substitutes for what families had once provided themselves.

From the very beginning, there was deep unease over the effects of these changes on domestic life. In Britain, Parliamentary inquiries told horrific tales of abandoned children and other signs of social disorder. William Wilberforce and his Clapham Sect abandoned London to raise their children together in the country, so inventing both the modern suburb and the daily commute. By the mid-nineteenth century, the English middle class settled into the model of the Victorian home. The men were irretrievably lost to the world of industry and commerce. However, the women – commonly aided by several servant girls – would devote themselves to building Christian homes for the nurture of children. By the century's end, even working class leaders in Britain, Germany, and North America would adopt a similar goal, demanding a "living family wage" so that a male worker could support a full-time mother and their children in dignity.

Feminists, however, insisted that such a model should not, and would not, survive. The most prescient of these was Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Her 1898 book, Women and Economics, showed how technological advances and the laws of capitalism had already stripped homes of most of their functions. No one any longer dipped their own candles or made their own soap or spun their own wool. Indeed, by her time, the tasks within the home had already been reduced to only three: cooking, cleaning, and early child-care. However, the laws of economics now slated these for extinction, as well. She proceeded to lay out business plans, of a sort, for the fast-food industry (where people in kitchenless homes "prefer to go to their food" and pick it up at the windows of industrial kitchens), professional cleaners (like the Merry Maids), and commercial day-care centers (with infants taken off "the trembling knees of the young, untrained mother" and turned over to trained nurses). The home would cease to be "a workshop or a museum," becoming instead a "place of love and privacy" for "pure, strong, beautiful [and equally employed] men and women."

The twentieth century witnessed several attempts to reconcile technology and the

home, in order to rebuild strong households. The most ambitious of these was the Home Economics Movement. Formally launched in the United States in 1899, this sought to pull the private household into the new world of technology and efficiency. As founding theorist Ellen Richards explained, “Home Economics stands for: The ideal home life of today unhampered by the traditions of the past.” Rejecting Gilman’s approach as well, this movement held that the housewife could be retrained, and saved. The home economists argued that their field would be “constantly stimulated by research” and they gave attention to the efficient use of new household appliances.

Over time, however, the discipline turned away from retraining young women in productive tasks such as cooking and sewing, focusing instead on educated consumption. This actually marked the thorough merger of the home sphere with the industrial sphere, with the retooling of the homemaker as a purchasing agent. Instead of rescuing women’s distinctive and vital tasks in the household, the home economists also dismissed them as irrelevant. Popular author Christine Frederick created the career of “household engineer” through books such as Selling Mrs Consumer and Household Engineering: Scientific Management in the Home. She vigorously endorsed Taylorism, the managerial principles then favored by progressive corporations, and she tried to translate “time-motion studies” and “one best way” for use in household tasks. In practice, however, home economists succeeded only in negotiating a final surrender of the private home to the industrial sector and its technological imperative. Under new assault by feminists of the Gilman-sort, the discipline dissolved in the 1970s and 80s.

An alternate approach to reconciling technology and the home was the Homesteading Movement of the 1930s. Examples of this “back to the land” approach could be found in England, particularly among the more enthusiastic Distributists who imbibed the work of G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. In the United States, the leading prophet was Ralph Borsodi. In the midst of a successful career as an advertising executive on New York’s Madison Avenue, Borsodi turned with vengeance on the capitalist consumerism he had helped to create. In best-selling books such as This Ugly Civilization and Retreat from the City, he called for the use of modern technology to reverse the industrial revolution. Borsodi argued that new technologies had eliminated the efficiency advantages formerly held by the factories. Specifically, the small electric motor tied to the electrical grid and the compact internal combustion engine had decentralized productive power. Home workshops and small companies not only could now compete with big industries; unburdened by corporate bureaucracies and overhead, they often enjoyed an efficiency advantage. As Borsodi

summarized, “The huge factory is a steam-age relic rendered obsolete by the electrical age,” yet kept alive by cartels, patents, and other state favors.

In short, technological advances now allowed families to begin again “an adventure in home production,” rooted in “true organic homesteads… organized to function not only biologically and socially but also economically.” Gardens, chicken coops, a few cows and pigs, carpentry shops, loom rooms, and modern electrical tools: all were necessary in real family homes. When fully engaged in modern home production, the housewife would save more of her husband’s earning than she could earn in the industrial sector. In 1933, Borsodi founded his School of Living, which would conduct the research to show “the scientific validity of decentralization” and retrain currently helpless city dwellers in the skills needed for a new agrarian order. His Craft Division taught woodworking, furniture production, and home spinning and weaving (using a technologically advanced Borsodi Loom). The Homemaking Division applied small-scale tools to cooking, food preservation, and laundering. The Agricultural Division taught vegetable gardening and small animal care. The Building Division offered training in the construction of a home. Another taught the basics of founding and operating a home-based business.

Hundreds of young couples came for training and Borsodi Homesteads mushroomed across the land. His ideas gave direct inspiration to the Subsistence Homestead Program, a Federal initiative launched in 1933 as part of the New Deal. Instead of a suburban development, these projects linked a new home to about five acres of land laid out in village fashion, and normally provided training in gardening and animal husbandry. In 1939, a magazine co-edited by Borsodi, called Free America, sponsored an architectural contest to design “the owner-occupied home of the free man,” where “living and producing a livelihood are welded into an harmonious whole.” Designs submitted must treat “the family as the primary economic and social unit” and craft the home to utilize the latest technologies in gardening, animal care, and handcrafts. Over 500 entries arrived, most of them using “a distinctly modern style of architecture.” By 1941, about 400 Homestead communities in the Borsodi style had been built or launched.

Alas, these promising developments were washed away during that great centralizing event known as World War II. Factory production of the most massive sort gained new life; homesteading now seemed to be a sentimental distraction. Peace in 1945 also brought on a housing shortage, as returning GIs and their brides produced Marriage and Baby Booms. Cheap houses built quickly and squeezed into suburban housing tracts became the favored government approach.

Still, the burgeoning suburbs offered another opportunity to reconcile home and technological advance; or so some key opinion makers thought. Sociologists led by Talcott Parsons celebrated the disappearance of productive tasks in the home. As he saw it, technology had liberated women from such drab practices, allowing them to refocus exclusively on emotional relations with husbands and, secondarily, children. These "companionate" marriages, he thought, would be richer and more stable than those once held together by mere economic bonds.

Another enthusiast for the new suburban home was Henry Luce, founder of the publishing empire that included Time, Fortune, Sports Illustrated, andLife. The son of Presbyterian missionaries to China, he worried about the problem of Mammon. In a May 1945 planning document sent to his editors, Luce accurately predicted that America would soon enter a "super-colossal Adventure into Prosperity," driven by pent-up demand and war-inspired technological advances. Fortune, he said, could make its contribution to responsible journalism by turning this adventure "into something which we shall not be ashamed to call Civilization." With its massive weekly circulation, Life would tackle the crass materialism found in modern American advertising. The magazine's Modern Living section, Luce said, would serve "as the nexus between the Editorial and the Advertising." At a minimum, it must promote good taste in the purchase of gadgets and goods, for "just as there is a close connection between manners and morals, so there is a close connection between taste and spirit." At its best, the magazine would guide Americans toward a family-centered consumption, as a key part of what he called the New America.

Whether as consequence or by coincidence, American consumption patterns during the great postwar economic boom of the 1940s and 1950s actually did center primarily on family life. Later investigations showed that household expenses focused almost exclusively on homes, home furnishings, clothing and toys for children, family cars, refrigerators, backyard barbeques, and the early televisions. This was not an age of conspicuous consumption, but one where it seemed that the gifts of technology had finally been reconciled with a reasonably strong family system.

This actually fragile world collapsed during the "Sixties" (more accurately, 1965-76), when a moral and sexual revolution freed not only Eros but also the fruits of technology. Companionate marriages liberated by technology from productive tasks and focused strictly on emotional needs proved to be weak. Divorce rates soared and retreats from both children and marriage began. American and European homes started to unravel again; and largely by coincidence the digital revolution began.

Looking ahead, there are reasons to feel optimistic about the relationship between home and technological advance. As with Ralph Borsodi in the 1920s and 30s, new devices hold the potential for a resurrection of the home economy. In his time, hope came from the small electrical and internal combustion engines. In our time, the amazing power of the home computer and the great commercial democracy of the internet make an array of small scale enterprises possible. Advances in medical technology, including the miniaturization of diagnostic devices, make feasible the return of doctors' and dentists' offices to homes. The potential for telecommuting remains great. 3-D printers could turn garages into mini-factories.

And yet, skepticism is in order. As the ruin of Borsodi's dreams reminds us, promising advances toward economic decentralization are vulnerable to both great events (such as war or revolution) and the vested interests conspiring to hold on to their power. Moreover, Borsodi's scheme actually presumed that future technological advance would be modest; yet he provided no mechanism that would slow future innovation. Nor can technology save us from varied disorders of the soul. Indeed, it is much more likely to encourage the deadly sins of greed, sloth, envy, lust, and gluttony. Examples of such "technologies" range from the flood of hard-core pornography to be found just two clicks away on Google to the "supersized" Big Mac.

Indeed, the only modern communities that have actually learned how to control technology are those which apply religious devotion and obedience to the task. While such separatist sects take many forms, the primary American example is the Old Order Amish. The secrets of the Amish are simple: "efficiency" is subordinated to the preservation of both the self-sufficient home economy and certain forms of human labor; the use of tools remains bound to the ideal of personal craft; and technological innovation is allowed only if it does no harm to the preservation of families and the religious community. Obedience to elders, in turn, makes bearable the psychological costs of renouncing the symbols and products of intensive consumerism and an extreme division of labor. Notably, with certain shifts in emphasis, the same principles have operated in largely the same manner within the historic and faithful Catholic religious orders.

The irony here is large: only a radical "separation from the world," with eyes firmly fixed heavenward, gives sufficient power to individuals in homes and intentional communities to overcome the lures, appetites, and pressures of technological change and the full industrialization of human life. These folks alone are the masters, not the servants, of innovation.

Technology and the New Evangelization

JONAH LYNCH, F.S.C.B.

Though not written specifically to address the question of technology in the home, the following article does address the important underlying issues. Applications to the home will be evident through the reviews that follow. We are grateful to the author and to the Knights of Columbus for permission to reproduce the article here.[1] – S.C.

All of Christian life rests on two principle mysteries: the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation. The Trinity is the name we give to the fathomless beauty of communion in God himself, the perfect unity of three Persons who are nevertheless distinct one from another. To participate in this unity is one of the deepest desires a human person has: to live in the depths of love, friendship, and communion, yet without dissolving one's identity in the crowd. We deeply want to be connected to other people, to love and be loved, because we are "image and likeness" of God himself, who is Trinity. It is not hard to see that this desire for communion is at the heart of what has made social networking undergo such explosive growth in the last decade.

In 2009, Benedict XVI said: "Desire for communication and friendship is rooted in our very nature as human beings and cannot be adequately understood as a response to technical innovations. In the light of the biblical message, it should be seen primarily as a reflection of our participation in the communicative and unifying Love of God, who desires to make of all humanity one family."[2]

The other deepest mystery of our faith, the Incarnation, is the bridge that links two worlds which otherwise would have remained apart. In Jesus Christ, God is revealed and made present in our midst. And not only: the flesh itself, that part of the human person which seemed destined only for decay and death, is revealed to be of crucial importance. Not only did God himself take on flesh, but in his resurrection he shows the eternal, transfigured destiny of the human body. Mary already participates in this destiny. So, by the grace of God, may we.

From its very beginnings, Christianity has faced a perennial temptation to underestimate the importance of the body. In past centuries, many crucial dogmatic

disputes arose in this regard, and many of the most dangerous heresies have devalued the body. Some philosophies situated the origin of evil in physical reality, and the Good in an exclusively spiritual realm.

Our Christian tradition, on the other hand, has always affirmed the goodness of all creation. Every generation of Christians has had to re-learn to think of Jesus Christ as "true man and true God," without excessively underlining one part of this expression to the detriment of the other. When we speak of Christ's "body and blood, soul and divinity" present in the Eucharist, we are speaking of this surprising union between apparent opposites, physical and spiritual. In the twenty centuries of the Church's life, much clarity has been brought to these definitions, yet they retain a fundamental mystery which has never been, and never can be exhausted.

Let us move on now to our subject, beginning with a few examples taken from everyday life.

A Few Examples

When I was a boy, my father worked in an insurance agency. He left the house around eight, and returned home at five-thirty. During that time, he made many phone calls, wrote many letters, and met many people. But from five-thirty in the evening until the following morning, he did none of these things. There was a clear distinction between the workplace and the home. Everyone felt it: even if you knew the home phone number of your employee, it was not right to disturb him at home except for a grave emergency.

Twenty years later, my father still worked for an insurance agency. But by now, even on vacation, he had to check his voice mail, respond to work calls on his cell phone, and write emails on his Blackberry. There was no longer a clear distinction between home and work. The causes of this situation are complex. One of them is the very fact that a cell phone is not linked to a specific physical location. This inevitably weakens the perception that you might be "disturbing" the person you are calling. That sense was stronger when the phone number was directly linked to a place: a work call on the home number had better be important.

What was once objectively linked to physical locations is now determined only by our will: we must turn off the phone in order to safeguard the silence of an important conversation, a liturgical celebration, or a meal with friends. And often, even if we have decided to turn off our own phone, those around us have not. A few decades ago, a parishioner would have had to make an exceptionally rude decision to interrupt the

Mass during the consecration with a loud noise; today it takes a decision on the part of all the parishioners to avoid interrupting the Mass with a ringing cell phone.

Let's take a look at another example: online chat. On my Gmail account, I can see when some of my close friends are online. Clicking on their name opens a chat window, which on occasion I use to say hello to people I did not plan on contacting, but whom I simply notice online. Some time ago, I was chatting with a friend who lives in Spain, whom I rarely see. Our conversation went something like this:

Me: "Hey Jack, how are you?"

Jack: "Good, you?"

Me: "Fine. So how's work?"

Jack: "Ok, a bit down cuz of the crisis."

Me: "How bout your girlfriend?"

While the other person is typing a response, the Gmail chat window shows a phrase which reads "Jack is typing…." That phrase remains visible as long as the other person is actually typing; when he stops, the phrase disappears a short while later. After my last question, by watching that message I could tell that Jack typed something, then stopped, then started typing again, then a long pause, and after about two minutes I received his reply: "Fine."

What happened in the meantime? Did he start saying something else, change his mind, and then send me a one-liner? Or did he receive a phone call or an email? Or did he go get a drink of water? I'll never know.

This taught me something about chat. It brings people closer together – I wasn't planning on talking with my far-away friend, but the chat window made it possible to have a brief contact. At the same time, chat creates a distance which isn't there in other forms of long-distance communication. For example, on the phone it would have been easier to interpret that long pause. I probably would have been able to make out if things were really "fine" or not between him and his girlfriend. Chat, on the other hand, made that silence completely illegible.

A third example: television. The availability of many channels makes it possible to leap continuously from one world to another (this is true of three or four, let alone with five hundred channels on satellite TV). This experience conditions us to think

that the world is not first "given," but chosen. You want to feel something in particular? Then choose the program that will make you feel relaxed, excited, fearful, joyful, sentimental, and so forth. Or you do not know what you want to feel, so you begin to zap through the channels, stopping for a few seconds on the images that most instinctively attract you.

Television screens have a character that is completely different from every other object. They seem almost magical. They attract our eyes with a power that not even the great masters' oil paintings can command. What's more, they are totipotent, they can become any image: on the screen one can watch a comedy, the Pope celebrating the Way of the Cross on Good Friday, or a porn flick. These are three experiences which more naturally would be located in three very different places: the theatre, the church and the brothel, but which can live together in apparent harmony on a living room television screen.

One final word about television will bring us to a first conclusion. In Amusing Ourselves to Death, Neil Postman writes "it is implausible to imagine that anyone like our twenty-seventh president, the multi-chinned, three-hundred-pound William Howard Taft, could be put forward as a presidential candidate in today's world. The shape of a man's body is largely irrelevant to the shape of his ideas when he is addressing a public in writing or on the radio or, for that matter, in smoke signals. But it is quite relevant on television. The grossness of a three-hundred-pound image, even a talking one, would easily overwhelm any logical or spiritual subtleties conveyed by speech. For on television, discourse is conducted largely through visual imagery, which is to say that television gives us a conversation in images, not words.... You cannot do political philosophy on television. Its form works against the content."[3]

The three examples we have briefly examined help us to see that, with a small change, Postman's final phrase, "Its form modifies its content," could describe all three technologies we have discussed. The cell phone changes our perception of space and privacy; chat obscures the meaning of silence, and changes the kind of things which can and cannot be said clearly; television alters our relationship with the world in many important ways. More generally, we could say that every technology carries with it a change in our approach to and relationship with the world.

Technology is Not Neutral

The changes in our approach to the world brought about through the use of technology are quite important. In particular, much depends on which aspects of life

are made easier and which ones are made more difficult through a given technology. In my conclusion, I will propose that we ask first of all what we wish to do or say through technology, in order to be conscious of the gains and losses incurred through its use. But first, we must tackle a common misconception.

Very frequently, we say or hear others say that technology is neutral, and everything depends on how you use it. The analogy is made to older tools: a knife, it is said, is neither good nor bad, and can be used either to slice bread or to kill a man. I would like to face this question head-on.

First, I need to clarify that in saying that technology is not neutral, I am not saying that it is intrinsically evil. By "neutral" we usually mean – taking things to the extreme – that internet was not invented by the devil. And even if there were a whiff of sulphur involved, it is undeniable that along with the bad, many good things can be found on the internet. Thus, we presume, the only real problem is to use the internet and other technologies well. The problem is that at this point we tend to make an unjustified leap. That is, we tend to think that only the user uses the technology. But this is not true: it is also the technology that "uses" its user. Every tool has an impact on the person using it. In that sense, they are not neutral.

The foregoing examples can be understood more clearly if we briefly mention a recent development in neuroscience called "neuroplasticity." The term indicates the fact that experience modifies the human brain in physically measurable ways, including the growth and death, the strengthening and weakening of dendrites (something like connecting wires) between neurons, and the reprogramming of groups of neurons for new functions. These developments have been discussed in many recent books,[4] to which I refer the interested reader. For our purposes, it is enough to state that the changes which occur in the brain as a result of repeated activity can have substantial consequences.

A personal example which I would like to mention has to do with reading and prayer. At one point in my life as a priest, I spent a lot of time speed-reading textbooks, news web-sites, and educational studies while working on a Master's degree. I became good at multitasking and quickly finding relevant information for the papers I wrote. At the same time, I experienced a growing difficulty in keeping my mind on one thing at a time, in particular when reading complicated theological works and while praying my breviary. My eyes kept jumping down a few lines, looking for key-words, and not following the more leisurely pace of the biblical text. At first, this did not seem to be a serious problem, and I kept pressing ahead. When a friend gave me a copy of Nicolas

Carr's The Shallows, I realized that my experience was more important than I had first thought. Carr shows in his book that the kind of reading I was doing was literally re-wiring my brain!

Once it was thought the brain reached a substantially fixed form with physical maturity, and it worked more or less like a computer. Carr's book helped me see that the reality is quite different. Neurons continually form new connections between themselves. We were born with some neurological structures, but these structures are profoundly modified by experience. The meaning and importance of this discovery is hard to overestimate.

One of the underlying dynamics is called Hebb's rule, formulated by the Canadian neuro-scientist Donald Hebb in 1949: "Cells that fire together wire together." If two neurons more or less in the same area of the brain are stimulated at the same time by an experience, they can form physical connections between themselves through the growth of new dendrites. More recently Edward Todd and Michael Merzenich have demonstrated that there are other possible mechanisms. Not only does experience generate neurological structures, strengthening and weakening the links between neurons, but it can also make entire groups of neurons change roles. Thus, for example, stroke victims can recover body movement by "reprogramming" the neurons in an undamaged area, which then substitute for the damaged neurons.[5]

And that isn't all. It is sufficient that an experience be "remembered" in order to strengthen the connections in play. A notable example of this phenomenon regards musical practice. One can practice even by only thinking of playing, without actually touching the keyboard of a piano, and really improve. A study done in 1995 by Alvero Pascual-Leone demonstrated that a group of pianists who only imagined playing certain notes registered the same changes in their brains as others who actually played the keyboard![6] When connections are strengthened between neurons, they can become the easiest route of communication. That is how habits are formed, both of action and of thought. All of this has deep implications for our relationship with reality.

We become what we think, what we see, what we read, and what we do. This is not a mystical affirmation; on a neurological level, our experiences never leave us unchanged. They modify us, for better and for worse, creating or strengthening new connections in our brains, weakening or eliminating others, forming us in the image of our actions, thoughts, desires, and tools.

If there is a two-way relationship between a tool and its user, between man and technology, which are the tools we would most like to resemble? Reading the Scripture creates a powerful capacity for reasoning and an attention to subtle detail that man does not naturally have. It can only be acquired by long experience, and by the decision to concentrate on certain types of reading. Meditating the lives of the Saints helps us to form our will and our intelligence to the highest standards. Good moral action creates virtuous habits. In other words, all of the above actions partially rewire our brains in the image of those same actions.

In this brief article, there is not enough space to go any further with this line of reasoning.[7] In the context of this discussion of technology and its influence on the human person, I would however like to continue our reflection by recalling our premise about the Trinity and the Incarnation, and bring to bear some insights generated by the Christian tradition.

Communion and Communication

The desire for communion seems to me to be one point where we should aim our attention. We should first look at the deep reasons which push men and women to constantly search for new means of communication, rather than on the technical methodology, which in any case rapidly changes and which must constantly be re-learned. At the same time, we should reflect critically upon our successes and failures in this search for communion.

In his message for the 2011 International Day of Social Communications, Pope Benedict XVI asked: "Who is my 'neighbor' in this new world? Does the danger exist that we may be less present to those whom we encounter in our everyday life? Is there is a risk of being more distracted because our attention is fragmented and absorbed in a world 'other' than the one in which we live? Do we have time to reflect critically on our choices and to foster human relationships which are truly deep and lasting? It is important always to remember that virtual contact cannot and must not take the place of direct human contact with people at every level of our lives."[8]

In reality he was repeating, in more vibrant language, what Verbum Domini says: "Among the new forms of mass communication, nowadays we need to recognize the increased role of the internet, which represents a new forum for making the Gospel heard. Yet we also need to be aware that the virtual world will never be able to replace the real world, and that evangelization will be able to make use of the virtual world offered by the new media in order to create meaningful relationships only if it is able

to offer the personal contact which remains indispensable."[9]

Would confession by telephone, fax, email, or chat be the same thing, with respect to the encounter with divine mercy through the priest present in the confessional? Wouldn't it be much more abstract and cold (besides being invalid)? Can you ask your girlfriend to marry you on skype? It seems to me that virtual communication can be a support to relationships, but it cannot make them grow and mature with the speed, depth, and honesty that only personal, physical communication can guarantee.

The history of the Church is full of fine examples of people like St Paul, who tried to communicate their faith with whatever new forms of communication were available at the time. I am also thinking of the scribes who copied pages and pages of manuscripts, as well as more recent television evangelizers including the American Fulton Sheen, or the incredible energy of the Polish priest Maximilian Kolbe, who founded newspapers and even cities before his death as a martyr in Auschwitz. Finally let us remember the powerful influence of Pope John Paul II or Mother Teresa: they had a luminous and convincing presence even on the television screen. Yet I cannot help but think that these people's actions have born true fruit according to the measure in which they favored interpersonal relationships, in small, local communities.

Another Church document, this one produced by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications in 2002, says: "Virtual reality cannot substitute the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments and the liturgical celebrations participated in a human community in flesh and blood. On the internet there are no sacraments." In other words, the fundamental problem for Catholics seems not to be so much about conquering the spaces of the web for Christ, but rather to live with Christ and the Church in the sacraments. Those who do so will "Christ-ify" every place in which they live, including the internet.

The Incarnation in the Age of Facebook

I recently received an email from a friend named Anna. She wrote to me of a particularly dramatic day in which she discovered the friendship of a person dear to her. The letter was beautiful, a simple and moving story. Then, a few weeks later I was speaking with a mutual friend about this message, she revealed she too had received the same email. But wasn't it an email sent to me? Or was it more like a newspaper article, copied for ease and sent to several people? And then again, why do we tend to feel disappointed when we discover this sort of thing? Why should the letter be less

valuable if it were sent to others as well?

The same thing is true for works of art. At Christie's auction house, originals are worth millions, and reproductions, even when they are not distinguishable to the buyer, are worth no more than a few thousand dollars. Also, when an artist makes several copies of a work, like in the case of prints and woodcuts, she numbers them. It is not the same thing to have an original or a copy. It is not the same thing to have a mass-produced poster, or print number 53 out of 100.

What changes in the case of a personal letter? The valuation of the person changes. Anna wrote a message which, in order to save time, she sent to others. But the message was thereby taken out of the intimate context of a friendship between sender and receiver. Only the text was left, without the complicated web of intention, form, and suggestion which exists only within an unrepeatable personal relationship. One sign of the falseness of this sort of action is the sense of guilt it creates, which can be found in the fact that the sender tends to hide the fact that it was a message sent to several people. Christmas cards are usually signed by hand, even if the rest is pre-printed.

Most of us want to be esteemed more than we deserve. Take facebook profile photos: most don't necessarily reflect what a person really is, but rather what he or she would like to seem. It is a small and absolutely pardonable vanity, but it unveils a way of being that eats away at friendship, that very communion that we most desire. Through these little insincerities comes a mentality in which appearance is more important than truth, and that is an obstacle to love.

But what does all this have to do with Web 2.0? On blogs or social networks, each person is an emitter of information, and most messages are sent out into the ether to a plurality of receivers. This is something different than a conversation among friends. In an essay-letter written to Facebook (as though it were a person), Adam Briggle faces this problem of mass communication:

"because of the mixed audience potentially viewing these public expressions… I do not feel all that free. In fact, I begin to sympathize with the mass media broadcasting corporations that have to produce content suitable for everyone. In these spaces, I am not playing with my identity or expressing myself so much as trying to purify a neutral self suitable for broadcasting to the viewing mass. It is the art of self-censorship in an attempt to handle the collision of life contexts that normally remain separate. I have seen innocent comments spin out a thread of rancour, because what

is best said to one is best said otherwise to another and not at all to a third."[10]

Seen from one's own point of view this may not be very convincing. "All right, virtual communities may not be as strong as real ones, but does it really matter?" It is easier to understand if we look at it from the point of view of the receiver. Even if I write carbon copy messages to save time, I would prefer that my friends write to me as an individual on a private, one-to-one basis. I would like to have our conversation happen with a balanced rhythm between speaking and listening. I would like our friendship to be full of sincere charity. Exactly what I do to others almost without thinking, I wouldn't want to be done to me.

When I go onto an internet forum to try and solve a problem with my computer, I can rapidly access the conflated knowledge of many thousands of people. And I am often able to find a solution quickly, but I tend to reduce these people to mere givers of information, which is something less than persons. On the other hand, I would not like to be treated as a simple giver of information, but as an unrepeatable being. I am not a mere event among events. I am not a mere function among functions, or a drop in the ocean. The concept of personhood, of which the Christian West is justly proud, affirms that every man and woman is a whole, an infinite. I am a unique event, and I find in the unrepeatability of the flesh and of local human relationships the necessary base for the strong and lively friendships that I seek.

The Body and Love

In elementary school, we used to pass love notes between students. They were ridiculous for how direct they were. I think I once wrote to a girl: "Would you like to be my girlfriend?", with two boxes to check, "yes" and "no." In high school things were more complicated and I usually did not have the courage to ask the question in person, so I tried on the phone. I was there straining to the outmost to interpret the microseconds of each pause and the tones of the voice, in order to understand the real intentions of my friend. I remember that certain relationships were in a sense doubled: there was the telephone relationship and the relationship in person during the school day. Rivers of words which we said in the evening did not seem to survive the light of the next day.

When I finally had a girlfriend, I immediately realized that being together was completely different from these interminable telephone conversations. In the first place it was much more difficult to mask my feelings. When I was tired, or tired of sweet words, I could not hide behind some monosyllable pronounced here or there on

the phone. I was all of one piece, readable every instant and not only when I came out of my silence. The look in my eyes said more than many words. The caresses I had so deeply desired were a sign of love, but they quickly became empty and we felt the need to find words ever stronger and gestures ever more daring, to say the same emotion. How strange it is, and how clumsy you feel, when you realize that an excess of expression stifles love!

This is significant because it helps us to understand that the language of love, like other languages and other fundamental experiences, is infinitely variable. It requires all the senses and all the expressive registers, even just to approach from afar that which we would like to express. It helps us to intuit that every communication that does not include the physical presence of people, but is presented only with words, images, and sounds mediated through a machine, loses the greater part of its effectiveness, even with the addition of smilies. A word written in a text message does not have the individuality of a word written by hand, which betrays the haste or the care, as well as the personality, of the person writing. The language of love, like the language of religion, needs personal, bodily communication.

We can trust a person, not a message. We can feel a leaping in the heart for someone who is here now with us. We can see his face, evaluate the sincerity of his smile, the purity of his gaze. We can shake his hand and measure his conviction, and his human warmth. In my body I experience the beauty of relationships, of which the physical limits are not a mortal shell, but a permeable boundary that permits communion. Precisely because my hand is not the same as that of the person who is shaking it, it is beautiful that our two hands be united. If there were no boundary, nor could there be the surprise and gratitude that we experience for the nearness of another.

In the flesh there is less confusion. First of all because there is a certain sense of modesty in front of a physical presence, which helps to not rush, to not pretend the fusion of our souls on the first date. And in the meantime, thanks to the continual corporeal messages which arrive through gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions, pauses, and so forth, we get an idea of the other person without having to bring everything out into the forced clarity and typical impoverishment of direct discourse. Tip-toeing around certain themes is not necessarily a lack of love for the truth. It can very well express respect for the freedom and subtlety of certain truths. Some themes are like the cyclamens which can only live under the shadows of the trees in forest. Direct light kills them.

This brings us to ask a surprising question: could it be the case that the very limits

imposed by physical reality have a positive meaning? Could it be that the desire to extend those limits, conquering space and time with ever more powerful means of travel and communication, is not always a useful desire?

Limits and the Infinite

As a young seminarian, I once spent a summer together with a hospital chaplain, Fr Vincent. I accompanied him while he visited the sick. One hot July morning, we heard screaming in the hospital hallway. The voice was coming from an isolation room where a woman named Rachel was dying of cancer. The nurses couldn't do anything to control her pain. On a busy floor with many other patients to care for, they stayed away from the screaming. They were very generous nurses, willing to do anything they could to help, but when there was nothing left to do, they didn't feel comfortable staying with that woman.

Fr Vincent followed the sound. He entered and closed the door. Then he got on his knees and started screaming with her. She screamed, "Oh God!" and he screamed, "Oh God, help her! Help her!" He held her hand. At least that way she knew that someone was praying with her. We were there for a long time. At a certain point she changed from "Why, oh why, God? Oh, stop, stop!" into "I offer, I offer, I offer it!" In the last moments of her life, despair became hope.

When I see paintings or icons which portray Christ's descent into hell, I think of that moment. Fr Vincent's hand was like Christ's hand, reaching into the dark pit of despair and blasphemy to bring light and hope. In fact, it is not too much to say that his hand was Christ's hand bringing about Rachel's salvation. This is the striking reality of Christ's singular love for each person, which he wishes to express through his Body, the Church.

That moment illuminated for me one of the reasons Jesus was willing to entrust his entire Church to the fragile, "inefficient" one-to-one communication he inaugurated with his disciples: nothing else works. No long-distance care would have been sufficient for Rachel. The only possible response to her need, after every medicine had been tried, every palliative care given, was the hand and the voice of a human person in the same room with her. And that was the vehicle for her salvation, for her to learn to believe that God does not abandon us, and to trust that even her suffering itself could find meaning in his Cross.

This is not to say that all the efforts of the doctors and nurses were useless, far from it. They absolutely were useful, just secondary. What was fundamental was the human

contact that could only come about in a one-to-one encounter. There was no way to multiply Fr Vincent's effectiveness through advances in communication technology. The only thing good enough for Rachel that July morning was his hand in hers.

This story helps us to see that the question we began with, "how can the Church use new technologies to further her mission?" must be asked as a secondary question. The Church must "sift everything," retaining what is good (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:21), but she must never forget that she had her beginnings in the singular, specific, personal love of Jesus for his disciples. No technical progress can ever make that kind of relationship go out of date.

The same truth is visible in many other areas of Christian life. A married couple must accept many limits in their life together – the limits caused by the personalities of the two spouses, by their social situation, by their children, by illnesses or accidents, and so forth. Yet it is precisely within those limitations that the couple may experience the fulfillment and beauty of their vocation. The alternatives to faithfulness do not lead to happiness. A missionary priest may be rightly full of the desire to carry God's Kingdom to all men and women – but if he does not care for one community, his own flock, he will end up dispersed in activity and bear little fruit.

The Church exists because people are wounded. Her goal is not just to proclaim the Good News efficiently, and then move on to do something else, but physically to be the Body of Christ. All of Christian life rests within the experience of the sacraments, the liturgy, the communion of the Church, and the mystery of God's time. Wounds take time to heal, and often a doctor cannot speed up their healing. He must be willing to wait, to consider each person as completely unique, completely worthy of his entire attention. He must not rush from patient to patient, in an attempt to care for greater numbers, to the detriment of the quality of the care itself. In his just desire to do more good, he must not end up considering his patients simply as problems and not as people.

In a similar way, a missionary must attend to the other, waiting for him to open himself to Christ, and be willing to wait as long as necessary. That puts a rather low limit on the number of people he can care for adequately, but only in accepting this limit is his work truly fruitful. I believe that this is what Christ showed us in his own pedagogical approach, which focused much of its attention on a very small group of men.

It seems reasonable to doubt that new technologies will fundamentally revolutionize

human life as a whole and, with it, the new evangelization. Jesus Christ, who "reveals man to himself,"[11] is not an intermediate stage in evolution. He represents the fullness of humanity, the height to which we can aspire through his grace, not a stepping-stone on our way to becoming cyborgs. We should not think, therefore, that technological developments have already brought about, or will bring about in the future, a fundamental change in the structure of the human person.

As I tried to show with the story about the chaplain, what is truly essential often cannot be given and received except in person. And that outstretched hand, Christ present revealing his personal, singular love for me and for you, is the very content of the new evangelization.

In conclusion, we must be careful that our question about how to use new technologies does not supplant the more important question: what are we trying to use them to do?

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[1] Extracted from Fr Jonah Lynch FSCB and Michelle K. Borras, Technology and the New Evangelization: Criteria for Discernment (Catholic Information Service, 2012). The original essays are available online at www.kofc.org/un/en/resources/cis/cis419.pdf.

[2] Benedict XVI, Message for the 43rd World Communications Day, May 24, 2009. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/mes...

[3] N. Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death (Penguin Books, 1985), p. 7.

[4] Among many others, Nicholas Carr, The Shallows (Norton, 2010); Norman Doidge, The Brain that Changes Itself (Penguin, 2007); Stanislas Dehaene,Reading in the Brain (Penguin, 2009); Maryanne Wolf, Proust and the Squid (Harper, 2007).

[5] These exciting discoveries have been recounted in passionate detail by Norman Doidge in his The Brain that Changes Itself. The writer, a psychiatrist and researcher at Columbia University in New York, reconstructs the history of the fundamental discoveries in neuroscience by presenting various "case studies" of his personal knowledge. Five years earlier, Jeffrey Schwartz and Sharon Begley told the same story in more technical language in The Mind and the Brain (HarperCollins, 2002).

[6] Described in Schwartz and Begley, The Mind and the Brain, p. 217.

[7] I dedicate more space to developing these themes in The Scent of Lemons (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2012).

[8] Benedict XVI, Message for the 45th World Communications Day, June 5, 2011.

[9] Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation Verbum Domini, n. 113.

[10] In Facebook and Philosophy, ed D.E. Wittkower (Carus Publishing Company, 2010), p. 168.

[11] Cf. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution Gaudium et Spes, n. 22.

Witness: The Challenge of Discernment

BENEDICT KOBUS

William Gibson once wrote, “I’ve never really been very interested in computers themselves. I don’t watch them; I watch how people behave around them. That’s becoming more difficult to do because everything is ‘around them.’”

My seven-year old Henry wanted to emulate his uncle and make some perfume. He got dill, basil, and lavender from the garden and ground them up with olive oil from the kitchen, and then asked me to update his blog with a photo of him at work.[1] Later he asked me to find pictures of Despicable Me 2 on Google Image Search; like his father he craves and hoards pictures, but also uses them as inspiration; I see echoes of them in his drawings. The medium of a connected computer enables my son to engage actively in publishing, via his blog – an activity impossible before the net. The same medium facilitates browsing for pictures galore, which without supervision, even in the case of children approaching adulthood, easily becomes passive and, without moderation, as deadening as too much television.

I began collecting images and other resources online long before my marriage, and I turned my fondness for collecting to the purpose of preparing to educate my future children. If my experience of teaching had not already made me realize that such material must be selected with care, this process certainly did. I found that almost any image search leads straight to material I would not want my children to view. Of course, parental censorship has always been exercised over manifestations of the culture impinging on the home: for example, newspapers and television. The problem is not new to this generation, but perhaps it is more intense.

The modern dualism of intellect and will – well ensconced in contemporary schooling – makes it impossible to deal with these challenges: discernment is only possible when the heart is engaged. And only the awakened heart is strong enough to live in the culture while remaining untainted, filtering out what is good. Our schooling, as C.S. Lewis argued in The Abolition of Man, will tend to underdevelop the heart. The ensuing “men without chests” lack the organ that enables them both to discern truth and goodness, and to experience wonder.

When my children watch David Attenborough's nature documentaries, I wonder what they pick up of the despairing environmentalism that pervades them, clashing with the gee-whizz production values. If my childhood experience is anything to go by, it is the moods that endure in the affective memory, and that later taint experiences such as finding an abandoned nestling in the garden – moods that have never left me.

In working with home-schooling families I have come across an attitude of fear, or rather a way of dealing with the fear that must be the common lot of all parents: there is a world "out there" beyond parental control, which lays claim to our children and which, by default, cannot be trusted. It is not even about only the usual suspects of porn, peer-pressure, perverts....

My parents were among those who in the 70s entrusted their sons' religious and moral formation to a particular Catholic school. They did not suspect that they were actually paying for experimental masses, lax sexuality, and a liberal humanities faculty. The majority of my fellow students left school stripped of their faith. Those whose faith and practice survived had attended clubs where the culture was embraced but in a more savvy way and without sacrificing orthodoxy; these institutions had at the heart of their mission the education of the heart in the truth, discerning that truth wherever it existed within the prevailing culture.

Something must have been missing from both the school and those homes whose sons never persevered. Nothing surprising here. Those families that by contrast opt for actively insulating their children from the culture might be expected to succeed better at preserving their children's faith and right principles. However, it often seems to be the case that "protection" is given more thought than how the children will cope when eventually that shielding influence is removed, when they leave the protecting nest and have to engage with the culture like it or not. The astuteness towards the culture that I observed in the boys' club I attended as a teen seems absent in these homes, and I have a sense of foreboding about them, notwithstanding all the family rosaries they recite.

Strict supervision is becoming impossible in any case. It used to be sufficient to vet newspapers and magazines, and plan television viewing. Digital media now also reach into the home, and would increase the burden of vetting beyond the feasible, even if it were possible, given the spontaneous and stochastic nature of seeking content and contacts on the net.

After holding out a long time, the head of my children's independent Catholic primary

school permitted his fifteen-year-old daughter to use Facebook, but only on condition that she allow him to look over her shoulder at random. He told me that the lack of trust and invasion of privacy that this implied brought a new awkwardness to their relationship, in light of which he regrets having imposed that condition. I would venture that this individual – for whom Thomas More's letter to William Gonell is bedside reading and who lives what he preaches – had already done in her early years all that could be done to prepare his daughter for Facebook, in comparison with which any strategy undertaken ad hoc for dealing with particular situations would pale into insignificance.

Still the fear and self-doubt were evident. How much more formidable the doubt in parents less well-informed about education or less conscious of the early work of formation of the heart than this energetic Catholic headmaster, or those brought up in a culture of dependency, reliant on external authorities to control media content.

"Catholics Unplug your Televisions"[2] has a fundamentalist whiff that I suspect drives away all but a certain kind of radical constituency. Their narrow focus prompts the question, increasingly heard in the internet era, of why only this particular screen-based medium? The computer is taking over the functions of the TV. Though Marshall McLuhan made us conscious of the necessary physiological effects of the medium and the consequent effects on our psyche, for effect he overstated his case that the content is a red herring. In addition, his mission was scientific and academic, not didactic.

Apart from the obvious case of grossly inappropriate content, my chief concern as a parent is not content or neurological numbing, but lost opportunities. In the spirit of Maria Montessori, I cringe when I see my children before the computer or the TV because I know they are missing the chance to draw, dance, or play with sticks, leaves, and mud at a pace programmed by themselves (assisted by us). When they crave more time before a screen, I try to provide interesting alternatives that remove that intermediary. And observation reveals – their initial disgruntled reaction soon forgotten – how much greater is their satisfaction and joy when playing with reality not virtuality, or listening to a story told by my wife or myself. (Incidentally I share my wife's discomfort at reading to them from a Kindle, but find it hard to define why – perhaps it is again the difference between relating to a screen and to a physical, real-world object such as a book.)

The British Prime Minister recently said he wants all pornography to be blocked by filters set up at ISPs' premises in order to "protect children." This is not technically possible, for "the net treats censorship as a defect and routes around it," according to

John Gilmore,[3] a founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation. But let us suppose it could be done: what arbitrary authority would decide the line between art that contains chaste depiction of nudity and porn, for example? Numerous other questions arise concerning the delegation of moral policing of the home to an arbitrary civic authority, the vetting of this authority, its ambivalent relationship with business and ideological lobbies and the gross breach of subsidiarity.

A basic knowledge of internet technology and human nature suffices to reveal Cameron's statement as a political gesture pandering to the fears of his constituency. However, the fact that he judges it politically expedient to make such a gesture and gets away with it reveals something about many parents' and educators' lack of confidence in their own discernment, their dearth of basic technical knowledge, and their reliance on the State for moral protection.

I come back to the realization that the locus of culture is in the individual human heart and in the home. Just as there cannot be a global, national, or "internet-wide" entity responsible for content, there is likewise no clear-cut, easily identifiable, and isolable enemy. The enemy is not "out there": it is in our fallen nature as much as in putative predators of various descriptions. Those best placed and most highly motivated to cultivate, educate, and protect their children's hearts can only be parents. So we are confronted by the challenge of educating parents.

Rousseau's romantic notion of childhood innocence is not credible to parents who actually take responsibility for their own children. Though they may well share his belief that "society" is what corrupts, and find no lack of evidence for this, in the final analysis society is as much what takes place in the home as what takes place in the world. Discernment of what is good in what postmodernity offers us (as is again patently obvious to actual parents) cannot be delegated to schools or government agencies, let alone automated systems. The naive heart must be protected, and discernment refined. The only alternative is an infantilized citizenry craving or resenting censorship by some superior entity, but seeing no viable alternative.

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[1] http://doingdang.blogspot.co.uk/2013/07/creating-fragrances.html.

[2] http://www.cutunplugtv.co.uk/.

[3] John Gilmore's web site: http://www.toad.com/gnu/.

Facebook and Philosophy

JULIANA WEBER

D.E. Wittkower (ed.), Facebook and Philosophy (Open Court, 2010, 285 pages).

Don't look to this volume for a definitive response to the question of whether Facebook is good or bad. Facebook, like any tool, has its pros and cons, a few of which are mentioned in any given essay, and a few of which are contradicted in other essays. Insightful and representing many schools of thought, these essays will probably raise more questions than they answer for any reader. But that's part of the fun, isn't it?

Facebook, it can be argued, mixes media (defined as entertainment or consumption) with personal interaction (connecting and keeping in touch with people we know outside of Facebook). This is a confusing mix. Wittkower points out the rigorist attitude of those Facebook critics who ask, "Is it important? Is it meaningful? We would only ask these questions if we view the status update from the outside as if Facebook were a television. But the feed is not a broadcast. The feed is our friends" (p. xxix). If we asked questions like that in face-to-face conversations, "we would be failing to be a friend in a very basic way", he adds (p. xxx).

Then Wittkower seems to contradict his own introductory remarks later in his co-authored essay about how our lives become "spectacles" on Facebook, no longer lives directly lived (p. 98). Is Facebook an entertainment broadcast, or is the newsfeed part of my life and how I interact with my friends and family? Perhaps it's so hard to tell the difference, as Wittkower explains, because on Facebook, socializing "mostly takes the form of simply consuming alongside others" (p. 99). I would add that the same can be said for our culture.

The sad truth is that some of us want friendships that make no demands, and we find them quite easily by "friending" on Facebook. There, friends only appear on our virtual doorstep – and only when we log on at that. Condella puts it this way: "To date, no one has ever helped a friend move on Facebook" (p. 117). Facebook does help people connect – perhaps too easily. One essayist, Bar-Tura, shares his experience networking teens from across the city, from different religious and racial backgrounds, in a social

justice cause. Noble causes go nowhere unless we realize that "the wall-to-wall must become face-to-face. Profiles must become people. The group must actually gather. Only then can divides be bridged, and social change be made possible" (p. 239), Bar-Tura goes on to explain. If it fails to do so, Bloor adds, "The fault lies not so much in our sites, but in ourselves. If we wanted in-depth, reflective friendships along the lines described by Aristotle, no doubt the flexible technology available to us would help support us in this, and the many talented individuals directing that technology to meet human needs would see that we soon had it" (p. 157).

There are equally troubling concerns about privacy on Facebook with its "reciprocal panopticism" as Doyle and Fraser call it (p. 229). The more democratic and ubiquitous our use of Facebook, the more government surveillance, terrorist information gathering, and predatory criminal activity can take place, even if we all stayed abreast of the latest privacy settings. Imprudent photos our future employers may find, foul-mouthed friends we never meant for our parents to meet, and the political range of our associates are only the most obvious boundary concerns. "Those who embrace Habermas's vision would likely [assert] that blogs and Twitter are creating an open and deliberative democracy. […] Foucault, for his part, reminds us how the same diffusion of power can facilitate the extension of surveillance and control into our most intimate spaces" (p. 229).

A few authors discuss the structure of Facebook and the underlying message of the medium. Losh, for example, presents the games on Facebook as the most visible sign that "the chief resource is attention" in these games and throughout Facebook (p. 35). Most games (since profits are made from greater numbers of users) favor users who have more friends to invite into the game (p. 46). This marketing device and underlying logic does run throughout Facebook. It can be argued further on this basis that, through encouraging quantity over quality of friendships, Facebook inadvertently undermines the Aristotelian "virtuous friendship," which requires a good deal of time and effort to develop. Facebook puts great emphasis on immediacy, too, and a constant feed of it, to the disadvantage of memory and perhaps coherency (p. 28). It is worth considering what else Facebook renders obsolete, and whether we are better off with the substitute, as Bogost reflects in his essay (pp. 21-32).

I've chosen to unpack just a few of the discussions that most interest me. Other discussions concern the meaning of privacy, which one author defines as respecting the context in which information is made available (p. 8). Thalos argues that Facebook forces users into a robot-like facelessness, while Sarachan argues for the artistry possible in a Facebook profile. Some authors, Wandel and Beavers, warn against

“fronting” on Facebook (p. 89), while Briggle explains that he isn’t trying to front so much as anaesthetize his appearance for a mixed crowd, making himself neutral enough to avoid offense (p. 168). Besides, Marinucci points out, you really can’t “front” where most of your “friends” know you face-to-face too (p. 65).

The reader will encounter philosophies ranging from utilitarianism to virtue-based ethics and feminism, and those who argue that an abundance of choice is distracting (p. 261). These discussions weave in and out of one another and raise further questions, all of which are worth pondering in-depth before logging back on.

Last Child in the Woods

CATHERINE SIENKIEWICZ

Richard Louv, Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder (Algonquin, 2008).

Sometime in the last few decades, a third American frontier quietly opened, or so says Richard Louv in this recent thought-provoking book. A little more than a century ago historian Frederick Jackson Turner brought to attention the closing of the first frontier; namely, the free access to wilderness area that allowed and encouraged westward expansion. This point was marked by the census of 1890, which noted the absence of a continuous line of frontier land. A century later, another census marked the end of a second frontier, as the farm population had been whittled down to such a number that the long-standing annual farm survey was dropped. The third and current American frontier, suggests Louv, is characterized by a severance of the public and private mind from the natural world and the values which adhere to a nature-attached culture.

Resulting from this is a malady that Louv terms “nature-deficit disorder,” which he insists does not have a strictly medical or scientific meaning, but is simply a way to give a name to a phenomenon that is becoming widely recognized. But this is not the only new term readers will notice. Louv’s book is scattered with newly coined terms relating to the alleged divorce from nature, its causes, consequences, and remedies. Ecophobia, biophilia, eighth intelligence, ecopsychology, zoopolis – Louv seems to think and speak in a language foreign to common parlance. And that is partly the point: much of the problem, according to Louv, is that the big systems which run our culture (education, government, city and urban planning, media and marketing) have long been pushing us toward all that is man-made and technologically up-to-date, and away from any real connection to land, nature, food – in essence to all of creation. (Creation, however, is a term that the author is careful not to use.) Even the environmentalists, he wryly notes, no longer come from the forest with dirt on their boots; they wear the suited uniform of Washington lobbyists.

Louv focuses on children in his study, partly because he sees obvious consequences for

them in a distancing from nature, and partly because of the joy and nostalgia that so many older adults have for their own outdoor child experiences, which are increasingly more foreign to the average American kid. There is more than a little irony in this, since the environmental movement has been so successful in introducing environmental awareness programs into the public school curriculum. Surprisingly, Louv argues that this only worsens the problem, creating "ecophobia," where children know nothing of their own rivers and forests first-hand, but only the images and apocalyptic stories of rainforest depletion. The result, he says, is an antipathy for nature, based on fears inspired at an early age.

The negative consequences of nature-deficit disorder, as seen by Louv, have varying levels of empirical data behind them, yet many seem sufficiently supported by common sense. Among them: childhood obesity, poor academic performance, declining emotional well-being, low sense of safety and connectedness, increasing incidence of ADHD diagnoses. The last in that list is in some ways the most alarming, as it is rapidly becoming the number one reason for pediatric medication, and in Louv's presentation certainly there is scientific data to support his connection. The causes for the severance of our culture – and especially our children – from nature are likewise manifold. Louv cites the following among them: lack of time (a necessity for experiencing nature) due to over scheduling and overuse of television, parental fear (of traffic, crime, stranger-danger, liability, and the risks of nature itself), efficiency-based urban and suburban planning (which excludes open and unstructured play spaces), and education programs at all levels (which emphasize technology and specified study over more classical and hands-on natural history studies).

Much of Louv's book is understandably dedicated to stating the problem and drawing the reader to share his concerns, and the picture he paints is of a situation for children that is concerning at the least and disastrous at the worst. Still, in his first writing and especially in his recent revision, he sees reasons to be encouraged – many of them inspired by the first printing of this book. What is to be done for the children? Louv gives a variety of guidance. For parents: learn to re-experience – or experience for the first time – the joy and wonder of the natural world, which necessarily takes time. Read good literature with your children – he mentions Tolkien – which awakens and nurtures a love for nature and can partly fulfill the need for it. Nurture "constructive boredom," which can lead to and be resolved through free outdoor play. For educators, he adamantly promotes a return to less efficient but more effective nature studies, which provides in-depth knowledge of local flora and fauna, and builds a sense of connectedness that has been lost. Allow for studies to occur out-of-doors when the

area of study suggests it. And for civic leaders, he makes a plea for “green” design, which utilitizes and preserves natural spaces when planning communities, work and school spaces, and especially child play areas.

What can we hope to acquire, or regain, from following Louv’s admonitions and suggestions? The conclusion here is just as much a blend of data and common sense: improved physical and emotional health, greater inspiration and appreciation for the fine arts, stronger discipline and character, improved school and work performance and satisfaction, and a greater sense of wholeness.

This last benefit – a greater sense of wholeness – Louv turns to at the end of the book, and it is here that he finally addresses the spiritual component, much too far along for this reader, but as Louv points out, religious environmentalists make strange bedfellows, so perhaps he considered it best not to muddy the waters. Still, it seemed there was perhaps too concerted and universal an effort to eliminate from the great majority of the book any use of the word creation. That, while making room repeatedly for hypothesizing that our unavoidable need for nature-connectedness is based in our physical/psychological memories of our primitive evolutionary experiences.

Perhaps an older theory – that our need for nature has its origin in our Creator, in whom all of creation finds its origin and end – has a little too much data and common sense behind it; it seems something novel was in order. Yet it is a study in truth that the concerns, solutions, and conclusions are much the same.

Divining a Digital Future

RACHEL M. COLEMAN

Paul Dourish and Genevieve Bell, Divining a Digital Future: Mess and Mythology in Ubiquitous Computing (MIT Press, 2011, 248 pages).

When dealing with questions of and about technology, it is always difficult to know where to start. How can we separate ourselves from such a pervasive reality enough to ask questions about it? There is also the issue of progress: the advancement of technology seems to happen so fast that it is difficult to think any one phenomenon before it becomes obsolete and something else takes it place. These two obstacles have conditioned us such that it is difficult to see technology and the set of principles behind its development and advancement. We are "enframed" in technology, to use Martin Heidegger's neologism –so thoroughly drenched in its logic that we do not know here we begin and the water ends, and we almost cannot help but advance the technological with every action we take.

The issue of "enframing" may sound ominous to some, simply obvious to others. In Divining a Digital Future, Paul Dourish and Genevieve Bell argue that ubiquitous computing, or "ubicomp," is a good thing. Of course, this is a disputed thesis: ubicomp, according to its principal articulator Mark Weiser, was supposed to bring an age of "calm technology, when technology recedes into the background of our lives" (cited p.1). But "calm" never seems to be the appropriate word to describe our relationship with and relation to technology – "frenetic" comes to mind more readily.

This is where Dourish and Bell's book comes in – specifically the "mess and mythology" subtitle. It is more or less a myth, say they, that technology will ever go unnoticed; rather, its reality will always be a little "messy." There will always be gaps in our infrastructure, problems with our coding language, and an inexact calculation here and there. If we wait until man machine are perfectly and seamlessly operating with and within each other, we will not recognize the technological possibilities open to us here and now.

"Mess" is an interesting term in this book, and it seems to cover any element of the

ubicomp system that is not already precisely integrated. The implication is that a complete and seamless integration into the ubicomp system is the standard of perfection. For example: across the United States we find a patchwork of wi-fi networks run mostly by individuals, all with different passwords and varying signal strengths; would not it be more helpful to have one continental system, giving every person equal access at any time? This is what Dourish and Bell would call the less messy version of ubicomp, though it is also, they claim, the utopian vision, and thus not really possible.

Which leads us to ask, “why not?” The implicit answer: man. Ubicomp will always be messy because humans are involved. If sterile, calculating, and perfectly integrated into a system is our standard for “clean,” then man will always bring a messy element to the equation. Organic life simply will not be pushed perfectly into a system that does not have the capacity to contain it. The logic of technology has no capacity for surprises, whereas life is always surprising.

Dourish and Bell do not make the connection between the mess of ubicomp and humanity. They do, however, grope their way towards it. The latter half of their book is dedicated to understanding the “sociocultural” implications, causes and effects of ubicomp. The authors turn to primitive cultures and traditions like those of the aboriginals in Australia to demonstrate human interaction, and then speculate about what role technology might have played in changing these interactions into what we observe in modern westernized cultures today. At first this approach seems haphazard and a bit confusing, until one realizes that Dourish and Bell have no way to speak about human life without, or before, technology. Thus, an interesting meta-question arises out ofDivining a Digital Future. How do we study a whole in which we are already enframed?

Dourish and Bell take technology to be the measure of reality, but technology is only a part, and we cannot evaluate the whole of the world by a part within it. Only a whole can judge a whole: the questions Dourish and Bell are asking concern the full measure of humanity. When the human element is reduced to mess and disorder, the framework, however implicitly or silently, becomes the technological, rather than the organic. And if that is the case, we will never be able to think about humanity, let alone the effects this peculiar and pervasive part we have named technology will have on man.

Breaking Free of Internet Addiction

DANIEL BLACKMAN

Kimberly Young and Patrice Klausing, Breaking Free of the Web: Catholics and Internet Addiction (St Anthony Messenger Press, 2007).

Kimberly S. Young and Cristiano Nabuco de Abreu (eds), Internet Addiction: A Handbook and Guide to Evaluation and Treatment (Wiley, October 2010).

In July and August 2013 the UK press reported comments by Baroness Greenfield, professor of pharmacology at Oxford University, on the possibility of social media such as Facebook and Twitter significantly reshaping self-identity for some users, and how they relate to one another (and not for the better either). Even more disturbing, in the same month CNN carried a report about the rise and rise of global cybersex trafficking of vulnerable young women, detained and forced to perform in front of webcams for paying customers. Not long afterwards, Britain's Daily Mail reported on the rise of websites allowing couples and individuals to upload their sex lives for the world to see, even in real time. As far back as the 1990s internet addiction was seen as a real problem in places like South Korea, which has been at the forefront of internet growth. In fact the Daily Telegraph this year reported on "digital dementia" caused by overuse of modern technology like phones and consoles.

Breaking Free of the Web and Internet Addiction both look at online gambling, social networking, cybersex and pornography, and gaming. Both also try to explain why addiction happens, its stages, and ways to break free, based on theoretical and practical experience of helping those in need. Arguably the whole sphere of sex and the internet is the worst of all. In other areas – online shopping, gambling, or gaming – users act unvirtuously with things, such as money, credit cards, and console systems, even fake identities. When it comes to sex it's people themselves, whether voluntarily or not, that are the users, the suppliers, and the content. It entails the dehumanization and desacralization of people and sex.

When it comes to sex, the online world and the real world are not two utterly distinct entities; one could argue that the concept of "online world" is redundant. The editors note in Internet Addiction the difficulty of distinguishing between addiction and necessity (checking email, websites for work, and messaging services on phones) as we are so reliant on the internet. It's not a matter of flicking a switch on and off. Men and women in pornographic films, made in the real world, are real people with lives; so too are those that view them. Images and videos are now gleaned from reality TV shows, or hacked from people's computers. Members of the general public can now drift between appearing in a reality TV show and performing in a pornographic film, all the while being lauded as "brave" and a "star." What of those trapped in the sex industry and forced to perform for customers? Online sex shows can have a devastating reality in the real world. Online sex is very much part of the real world; it's a digital space where the real flows over – often some of the more perverse and appalling. The authors in both books note that the anonymity, ease of access, and apparent freedom from consequences for users are big factors in fuelling the online sex industry. A whole sector of literature on how internet pornography can re-wire and harm the brain's functions and change the way we interact with the opposite sex has sprung up in the last few years.

According to World Internet Stats there are now over 2.4 billion internet users worldwide, a 566.4% increase between 2000-2012. Google Internet Stats says 71% of people in the developing world are now online. There are an estimated 555 million Twitter users and 1.11 billion Facebook users. In 2012 21 million (80%) of UK households had had internet access, and 85% of the US adult population used the internet. In fact internet penetration rate is a standard telecommunications measurement, even the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) carefully monitor the growth and use of broadband internet. We could add statistics such as internet access and use on smartphones and ipads, but it's not only the numbers that we might find interesting, it's the fact that the internet, and in turn the content of the world wide web, can and is accessed pretty much wherever a person might be, including the home.

Looking for knowledge, shopping for consumer goods or sex, and interacting with others online promises speed, ease, and variety. The internet can be used in the privacy of one's home – kitchen, lounge, bedroom, in bed, seven days a week, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. This is what, coupled with certain types of content, has lead to the facilitation and rise of internet addiction. However, Breaking Free and Internet Addiction speak more about compulsive behavior than "addiction." The application of

the concept of addiction to internet behaviour, though becoming more common, still has its critics.

When looking at the reasons why some people compulsively search for pornographic content or engage in long stints of gambling or gaming, several possibilities are offered. Of course there is the "chemical balance in the brain" approach (Hollander, Arias-Carrión, PÖppel), but there are also other possibilities. One of those is the theory that people are looking to make up what they lack in real life: a spouse, the ability to make new friends, a parent, someone to connect with, an outlet for aspirations and goals, and a place of refuge from the harsher realities of daily urban living. In this sense there is something tragic about the lone man or woman glued to their laptop or phone, hearts and minds seeking fulfilment and happiness in all the wrong places and in the wrong ways. It's also a wake-up call. We need to think carefully about how we build our families, shape our homes, and live our duty to be our brother's keeper.

Breaking Free is specifically aimed at Catholics. However, there are a number of paragraphs that do not convey Church teaching clearly, and show the influence of Freud, whom philosopher Peter Kreeft has called Freud one of the "pillars of unbelief" and an "enemy of the Faith." The authors write: "Because one is dealing with addiction (some level of compulsion and lack of freedom), universal moral teaching may not be possible or appropriate." But it is precisely moral teaching on virtue and vice, human freedom and sin that is much needed in this area. Universal moral teaching is there to safeguard and guide, not oppress. The authors do not explain why compulsion and lack of freedom mean universal moral teaching can be dispensed with.

Another example. "When it comes to marriage, some would say the church teaching was obvious… [But] there is also a clear and unequivocal teaching about primacy of conscience, which in the final analysis cannot be violated." Canon law, annulment, and the internal forum of conscience are complex and delicate areas. Such statements are misleading, since they do not explain Church teaching on the correct formation of conscience.

In Internet Addiction, an academic book with extensive references and index, we find the following passage in the chapter on cybersex addiction: "not all online sexual activity should be viewed as having a negative impact on consumers…both youth and adults report using the internet to research sexual information on issues such as preventing the spread of sexually transmitted infections, purchasing and reviewing options for contraception, exploring healthy sexuality, and so forth." Indeed the same chapter tells us that 80% of people who engage in online sexual activity can be

considered “recreational users.” Therefore, there is nothing in principle wrong with sexual activity online. The problem is only when the behavior gets out of control, becomes compulsive, outside the range of the individual’s control.

Catholic readers of these books need to refer to the Catechism and authoritative magisterial documents. The guidance of one’s parish priest, spiritual director, or diocesan canon lawyer in the delicate areas surrounding marriage is invaluable. There are however some important suggestions at the end of most chapters in Breaking Free on log keeping, regular prayer, and community service. There is also a chapter on the very necessary role of the sacrament of reconciliation.

Without a grounding in the spiritual dimension, the viewing of pornography comes to be seen merely as a therapeutic pastime that has gotten out of hand. In reality we are dealing with sin, and the vice of lust that has taken root in the heart. If this vice kills the life of grace in the soul it also destroys the ability of the person to flourish and live a healthy life for themselves and others. All that time in front of a computer also takes away the time we owe to family, friends, those in need.

For a well-rounded appreciation of how the Catholic Faith and Catholic anthropology can inform our understanding of internet addiction and its treatment, readers would do well to become familiar with the US-based Institute for the Psychological Sciences, and the St Michael’s Institute of the Psychological Sciences. In fact, renewed interest in the thomistic psychology of the late Drs Conrad W. Baars and Anna A. Terruwe would be a welcome contribution.

Destroying the Imagination of Your Child

JAMES STANLEY

Anthony Esolen, Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2010).

Assuming the persona, as it were, of his own evil twin, Anthony Esolen casts his recent book in an ironical frame reminiscent of C.S. Lewis's The Screwtape Letters. In place of the seasoned and slightly "affectionate" Uncle Screwtape—elder demon in the service of Their Father Below—we meet the in-some-ways-less-affable state school commissioner, or some such creature, who would like to propose his Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child. These, he claims, are really only a kind of summary of the implications of our own thoughts and actions, part of the very fabric of the culture we have helped to create: "But we don't want that!" we might object; "Yes, dear reader, you do. Children make liars of us all. Almost everything we say about them is a lie. We believe exactly the opposite, and act accordingly" (xi). Here at last, then, is the inspector who will iron out for us that last wrinkle in our seamless, service economy: the essential element of spontaneity which makes us more than machines.

And yet here is a rare commissioner indeed, himself possessed of an uncharacteristic command of the great classical and Catholic tradition (perhaps he gleaned something from Esolen's earlier Politically Incorrect Guide to Western Civilization). Drawing alike on Beowulf and the Bible, Chesterton and Chaucer, Shakespeare, Sigrid Undset, Jesus and Jayber Crow, this well-disposed commissioner displays not only formidable breadth but excellent taste. Most prominent among his gifts, however, is the well-chosen anecdote culled from biographies of the famous and the obscure, or often enough from his own "boy's life" (for which Esolen thanks his mother in the book's dedication). If only while thus richly weaving such tapestries of Christian culture as make up the book's chapters, he would not continually sabotage his own work: "We must, then, kill the imagination" (p. xiii)! Short of spicing the speaking persona with a gratuitously tragic (or diabolical) dimension, this effect compromises the book's style

somewhat. Two voices—Esolen's and that of his "evil twin"—change fluidly back and forth to the point at which one wonders how the book might have read without a sarcastic alter ego: recast positively, that is, as Esolen speaking directly from the heart.

For this, of course, is exactly what the book is: Esolen's heartfelt plea to save culture through the preservation and cultivation of our children's imaginations. And understood in this way it accomplishes its goal admirably well. It is a veritable feast, not only for the starved imagination of our children, but for we ourselves who were and ultimately are these same children. An attentive reading of each chapter may even make things like scales fall from one's eyes. For precious truths, not only of childhood and education but of that to which these essentially refer—the glorious liturgy of the created cosmos—are here collected and uncovered, along with not a few tactics (subtle or otherwise) of the Great Enemy of the Imagination: fallen man himself, buttressed by structures of sin never so solidly constructed as in our own day.

Particularly valuable in this light is Esolen's analysis of the ways in which the contemporary culture—reinforced by virulent ideologies operating in the world of education—manages to undermine almost everything a child could believe in: truth (chapter one), the moral imagination of fairy tales (method four), the heroic and the patriotic (methods five and six), the nobility of love between the sexes (seven and eight), and the transcendence of reality itself (ten). As Esolen emphasizes, this amounts to the evisceration of just about everything that could so much as interest a child in the first place, let alone summon him to higher belief. And yet we must say that the situation is worse still, for this (anti-)culture is not content simply to wipe the slate clean, so to speak, of classical virtues, Christian revelation, and the beauties of a meaningfully ordered universe—all the things we hold so dear. Under the guise of a putative neutrality or "objective rationality," it tacitly inculcates its own creed of liberal, positivist, and technocratic secularity—a creed which is far more coercive, pejoratively dogmatic, and indeed "superstitious" (cf. Blondel) in the end. Thus the problem today—as Esolen takes pains to demonstrate—is not so much that children are being offered, as if for the first time, the perverse option of rejecting a heritage which is actually best for them; it is rather that the very possibility of choosing what alone will make them happy is being systematically undermined or withheld.

Esolen's further critiques of today's obsessive and antiseptic cults of safety, efficiency, and conformity (which come to the same thing in the end: a bureaucratic insulation of life from life)—"Keep Your Children Indoors as Much as Possible" (method one), "Never Leave Children to Themselves" (two), "Keep Children Away from Machines and

Machinists" (three)—are also of prime importance in this battle for the child's imagination. So are his warnings against the paradoxically carefree modern approaches to love, marriage, and sexuality (seven)—a landscape far more perilous than the Great Outdoors—and the even more frightening tendency to coalesce reductive and alienating visions of what it means to be a man or a woman into a mandatory, common anthropology (eight).

Most serious of all, however, is the concern that makes itself heard time and again throughout the book's chapters: the terrible "Kingdom of Noise" (nine), which is not unrelated to the commissioner's final counsel, "Deny the Transcendent" (ten). An ardent, articulate, and idealistic disciple of liberalism one can have the pleasure of battling, perhaps even the hope of convincing. But what can be said of the kind of person who seems ever on the increase today: the "man without a chest" (cf. 148) who is generally apathetic, whom you can hardly distract from his own habits of self-distraction long enough to challenge to the death?

It is probably just such a concern that accounts for the book's tone, which is full of sharp wit and irony, eloquence and even elegance. At times, however—and here I venture a friendly criticism—its heavy sarcasm runs the risk of pigeonholing it into the category of a kind of sermon to the choir. I quite agree that things have become so serious today that the only thing left for them is a good sense of humor, maybe even a healthy dose of sarcasm. After all, the one thing Screwtape's dark lord can't stand is to be laughed at: a genuine, full-blooded, hearty human laugh—worst of all the sweet laugh of a child. Thus the demons in St Thérèse's dream fly from her, and in the end the child on the present book's cover poses a greater threat to the gargoyle that leers over him. Indeed, G.K. Chesterton, whose style often rings through Esolen's prose, could perhaps—pending his canonization, which has recently advanced one tiny step—be named a doctor of the Church in this regard: doctor hilaris.

But Biblical injunctions not to scorn the Devil (e.g., Jude 1:9, 1 Peter 5:8) retain their force. For if we rush out to meet him with swords sharpened by anything like his own sarcasm, he is sure to have the last laugh—a laugh that echoes maddeningly in the mouths of an unsympathetic audience. We who would venerate the memory of Chesterton (or Thomas More, etc.) must take care, then, not to let the wine of their mirth turn sour with the gall of our contemporary crises. This seems to be a widespread temptation in the Catholic cultural criticism of our time—owing something, no doubt, to the unconscious influence of internet forms which lend themselves of their very logic to instantaneous, unedited, and anonymous commentary. Admittedly—and for many reasons—this is a temptation that seems to

be getting harder to resist every year. But this only makes it all the more important never to allow one's satire to relax into snarkiness—a trap which Esolen's book, for all its virtues, does not in my opinion always succeed in avoiding.

All the same, the book is very funny—hilarious at times (and at others, I should add, wistful and melancholy by contrast). Certainly the choir and hopefully not a few stragglers in the back pew will be roused. Parents like me (or my wife who read it first) will find in it ample food for thought—nourishment for their own imaginations, not to mention those of their children—as well as courage for the battle and fair warning against some of the subtler tactics of the enemy. Indeed, books like Esolen's are right on the mark in emphasizing childhood, education, and the Christian imagination as key to the renewal of Church and world. One day perhaps even our state school commissioner will come to see that his "empire of mass man" (216) is not worthy of preservation, that Catholic culture deserves neither persecution nor blame, and that the genuine goods anyone seeks can only stand by virtue of the proper cultivation of these other things.

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Scent of Lemons

WILLIAM R. HAMANT

Jonah Lynch, The Scent of Lemons: Technology and Relationships in the Age of Facebook (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2012).

The great accomplishments of this short and accessible book are two: first, it lays bare the ontology that is embodied by and spread through technology; and second, that it criticizes this ontology without at the same time falling into either fatalism about its inevitable and lamentable triumph, or romantic nostalgia for a more innocent time before its advent. Throughout the book Lynch refuses to oversimplify the questions that arise from a consideration of technology. This is no small feat when he himself admits that his observations are admittedly generalized for the sake of brevity (p. 48).

Approaches to technology often fall into one of two camps. Either technology is viewed as "neutral," meaning that it is good if used "properly" or for "good ends," and bad if the contrary obtains (p. 33); or it is in itself a flawed way of interacting with and making use of the world, a "structure of sin," the defects of which are the cause of the problems that flow from any use of it. What is refreshing and challenging about Lynch's approach is that he is able, first, to insist that the use of technology is a moral question, without at the same time rendering technology "neutral"; and second, to acknowledge the link between technology and its attendant problems without at the same time rendering technology "inherently evil."

Most of all, Lynch maintains throughout an optimism that stems from his Christian faith in the goodness of God, who created the world, and who calls people of every age to salvation. "I am a Christian and I don't believe that my era is an age in which it is impossible to live well. It would be a lack of faith to believe that one can know God, love one's brother and live in peace only after having destroyed this or that 'structure of sin'" (p. 17).

Lynch's book explores several characteristics of technology, which are, as might be expected, closely bound up with one another. First, technology tends to eliminate our connection to time and space, with its rhythms and particularity. The clock, for

instance, divides the day equally into twenty-four separate units, the consistent duration of which contrasts with and lessens the relevance of the fluctuations of the seasons (p. 42). Electric light, similarly, in spite of all of its obvious benefits and convenience, overpowers the gentler and God-given light of the stars, disconnecting us from the nature in which humanity has always been deeply immersed (pp. 41-42). Finally, devices such as the cell phone are invented precisely to render where one is more and more irrelevant. Previously, someone from my work would only call me at home in cases of real emergency; now I can be reached (and am expected to be reachable) wherever I am.

Second, the increasing irrelevance of time and space makes personal growth more difficult. Technology tends to eliminate physical or emotional "distance": a child on her first field trip or away at college still tethered to her parents by the umbilical cord of the cell phone, for instance. Healthy individuality is stunted by unhealthy dependence (p. 34). Similarly, even one's society is prevented from allowing for one's personal growth, because, as Lynch points out, the "memory" of the internet is eternal (pp. 65-68). Anything I post on Facebook, any web search I conduct, leaves an unerasable trail. And herein lies one of the greatest shortcomings of technology, where it fails us insofar as we are persons: we make mistakes, we commit sins, and we need forgiveness. Unlike the mind of God, however, the internet has no mercy. Yet: "If… forgiveness were not possible, if every one of my acts should remain fixed forever without appeal, I could only despair" (p. 68). To this problem Lynch can think of no technical solution; and it seems to me that no technical solution is possible. The simple recording of data as data is an atomistic memory, capturing each instant and disconnecting it from the whole. This is not the memory proper to persons, for whom memory always takes into account and is affected by one's knowledge of the entirety of a life. Living with a recovering alcoholic who has been sober for several years, for instance, makes one realize how great was the victory over past difficulties; for the "memory" of technology, the victory is just one moment among all of the others, leaving the pain of the time before the victory as fresh as when it first occurred.

Third, today's technology leads to a lack of patience. It embodies the view that what is done more quickly is done better (p. 43). Here the "could" quickly becomes "should": it is wrong, wasteful, to take a slower approach, if a faster one is possible. Inevitably, however, "faster" come to mean "shallower." The reading habits of the current generation, Lynch argues, are non-linear: we skip around on a web page, looking for something more interesting than what we presently are reading (p. 27). He himself admits to being less able to concentrate on an argument (pp. 12-14). And this is not by

accident, he maintains: the internet, cell phones, and so on, "are structurally ordered to a type of reading that is superficial, a type of research which is more similar to hunting than to contemplation" (p. 28). My own sense is that Lynch is correct in this assertion; I do, in fact, read the same article differently if it is printed, versus on computer or tablet screen. It would be an enlightening addition to look at studies that help explain why this is the case [see other reviews in this issue – Ed.].

Fourth, our greater "interconnectedness" is actually accompanied by a profound – and perhaps hitherto unexperienced – solitude. Some of the observations Lynch makes to support this point are limitations of technology that could imaginably change as the technology develops; for instance, the unnaturalness of Skype conversations in which, because of the location of the webcam, one cannot simultaneously look into the other person's eyes and appear to the other person to be doing so. But most of Lynch's points on this score are subtler, and depend upon and develop an understanding of bodily presence to show the deficiencies of technology.

To be present with another person physically is a unique kind of presence that cannot be duplicated; the attempt to overcome time or space in communicating with another person always loses something fundamental. Recent innovations in technology (the internet, the cell phone) are in fact for Lynch not alone in this deficiency: a letter – even if it is handwritten – or a phone call fail to include aspects of self-communication that are possible only in the body (pp. 55-7). "The language of love, like the language of religion, needs personal and bodily communication. You can trust a person, not a message. You can entrust yourself to a person and follow him, love him" (p. 56). Disturbingly, we sometimes prefer the more impoverished form of communication; Lynch will often hear his students tell each other, "See you tonight on Facebook," and wonders why they don't simply go out for a beer together. He worries that it is due in large part to the fact that such forms of "hanging out" make it possible for me to put up a virtual version of myself that may not correspond to the real me (p. 59).

In sum, technology contains and communicates a certain ontology. This ontology, Lynch argues, is reductive, and teaches us to believe that everything is reproducible. It is reductive because digital reproductions by definition result in the loss of data; an image or a sound is always an approximation. Whether or not I notice the difference, the fact remains the same: "Digital is structurally incapable of shades of meaning, it has to atomize the world into little fragments, even if perhaps with a resolution that is beyond the limits of human perception, in order to measure them and recompose them in another place." Lynch continues, "[T]his approximation of the world contains a powerful and hidden ontology. Digital pretends that things can be decomposed into

the elements 1 and 0, at least up to a resolution you can perceive" (p. 46).

For this reason technology promises reproducibility: one of the most disturbing losses that follow from technology's reductivity is the loss of the uniqueness of the individual or the original. A recording of a song can be reproduced an infinite number of times, and each "copy" is purportedly the same as the first. No one would deny the practical benefits of this. Harder to see is why this is problematic. To help make this point clear, Lynch asks why an original painting, for instance, is so much more valuable than an even very highly deceptive copy. He observes the feeling of disappointment he has had upon realizing an apparently personal letter was a form letter. It is, he argues, legitimate that an original painting be more valuable than a copy, or that a form letter means less than an individual letter. Proper to the person is irreproducibility; one of the greatest attractions of technology is its perceived ability to reproduce everything.

In spite of his desire to confront the problems inherent in technology, Lynch is refreshingly optimistic in both his treatment of technology's shortcomings and his proposals for addressing these shortcomings. This is not to say that he imagines that any solution would be easy. I personally found Lynch's use of Neil Postman's approach helpful: "1. What does this thing promise, what problems will it solve? 2. Am I interested in its promise? Do I really have these problems? 3. What other problems will it create?" (p. 86). It is, Lynch warns, impossible to answer these questions on the basis of criteria proposed by the logic of technology. Technology's problems have no technological solutions; technology must be judged by criteria that are not themselves technical, buthuman (pp. 84-5).

For this reason the real solutions will not be the easiest. We can put no programs in place that will make us "use" technology "just the right amount" and in "just the right ways." Living fully in every age is always a personal and free decision. But here Lynch has a refreshing faith in the ultimate appeal of life beyond the screen. Reality is full enough, genuine relationships are rich enough, and silence is satisfying enough, that its appeal can never be silenced entirely. There will always be important dimensions of reality, like the scent of lemons, that technology will never be able to communicate.

iDisorder

CARLY O'CONNOR

Larry Rosen, iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold On Us (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 246 pages).

The Western world's relationship with technology is "enmeshed," as Dr Larry Rosen argues in his book iDisorder, and as such, it "can cause significant problems in our psyche" (p. 4). One only needs to look around to see that something is amok – drivers texting while speeding down the road, pedestrians sporting fashionable earbuds, friends at a local restaurant who have their phones out on the table, texting other people rather than conversing with those around them. And, if we are each honest with ourselves, then surely we cannot simply point fingers at the masses; we must admit that perhaps each of us has an unhealthy relationship with technology. (I, for one, just checked my phone as I was writing the last sentence to see if anyone had called or texted me since I had last checked thirty minutes prior. No one had, by the way. What was I doing again? Oh – writing. Moving on.)

It is precisely these widespread trends, with the emotional and psychological baggage they seem to carry, that has caught Dr Rosen's attention in iDisorder. The smooth, user-friendly ease of these technologies compels our use, he writes, and in fact fosters "our obsessions, dependencies, and stress reactions" (p. 4). They "daily coerce us to act in ways that may be detrimental to our well-being" (p. 5) for "the way we interact electronically with the world – including our friends, acquaintances, and even strangers – tends to produce psychological disorder-like symptoms that are being ignored as we quietly slip into a technology-induced iDisorder" (p. 12).

Dr Rosen is not talking about a definite, diagnosable disorder with a set of measurable symptoms, but something fluid enough to be unique to every particular person: each has his own iDisorder (p. 15). This is the case because technology use, he argues, can manifest psychologically disordered symptoms that are already latent within the person. In some cases, technology use can even cause such symptoms to manifest themselves in persons who do not have any latent symptoms. Whatever the particular case may be, if technology and social media use is one of the causes for these

psychological disorder symptoms, Dr Rosen suggests that the person has an iDisorder. Although nearly everyone uses these technologies daily, the relationship is only anenmeshed one if it interferes with "normal" life activities (p. 189); nevertheless, given that over-reliance on technology has become the "new normal," as it were, we are all at risk of contracting an iDisorder.

Dr Rosen's task is to help his reader "recognize the signs and symptoms" of his own unique iDisorder. Ten chapters are devoted to ten particular psychological disorders whose symptoms most commonly appear with technology use. He identifies Narcissistic Personality Disorder, OCD, addictions, depression, ADHD, communicative disorders, somatoform disorders, eating disorders, and schizophrenia – all of them disorders found in the real world. He then illustrates how many of these symptoms unveil themselves as we use technology, linking such "disorder-like" behaviors "to the internal, virtual world that we inhabit many hours a day" (p. 12). At the end of each chapter, Dr Rosen offers a list of suggestions to help the reader overcome his iDisorder by giving him tools that would enable him to take control of his relationship with technology.

Though Dr Rosen promises to paint us a bleak picture, he hardly advocates a flight to the fields in persuading his reader to give up technology. "I am not anti-technology," he writes. "Far from it…. I carry a smartphone and an iPad and spend hours texting my kids and friends" (p. 4). "We are way past the point of no return," and so it is impossible to propose that one give up technology, even for a day (pp. 5-6). The goal of Dr Rosen's book is simply to make his reader aware of his relationship to technology and how it may influence his behavior and psyche. "Paying attention," he writes, "is half the battle" (p. 219).

Indeed, paying attention is half the battle, and this is Dr Rosen's strongest insight. He does succeed in encouraging the reader to pay attention to his enmeshed relationships with technology – but, because the level of introspection in the book is not particularly deep, his argument and the enmeshed relationship it describes remains at the level of appearances. Dr Rosen is careful to say that technology use does not cause psychological disorders, so he instead writes that technology use "tends to produce disorder-like symptoms" (p. 12). In nearly each chapter, the language Rosen employs is one of appearances: technology makes us "appear as though we may be depressed" (p. 76), or "as if we have ADHD" (p. 105), or we may be "looking narcissistic" on our Facebook page (p. 28). Such language suggests that the relation between technology and our psyche is merely superficial. Given the problem which Dr Rosen has himself

observed and which compelled him to write this book, this simply cannot be the case. Further, in pitting "real" psychological disorders against the symptoms it may share with our "virtual" behavior, the reader is left to wonder if an iDisorder is real, or merely virtual, or what is the relationship between the real and the virtual, or, for that matter, what "real" and "virtual" even mean.

One is able to see the limits of Dr Rosen's thesis in his chapter on the "schizo group" of psychological disorders (p. 170). He lists the symptoms of such disorders and then describes how they are manifested in technology users. For example, delusional thinking ("the voices made me do it") can be seen as a driver attempts to speed through a lake because he obeyed that cool British voice sounding from his GPS device telling him to continue driving 1.6 miles. Or, take the woman at the grocery store who appears to be talking to herself but, upon closer observation, is only speaking to someone on her Bluetooth device – she too is manifesting symptoms of a "schizo" iDisorder (pp. 174-5). Even though these two people are not "paying attention" to their relationship with technology (nor, perhaps, to reality), these "schizo symptoms" hardly betray a latent schizophrenic disorder, nor a propensity to develop one. The "voices" they hear, after all, are really there.

This particular chapter clearly shows Dr Rosen's argument at its weakest precisely because he cannot move beyond the level of appearances. As a result, the reader is left wondering not only if technology has a serious affect on our behavior and psyche, but also (and more importantly) what is meant by reality, and what is at stake here. Of course, reality always has a way of revealing itself. Nearly every list of suggestions at the end of each chapter advises the reader to "unplug" and reconnect with nature or engage in some "real-world" communication – though the reason why this is so important, and even the distinction between "real" and "virtual" communication itself, remains fuzzy.

Dr Rosen is unable clearly to articulate the problem he cannot help but see; nevertheless, the questioning is not for naught, for, as Martin Heidegger wrote, "The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become" (The Question Concerning Technology). The questioning, as it turns out, is the greatest (if unintended) strength of Dr Rosen's book.

Wired and Pornified

BENJAMIN PETTY

Pamela Pau, How Pornography is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families (Henry Holt and Co., 2005, 305 pages).

William M. Struthers, Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain (Intervarsity Press, 2009, 196 pages).

In an April 29, 2013 interview on NPR's Fresh Air, comedian, podcast host, and author of the book Attempting Normal, Marc Maron, had this to say when asked about how pornography played a part in his sexual development:

"I don't know that I would call myself a connoisseur as much as someone who uses it...

It's profound how much of it is out there, and there isn't really a cultural conversation about it anymore. I personally think it's somewhat dangerous. And to answer your question, I try to frame it as almost like a drug that you have to be careful with... I think that porn addiction is going to be big business eventually, I don't know how it could not be."

Marc Maron is no moral crusader, and does not find pornography to be morally objectionable, and yet he is very frank about his concerns that the internet has become saturated with it and the serious personal and cultural effects that follow. Now that we have twenty or so years experience in the internet age, his is not the only voice calling for another look at pornography's cultural impact.

Pamela Paul in Pornified: How Pornography Is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships, And Our Families, has assembled a compelling journalistic account of just how far-reaching the effects of pornography are in our society. She conducted over a hundred in-depth interviews, and commissioned the first nationally representative poll of Americans to deal primarily with pornography. The results of her investigation confirm time and time again the description given by Maron. For Paul, the porn industry is the new Big Tobacco, preying on the highly addictive power of its product, falsifying its negative effects on the consumer, and inserting itself into every aspect of

the culture.

Paul traces its metamorphosis over the last generation from stashes of softcore magazines hidden under the bed to unlimited streaming of high-definition videos of the most deviant forms of sexuality. The technological advancement from video cassettes to pay-per-view cable to the internet and now handheld devices has allowed the industry to provided men with a product that was completely unavailable a generation ago. It has gone from dirty little secret to accepted, even glorified, mainstream, male recreation.

Pornified's greatest strength lies in the frank admissions of her interviewees. While Paul doesn't disclose how she chose her subjects, they are demographically representative of American men aged twenty to fifty-nine. What is most striking about these testimonies is the across-the-board way that pornography forces them to live a double life. Some of these men are self-identified feminists and would never dream of treating their girlfriend or wife in the degrading manner they see on their screens, and yet they continue to find themselves clicking away. They insist they can keep the two separate and often don't tell their loved ones about their pornography use. This duplicity leads to a divorce of their libido from their partner so that they eventually need pornography in order to function sexually with them. Almost all of those interviewed confessed to a progressive use of pornography: in time and money devoted to it, in the increased deviancy of the images viewed, in preoccupation with it outside of viewing, and as a necessary condition for sexual arousal inany situation.

But if almost all the users seem to understand that pornography is not good for them, or at least is neutral in itself but can become an obsession, like fantasy football, why do they continue to use it? Paul suggests that the false sense of accomplishment in pleasing a women without the risk of rejection gives men a sense of power over their need to be affirmed by a woman – like the "cheat" mode in a computer game, where you win no matter how poorly you play. And the testimonies show that many men turn to it during times of loneliness, rejection, and high stress as a way to feel in control.

Paul doesn't leave out the feminine perspective on porn either. She decries how a pornified culture has taught contemporary girls that to be a liberated woman is to be okay with porn, even encouraging it as an empowering mode of self-expression. However, women nearly universally see their husband's or boyfriend's use of porn as a profound betrayal. Women feel trapped in a cutthroat competition where they are being underbid for their guy's affection by the low-cost, instant availability of

airbrushed, surgically enhanced nymphomaniacs.

It is not a surprise then that pornography is becoming a significant factor in an increasing number divorce cases, not only because of the effect on women but because their children are being exposed to it. This is leading to an entire generation of men growing up learning to cue sexually to a computer screen.

Paul is a realist and advocates that we should censure, rather than censor pornography. Through proper sexual education, by framing pornography as a commercial product rather than free speech, and by exposing the harmful reality of pornography, Paul believes a negative cultural attitude, like the present one towards cigarettes, or hydrogenated oils, can be established.

The biggest problem with Paul's book is her reliance on the harm principle to validate her condemnation. She has trouble making a distinction between purportedly sex-positive erotica and degrading pornography. She never articulates her own vision for an authentic and healthy sexuality. Neither does she confront the underlying absolutism of license that forms the basis for our cultural conversation. In addition, her empirical data does not include enough explanation of the methodology behind either the selection of her interviewees or the results of her poll. It does not rise to level of quantitative scientific research.

But this is not within the scope of her journalistic objective of raising awareness about what is happening in the world right now. This approach is also the book's strength. Showing how pervasive pornography has become by qualitatively detailing the corrosive effect it has on men, women, and children, in their own words, is a great service. This book is ideally for those who are not aware of how pornified the culture has become, and are not yet open to moralistic arguments. To that end she includes shockingly graphic details about the filth that anyone surfing the internet is likely to encounter, and the sensitive reader should be aware of that before picking it up.

For those who need no additional convincing of pornography's corrosive effect and who may be victims of its addictive power, William Struthers' Wired for Intimacy is the perfect next step. Struthers is a psychologist at Wheaton College in Illinois, whose specialty is in the neurobiology of behavior. Through his experience in research, teaching, and counseling at Wheaton he has assembled an accessible and comprehensive account of how pornography hijacks the male brain on a neurological level, and how its effects can be healed. His approach is integrative, addressing the biological, psychological, and spiritual levels involved in the addictive behavior of

men. It is a model of Christian psychology.

He begins where Paul left off: decrying the pornified world we live in. He defines pornography using the language of the Catechism of the Catholic Churchand attacks the way our culture uses the excuses of constitutional freedom, the relativistic nature of artistic judgments, and the limitations of scientific certainty to ignore dealing with the problem. He lays out how the internet's anonymity, accessibility, and affordability, combine with its collaborative nature to create a virtual community of porn-addicted men.

Struthers then further, and builds a principled moral case based on the nature of love and Christian revelation to demonstrate that porn inherently corrupts intimacy and reinforces unhealthy concepts of sexuality. Placing sexual intimacy within the context of marriage between a man and a woman, he highlights how pornography substitutes sexual technique for actual intimacy. He also makes a fine distinction regarding the guilt which properly steers one away from evil and the shame which erodes human dignity and traps one in it.

Like Paul, he identifies reasons why men find pornography attractive, but with greater depth. He also gives a stronger psychological treatment to the cognitive changes which result from pornography and their connection to deeper unmet needs for intimacy. He gives a thorough argument for including pornography addiction in the American Psychological Association's list of neuroses, but also teases out the compulsive and impulsive behaviors that plague many men, but lie outside a clinical definition of addiction.

The best part of this book is the chapter on how neural pathways are formed and addictive patterns laid down. It demonstrates why they become so powerful, but in doing so demystifies them. When the road to addiction is thus mapped out and the parts of the process identified, the man trapped in it can have hope that there is an escape.

Healing begins with rooting out the degrading kind of shame pornography creates in its viewers, and replacing it with a true notion of what a man is and where his dignity comes from. Struthers offers an embodied relational understanding of the imago Dei as the best model for reintegrating a healthy sexuality in men. He casts a vision of the human being as created in a body and ordered to a comprehensive goal of deepening intimacy with God and man – an intimacy that involves every part of the male body from genes to brain structure. In place of our cultural ideal of androgyny, he offers

Jesus Christ as a model for authentic masculinity.

Struthers takes time to emphasize the male need for intimacy; an often overlooked fact in the pornography discussion because it is so often a case of divorcing sex from intimacy. The point is not that men are anti-intimacy, but that out of fear of rejection they try to manufacture a sham intimacy with their own fantasies, and porn is more than happy to help.

He concludes his book with a pastoral and clinical approach on how to rewire the porn-saturated male brain. He believes recovery should be viewed as a kind of spiritual formation that is part of the lifelong process of sanctification. The appendix includes several different resources for recovering from sexual addiction.

Struthers' book is as complete and readable a treatment on the subject of pornography from a Christian perspective as one is likely to find. Those not convinced of the truth of the Christian witness may find the blend of science and faith a little off-putting, but it is essential to the process of healing and recovery that he lays out. Struthers, as a professor at a Protestant college, is writing primarily for that audience, but Catholics will see in his integrated relational view of the human person an opening to dialog with John Paul II's Theology of the Body. It is here that Struthers could take his analysis further. For while he rightly places an emphasis on the context of intimacy for understanding sexuality, he sometimes does so at the expense of its procreative aspect.

Taken together Pornified and Wired for Intimacy are a fantastic one-two punch that takes the reader on an eye-opening journey into the inner circles of pornography and up the mountain of recovery to a vision of sanctified manhood that our pornified culture desperately needs.

Noise

KRISTINE CRANLEY

Teresa Tomeo, Noise: How Our Media-Saturated Culture Dominates Lives and Dismantles Families (Ascension Press, 2007, 190 pages).

On a pastoral visit to a Carthusian monastery in 2011, Pope Benedict XVI offered a penetrating reflection on the problem of the noise in today's society. Speaking to the monks on the gift which their mission of silence and solitude brings to the Church he said:

"Technical progress, markedly in the area of transport and communications, has made human life more comfortable but also more keyed up, at times even frantic.... In the recent decades, moreover, the development of the media has spread and extended a phenomenon that had already been outlined in the 1960s: virtuality that risks getting the upper hand over reality. Unbeknown to them, people are increasingly becoming immersed in a virtual dimension because of the audiovisual messages that accompany their life from morning to night. The youngest, who were already born into this condition, seem to want to fill every empty moment with music and images, as for fear of feeling this very emptiness. This is a trend that has always existed, especially among the young and in the more developed urban contexts but today it has reached a level such as to give rise to talk about anthropological mutation. Some people are no longer capable of remaining for long periods in silence and solitude."[1]

The suggestion of an "anthropological mutation" is remarkable, coming from a theologian as precise and measured as Pope Benedict. His words reveal a growing urgency in the need for society to think deeply about the impact of social media on the human person as such. How does over-exposure to audio-visual stimulation affect us on a physical, emotional, social, and spiritual level? Can the intemperate use of digital technology damage us, and, as the pope seems to suggest, even deform us as human persons? If so, in what way?

It is imperative that we begin to ask these questions. Teresa Tomeo's book is a great stimulus, through its survey of some of the observed effects of media use, specifically

on children and families.

Noise is a book directed primarily to families, in an attempt to help alert parents to some of the dangers which unregulated access to the media poses for their children. Her concern is mainly regarding the negative content communicated through the various media channels, although she does speak in a limited way about some of the effects of lack of silence in general. The purpose of her work is not only to warn about the dangers which social media poses to families, but also to encourage parents to fight against these threats in proactive and creative ways through educating their children, limiting their exposure to social media, and pressuring the secular media to improve standards of decency. She expresses a hope that families will work to "take back" the media, so that it may be used for the communication of wholesome values. Tomeo writes: "we see a seemingly impossible task in front of us, actually changing the output and influence of the media in our world… a mission that will restore the true, good and beautiful in a world that is in great need" (p. 163).

Her knowledge of the topic is enriched by her own experience in working for the radio and TV industry. Testifying regarding her time of employment with the secular media, she speaks of a struggle to retain her faith in an environment where broadcast standards were rapidly "spiraling downward," in which she was continually pressured to forsake objective reporting for the sake of increased ratings. For example, at a "Mothers Against Drunk Driving" conference she interviewed the keynote speaker – a man whose daughter had been killed by a drunk driver. After filming what she believed to be a "powerful piece which would raise consciousness about drunk driving for her viewers," she was horrified when the producer rejected the interview and asked her to capitalize on the man's grief by taking him back to the scene of the accident and film him in tears.

Within the industry she witnessed increasing pressure from corporate headquarters to sink lower in "the realm of moral decency and journalistic integrity" in order to "crank up the ratings." Eventually, after reading a report by the American Academy of Pediatrics that encouraged parents not to allow any television viewing for toddlers, and warning of the harmful effects on children which exposure to violence, sexual conduct, and unhealthy food causes in them, Tomeo decided to quit the secular media industry in order to work for Christian-based media companies.

Tomeo explores some of the observed effects of media exposure through a mixture of statistical surveys and personal testimonies. She begins by looking briefly at the harm caused by a lack of self-reflection due to media stimulation. She argues that media

dependence drains our capacity for love and inhibits our growth to human maturity. “We are literally being entertained to death,” she writes (p. 32). She also claims that overexposure to the media causes more and more people to forsake the arduous task of thinking logically. She writes, “the intoxicating allure of entertainment found in the media has generated potentially millions of consumers who are simply not thinking. We seem to be merely responding, usually to the position that requires the least amount of thought” (p. 37).

Given the corrosive effects of media over-exposure on human development, Tomeo exhorts parents to take responsibility for protecting their children from it wherever possible.

Next she proceeds to offer documentation on the more specific threats posed by the most used forms of social media: television programs and movies, radio, internet, music, video games, and advertisements. One in five children are reported to have received sexual solicitations while in a chat room. Law enforcement officials believe there are an estimated 50,000 predators using the internet to access children. Obesity is highest among children who watch more than four hours of TV a day. The average student will witness 200,000 acts of violence before graduation from high school, and 16,000 simulated murders.

Tomeo concludes most chapters with practical advice. She encourages family dinner together as a way of combating the narcissistic tendency to drown oneself in isolating technology. She advises parents to be aware of what their children are exposed to, in order both to protect them from the sexually explicit, violent, and materialistic content, and to create opportunities to discuss why these messages are so harmful. She suggests creative ways of limiting the amount of time children are allowed to spend “plugged in.” She exhorts families to take an active role in changing the standards of the media by complaining directly to producers about inappropriate content. Her experience in the industry leads her to believe that their overriding concern for financial profit will cause producers to modify their decency standards if a significant enough outcry demands it. Finally she asks all to pray regularly for all those involved with the media industry.

Tomeo focuses primarily on the observable effects of the media, but she does not look at the deeper philosophical questions about modern technological modes of communication as such. She seems to assume that the media are essentially neutral and only become dangerous by immoderate use and immoral content. She leaves unasked the question of whether technological communication itself has any effect on

us merely by being what it is, regardless of the message it is seeking to communicate. Does the primacy of disembodied modes of communication affect our capacity for true dialogue with one another? Does the ever-increasing efficiency of the tools at our disposal bias us toward a specific approach to reality in general? In other words, does our obsession with efficiency ingrain a false way of relating to one another and the world around us? Does it accustom us to approach the whole of reality as a set of objects to be used and then discarded? Does it damage our capacity to sit before the "other" and wait for them to reveal their true selves? Does the silent and gradual self-revelation of a carrot in the ground, or a caterpillar in a cocoon, or a child in the womb, teach us something about the nature of truth that a computer never can? Does the use or over-use of technology blunt our capacity to respond to the world in wonder?

In conclusion, Tomeo's book is an invaluable aid to parents seeking to guard against the new threats which this digital age uniquely poses to the wellbeing of their children. Her overview of the available studies is extensive and her writing easy to follow. And I believe her work can be a springboard into deeper inquiry. For in understanding the nature of the digital noise which surrounds us, we can come to appreciate the transformative depth of silence and solitude, which as Pope Benedict suggests in his address to the Carthusians, has the capacity for opening us up to a transformative encounter with the living God, with the "fullness" of the Reality that lies beyond the tangible.

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[1] http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-s-address-to-carthusian-monks.

iPod, YouTube, WiiPlay

MICHAEL CAMACHO

D. Brent Laytham, Pod, YouTube, Wii Play: Theological Engagements with Entertainment (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012).

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one.... Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula. It is more certain; and it's better style. To get the man's soul and give him nothing in return – that is what really gladdens Our Father's heart." – C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters

In thinking through (and with) a book that undertakes to deal theologically with modern entertainment in its myriad forms, these words of advice from a senior demon tempter to his novice nephew are perhaps not wholly out of place. Elsewhere in this devilish correspondence the tempter Screwtape returns to this theme: "Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man's best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why, in the gratification of curiosities so feeble that the man is only half aware of them, in drumming of fingers and kicking of heels.... It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing." Such a prescient warning – applicable in all times, to be sure – nonetheless seems to be spoken directly for our benefit, we who live in the age of Facebook and YouTube, twitting away our days.

In iPod, YouTube, Wii Play: Theological Engagements with Entertainment, Brent Laytham proposes to think through the various forms of entertainment and entertainment technology that so enthrall us today. One of his primary principles is not to jump immediately to the extreme of either condemnation or celebration, but to reflect critically on what entertainment is, how it works, and what it means for us. To

reflect on entertainment theologically means, for Laytham (a United Methodist) to do so before God, within the Church, and in the light of the Gospel. This leads him to focus not so much on the content as on the form of entertainment today, and on how its inner logic forms us, shaping our patterns of thinking, feeling and acting. In what way, Laytham asks, does entertainment help form us to the mind of Christ, and in what way does it serve rather as a counter-formation?

This attempt to seek out the inner logic of today's entertainment culture is the real strength of Laytham's work. While he makes use of social statistics and current writings on these topics, he's not afraid to ask metaphysical, anthropological, and theological questions: what is the essence of what we're dealing with today, and what vision of man does it contain and impart? What does this have to do with our faith in Christ and our life in the communion of the Church? Laytham helps readers to see why such questions are important and how they are always already in play. Moreover, he eases an approach to this more universal understanding of things by working with particulars, devoting most of the chapters of his book to delving into the various forms of entertainment that are most present and powerful today: iPod, YouTube, Twitter, commercialized sports, and video gaming, among others.

These chapters contain a number of real insights. Laytham shows, for example, how the iPod not only makes music manifestly less social, but how, through its advertisements and the aura it promises and in many ways makes actual through the device itself, it focuses on a kind of interior transcendence: rather than being moved ecstatically out of myself by the beauty of a particular piece, I am now given the means to bring about a private, particular feeling or mood which I can manufacture for myself through my selections. This leads, among other things, to an incapacity to enjoy life "straight": we must instead increasingly aestheticize our existence. Laytham does a nice job of building up a more general argument through such particular analyses, showing how entertainment more broadly, for example, and not simply the iPod, teaches us to disregard limits, indeed to imagine that true freedom comes by overcoming limits through ever-increasing control and choice. In this way we become dulled to any wonder that lies within the merely mundane, insofar as it lies outside our immediate control and we cannot simply manipulate it into an "experience."

One of the questions which inevitably comes up when treating entertainment, and technology more generally, is: what should we do? What should our stance be towards entertainment trends? Laytham should be commended for first seeking to understand what modern entertainment is and means before asking what we should do in

response. Regarding that latter, however, and consonant with his critical-dialectical approach, Laytham proposes, not a via media of temperate use – which is problematic among other reasons because rational control or choice are part of the very logic which these devices are conforming us to – but rather a recognition that entertainment is simultaneously a power and a triviality.

As a "power" (cf. Rom. 8:37-39, Eph. 6:12, etc.), entertainment is a widespread social structure with the constant pretension to be more important than it is, thus usurping the place of God. Indeed, it seems more omnipresent and omnipotent in our daily existence than God himself. Not only is it present in nearly every aspect of our lives (a virtual appendage to our bodies, in the case of the smart phone), but its particular way of providing amusement has become "the primary standard of value for virtually everything." Because of entertainment's intrinsically rebellious nature, its tendency to elevate itself above what it is, we must beware of simply trying to make use of it for own good ends (on this, see the hard-to-believe chapter on Christian liturgy and "U2charist"): rather than being a mere neutral medium, entertainment will inevitably shape whatever content we put into it to the mold of its own logic.

At the same time, however, entertainment is also a "triviality." For Laytham, this is a good thing. Trivial pursuits free us from our own false claims of authority and ultimacy; they help us to recognize that we are not God and are not responsible for saving the world. Through trivialities God reminds us that not everything in our lives is fraught with ultimate consequences. We are given permission to "waste time," to recognize that life is not fundamentally something to be accomplished through our own will but rather a gift given to us to be received in thanksgiving and joy.

What does all this mean for our use of entertainment? According to Laytham, it means that we should not simply accept modern forms of entertainment unthinkingly, nor that we should simply reject them: rather, "refusing always and never," we must sometimes enjoy and sometimes eschew. Laytham is at pains to indicate that he is not proposing a radical solution: we need not throw away our iPods, stop watching professional sports, or sell our gaming systems – after all, he argues, there is something good and legitimate in these pleasures. In the end, one is left wondering how his approach really differs from the via media of temperance that he himself indicates is inadequate. Perhaps part of the answer is that understanding entertainment is already a way of freeing ourselves from its problematic logic.

To enter into this question a bit more, I would like to press Laytham on two points. In the first place, it seems to me that in his affirmation of the intrinsic goodness of

entertainment (a goodness which is inevitably distorted through sin, manifest for Laytham especially in the effects of corporate exploitation), Laytham misses something of the inevitable link between content and form. If the very logic of YouTube, for example, conditions us to "an endless chain of immediate but forgettable gratification that can only be satisfied by another video," then this means that anything of more significance that does appear in this medium – "poignant or piquant sharings of self, witty or wonderful observations of life, graceful or gladdening performances" – shows up only per accidens, insofar as it is inherently contrary to the shallow triviality and self-reflexivity that YouTube consciously or unconsciously promotes. The same holds true analogously for other entertainment media.

Secondly, on triviality. While I agree with Laytham's overall thrust that entertainment or genuine pleasure is a "useless" gift which reminds us that the world is good beyond anything we can do or make it to be, I am not sure I would agree with him in equating triviality itself with this intrinsic goodness. One of the marks of modern entertainment is precisely that it is trivial, rather than meaningful. It has nothing of true leisure about it. For the most part in America today "the real world" of work is sharply separated from the world of pastimes and pleasures, but for many of us neither sphere seems to be truly "meaningful" or "fraught with ultimacy," except again per accidens. Neither helps us to enter more deeply into the reality of things: entertainment is simply a mindless, if sometimes thrilling, escape from the drudgery of the work day, a kind of "incarnation" in reverse, into superficiality.

Not all pleasures have to be "high," of course, but they should all at any rate be genuine pleasures, as opposed to mere stimulations: they should have something analogous to "play" about them, the marriage of freedom and form and intrinsic worth and community and bodily presence which Laytham expounds in the central chapter of his book. Instead, too much of the entertainment today, precisely as informed by technology, stokes our misplaced modern desire for a freedom over things (and ourselves – the freedom to create our own identities), even if these "things" are simply pixels on a screen. Such pixels in fact are precisely the perfectly formless, infinitely plastic (because virtual) "stuff" that answers to our desire for an all-encompassing freedom. We marvel over touch-screen technology, how with the flick of a finger we can flip a page or strum a string just like the real thing. Having lost any interest in reality itself, we are captured by the world re-made through our own powers. It is seductive, for we have the illusion of complete control, and the satisfaction of immediate response; whereas reality itself always further eludes our grasp and takes time to reveal itself: to which the proper response ispatience and

wonder, neither of which are encouraged or informed by modern entertainment technology.

Laytham's book is a welcome contribution to entering more deeply into these questions. I must admit that I at times grew weary of his constant attempts to be accessible, indeed catchy ("the iPod is an iCon of musical iDentity"): it's probably fair to say that he sometimes falls prey to a problematic he critiques, "the pressure on Christian[ity] to adopt the idiom of entertainment –looking, feeling, and sounding like secular entertainments" (not unlike certain presentations of John Paul II's Theology of the Body that attempt to make the Pope's teachings on human love "exciting," if not downright "sexy"). This issue did seem to diminish as the book continues, however. I also wish that Laytham had concluded with an overall treatment of what unites the various forms of entertainment he deals with, instead of simply pointing to this in a sketch in individual chapters.

Finally, I would have liked to see a more intrinsic connection between some of his critiques and how they relate to the life of faith and of the Church: often the theological connection seemed to be made only "after the fact," so to speak, rather than showing how the heart of the faith affects our daily lives and doings from the inside. Be that as it may, Laytham's work is at one and the same time clear and accessible, often engaging, and full of genuine insights into the essence of entertainment today, insights that prompt the reader to his own reflection on an area of our lives that is immensely formative and yet often remains unthought.

Rewired and Second Self

CONOR HILL

Larry D. Rosen, Rewired: Understanding the iGeneration and the Way They Learn (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 250 pages).

Sherry Turkle, The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit (MIT Press, 2004, 372 pages).

The goal of Larry D. Rosen's Rewired is to address the evident "educational delivery problem" (p. 3) which besets contemporary education. This problem, as he describes it, is that students of the iGeneration (those born in the 1990s and in the new millennium) "are simply not happy learning the way we are teaching them" (p. 4), or, simply put, "they hate school" (p. 3). The diagnosis which he offers is that "education has not caught up this new generation of tech-savvy [students]" (p. 3), insofar as educators do not know how to engage them in the process of learning. Therefore, Rosen suggests, "we need to find ways to match our teaching methods to [our students'] virtual lifestyles" (p. 5, emphasis added). Or again, we need "to adapt to their world" (p. 15).

Each chapter of the book address the different ways in which one could "rewire" education through the incorporation of current technologies (mobile phones, social networking, virtual worlds) and the harnessing of certain habits (multitasking, and "content creation" on social media websites). Rosen suggests that teachers adopt a method that enables students to multitask in the classroom (pp. 218-19); or, rather than having them write a traditional paper, one should give them the option of doing a "report" (p. 220) in which they can incorporate multiple forms of media (video, audio, art, etc.); or, again, using social media (i.e., MySpace, Facebook) as a context for "group projects that are done through online collaboration" (p. 221). (For those who might be interested in a brief exploration of Rosen's proposal, see the final fifteen pages of the book where he gives clear summary of his "top eleven recommendations" for rewiring education.)

One of the most positive things that one can take from this book is Rosen's adequate

and realistic description of the iGeneration, their immersion in technology "24/7," and how this informs the way they engage in the educational endeavor, with the world, and with one another. In this sense, his well-researched book provides a basis upon which we might understand the iGeneration and their habits of engagement with the world around them.

A deeper issue that arises, in this regard, is whether Rosen's recommendations are based his perhaps overly narrow, functionalistic understanding the purpose of education. Education, as he understands it, is primarily the task of "passing on knowledge" (p. 107) and of "providing … critical thinking skills" (p. 5). This leads him to talk about learning as nearly synonymous with "engagement" with the material. So to address "the way the iGeneration learns" (from the subtitle of the book) is, for Rosen, to look at "the way they prefer to or habitually engage" in the world. Given these premises, and the current state of the iGeneration, the imperative of educators is that of finding and using "more engaging and more effective technological tools" (p. 184) to communicate that knowledge and to teach that critical thinking which are the end of education as such. However, if one had a broader understanding of education, which included in its scope, perhaps, education in "character" (i.e., the type of person that one becomes), or the creation of "life-long learners," rather simply making students capable of doing a particular job, how would that affect the problem of engaging the iGeneration?

Sherry Turkle's The Second Self offers just such a "broader scope." It offers us a much needed breath of fresh air. The profound depth and scope of her examination, as well as its hopeful injunction that we ought not to see the "current direction [i.e., use of technology] as inevitable or determined" (p. 4), gave this reviewer a sense of relief. It was as though I were emerging from a windowless room, to see that the horizon was once again open and expansive. One does not have embrace tout court the technological revolution just yet, for Turkle's account convincingly argues that there is more to the world, and to the human being's relation to technology and to other human beings, than Rosen's book suggests. Indeed, in her 2004 Epilogue, Turkle notes that the need for a "sustained scrutiny of our relationships with computation" has grown ever more urgent (p. 287).

The question which must remain in focus is not so much "what computers can do," but "what we will be like," what kind of "people we will become as we develop more and more intimate relationships with machines?" (p. 294). This is a philosophical question, which, she suggests, we often forget to ask because we are mesmerized by the computer (p. 294). When entranced, we become like those who "pronounce the

words in a book but don't understand what they mean" (p. 14). Turkle proposes a different imperative, that of understanding and deepening our conversations about "who we are becoming in our increasing intimacy with our machines" (p. 4).

Turkle's book is the 20th anniversary edition of a work first published in 1984, updated only with an Introduction and an Epilogue. It comprises research undertaken between 1976 and 1983 in which she explored the early impact of computers on the human spirit. She notes that this was an age of "relative innocence" (p. 298) in which people were first confronted with machines whose behavior "incited them to think differently about human thought, memory, and understanding" (p. 1). By contrast, today's "computer culture acts on the individual with breath-taking speed and ferocity" (p. 298). Despite the age of the book, her observations contain insights that are of contemporary relevance. Trained as a humanist (p. 1), she keeps the "human" at the center of her observations (p. 281-82), focusing her study on the impact of computers on the human person.

Like the inkblots in a "Rorschach test," she believes computers can act as a mirror for our self-understanding. The computer is not "just a tool," for its use does something "to us" (p. 3). In describing what this effect is, she also traces the link between technology and culture (p. 26), the manner in which technology shapes human culture. She wants to undermine two extreme ways of viewing or understanding technology: (a) the "naïve realist" and the "idealist" positions, in a sense affirming both of these perspectives together. She wants to see how computers evoke rather than determine thinking about the self. She notes that "the computer has become [simply] the new cultural symbol of the things that Rousseau feared from the pen: lost of direct contact with other people, the construction of a private world, a flight from real things to their representations" (p. 92).

The book is structured around the different stages of development: early childhood, school-aged children, adolescents. She shows how children use the computer in "world and identity construction. They use it for the development of fundamental conceptual categories, as a medium for the practice of mastery, and as a malleable material for helping them forge their sense of themselves" (p. 155). The second part of the book takes up university students and adults, for whom the computer becomes a "catalyst for cultural formation," i.e., a way of seeing themselves, their jobs, their relationships with other people. Finally, in the third part, she expresses more general observations regarding the state of the human spirit in a computer culture, including our capacity for relationship to other people. "Terrified of being alone, yet afraid of intimacy, we

experience widespread feelings of emptiness, of disconnection, of the unreality of the self. And here the computer, a companion without emotional demands, offers a compromise. You can be a loner, but never alone. You can interact, but never feel vulnerable to another person" (pp. 297–80). There is reason for pause before opening the doors of one's home or classroom to every form of gadgetry.

Rosen's study is mainly interested in "how we can use technology to get 'results' – to get the students engaged in their education." But in an age where the lines between "real" and "virtual," person and machine, are being blurred, Turkle suggests we pay more attention to our everyday experience of the world. She notes that, generally speaking, there is widespread resistance to treating human beings as programmed information systems. She asks us always to keep in mind this "philosophical" question about who we are. "If our encounters with computers don't help us to deal more compassionately and carefully with one another, then what will our attitudes, formed through our relationship with them, contribute to our fragile and threatened world?" (p. 299).

What the Internet is Doing to Us

EDWARD TRUDEAU

Nicholas Carr, The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains (W.W. Norton & Co., 2011, 228 pages).

Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business (Penguin Books, rev. ed. 2005, 163 pages).

Nicholas Carr is concerned that the Internet is making us dumber. He believes this is not merely the result of the content we are consuming via the world wide web, text messages, email, Twitter and Facebook, but a side effect of the medium through which this content is transmitted and consumed. Even more ominously, the change, according to Carr, is not limited to a deleterious effect on the way we think, but includes the neural structures in our brains that enable thinking.

Carr's argument seems to reprise and extend the warnings of Neil Postman from twenty-five years ago, who predicted that television was producing a culture that was no longer interested in the deep sort of deliberative thinking that has characterized Western philosophy for two and a half millennia. YetThe Shallows is not merely an update to Amusing Ourselves to Death, filling in a few technical details Postman got wrong; it changes the argument in important ways.

To understand this change, it is helpful to remind ourselves of the situation in 1985 when Postman was writing; a brief forward to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition of Amusing Ourselves to Death penned by Postman's son Andrew does just that. North American readers who lived through those days will almost certainly be surprised by one or two items they had forgotten, and slip back to a time when television was rapidly becoming the dominant paradigm for mass communication, beginning to displace what Postman calls the typographic culture.

In the early chapters of both books, Postman and Carr trace the development of typographic culture from its roots in Greece. Both acknowledge Socrates' ambivalence

about writing and Plato's ultimate embrace of it, and each treat topics such as the development of the codex in the Roman era, subsequent typographic conventions designed to aid readers, Gutenberg's press and the sudden, broad availability of cheap printed material, and the educational and cultural precedents that developed around the book. The history of the book is not only a recounting of its technological maturation, but a tale of new behavioral norms and the realization of a cultural epistemology. They report this history so well and clearly that it is well worth reading both accounts to get a complete picture.

One might fairly characterize the typographic culture praised by Carr and Postman as requiring a active commitment on the part of the reader: a commitment at once physical and mental, extended over a prolonged period of time. In this core elucidation of the typographic culture, Postman and Carr are in agreement. They both maintain that complex and subtle arguments require the kind of linear deliberation at which literate culture excels, and although they do not say so explicitly, it is clear from their respective laments that in order for us to wrestle with the deepest questions of our world and ourselves, we must employ just this kind of attentiveness. The epistemological argument largely derives from Marshall McLuhan, whose 1964 observation, "the medium is the message," warns that every communications medium operates by its own inner principles. While this theorem is essential to their arguments, Postman and Carr differ both on the type of media that concerns them and in how they claim those media influence our thought individually and socially.

Postman's argument revolves around the triple effect that modern communications have on discourse, "introducing on a large scale irrelevance, impotence and incoherence" (p. 65). He sees the origin of these effects in the telegraph, the first medium that separated time from distance by making information at any wired location, no matter how far, immediately available. That which constituted "news" was no longer associated in any immediate way with those who received the information – it was therefore largely irrelevant, even if it may have generated curiosity or interest. Such information has little impact on the recipient's daily actions, and so it makes no claim on him. It is information without power to effect change. The logic of the medium encourages short, self-contained messages that need no external context to understand, and which may be fed in a constant, incoherent stream where nothing is related to what came before or comes after.

The telegraph accustomed us to decontextualized information, but the photograph brought an entirely new visual language, according to Postman. He argues that the

photograph lacks a syntax with which to make claims about the world; since it only records concrete particulars, it cannot make a proposition anyone can argue or agree with. In its particularity it creates its own kind of dissociation from context – an instant in space and time that, like the newscast about a distant war, must be framed by commentary to be understood by the viewer. We gradually come to live in these "pseudo-contexts," which Postman claims were "invented to give fragmented and irrelevant information a seeming use" (p. 76). Television is the grandchild of a marriage between the telegraph and the photograph, and its principles of transmission and graphics constitute a new mode of communication that has come to dominate all others, even those that remain firmly within the typographic culture. That mode is entertainment.

The second half of Postman's book is dedicated to a general explanation of the effects of show business on public discourse, and then to its specific effects on faith, politics, and education. These are some of his wittiest and most incisive chapters, and although jaded readers may find his contempt of televised politics modest by modern standards, they may also raise an eyebrow in surprise at his critique of generally lauded educational programming such asSesame Street.

Whatever the particulars of his analyses, the point he drives home with great effectiveness is that show business is not just a pejorative term for "junk" programming, but essential to the form of communication that the televised media demand. The most serious topics are accompanied by the same kind of sound and motion – graphical logos and musical themes – as game shows. The explicit rules of all productions are that the viewer must not need to understand its history or context; that the narrator and participants be engaging and attractive; that each feature be short enough that the viewer's attention not wander; and above all, that the viewer leave behind whatever was just seen for the sake of whatever is next.

It is primarily the change in the mode of public discourse that is problematic for Postman. Television is first and foremost a social problem. Its inherent epistemological assumptions cannot be avoided through personal discipline, since they have become so widespread as to be inescapable. He points out that some modes of communication are clearly not suited to certain types of content, as smoke signals would be to philosophy. In particular, the medium of television is inadequate to express the kinds of deliberative argument that characterize the greatest achievements of typographic culture.

This is a decisively different concern than that voiced by Carr in The Shallows. Carr's

attention is focused on the change in individuals brought about by the technology of the medium. In fact, he expressly diminishes the effects of television, which could only "display but not replace the book" (p. 77). Although he admits that graphical media were "endlessly entertaining," they can in a sense only be a social issue, whereas the technology by which we consume internet content is fundamentally changing the way our brains operate, and perhaps even training us to crave consumption that follows its inner logic. The kind of neural reprogramming Carr indicates sounds much more like a biological epidemic that spreads throughout a population by infecting individuals; its means of transmission is the internet technologies of email, web pages, and social media. Not only are we letting ourselves turn into witless spectators, Carr sees us quickly losing the mental capacity to think as deeply as our literate forebears through a restructuring of our brains.

That such a fundamental change could occur in the first place is a large claim to lay on the very young research being done in neuroplasticity, but Carr supports well his argument that the brain's neurons change much more deeply in response to stimuli than had been previously thought. These changes reinforce the tendency to behave in the same way the more they are used – in other words, habits of thought become ingrained the more they are trained or reinforced. Such conditioning has always been taken for granted, but perhaps not to the level that Carr suggests – that is, not merely the attenuation of content or the atrophy of skills that have gotten "rusty," but the capability to follow an argument, to remain focused on a task or project for a long duration of time, or to think creatively.

It sounds even more far-fetched that the technology of the medium could be the cause of such profound change. Carr hangs the bulk of his argument on the different ways we consume information in the internet age. He points to differences in how we manipulate books in comparison to a mouse and screen; to hyperlinks and multi-media content that increase cognitive load and entice a reader to pause and change course frequently; and to the ability to search and quickly move to items of interest (pp. 90-91). Together, Carr claims, "The Net's cacophony of stimuli short-circuits both conscious and unconscious thought, preventing our minds from thinking either deeply or creatively. Our brains turn into simple signal-processing units, quickly shepherding information into consciousness and out again" (p. 119). The more we engage in this kind of information consumption, the more addicted we become to interruption and change. These stimuli even engage our natural hunting instincts, making it almost impossible to stop checking for new mail, new tweets, new text messages, and continuous, real-time updates.

Just as Postman noticed with respect to television, Carr observes the physical world being rearranged to match more closely the virtual. Where Postman saw textbooks being redesigned like a television show, Carr sees magazine layouts mimicking web pages. Carr agrees that this social phenomenon is inescapable, no matter how much one attempts to isolate oneself. However, Carr's internet teetotaler doesn't suffer the personal neurological consequences of using hypermedia, whereas everyone must endure the entertainment culture whether he watches TV or not. And lest we mistake the internet for the only remaining threat, Carr reminds us that studies show television consumption has gone up in the internet age, even as individual internet use continues to rise (p. 87).

There is no doubt that both Carr and Postman view the intellectual achievements of Western modernity since the printing press to be the highest we have yet attained, at least generally among the population. Leaving aside the question of whether there have been more brilliant minds prior to widespread availability of the book, their homage to enlightenment philosophy, modern science, early America, and great literature is clear testimony to their common belief that typographic or literate culture revolutionized the world for the better. Aside from their admission that the book wasn't always edifying, readers should keep in mind that very little about the role printing played in the development of Western culture is problematic for either Carr or Postman.

Carr in particular implies that the mind emerges from activity of the brain tout court, and there is nothing more to be said about the exercise of will or the development of character with respect to the media we consume. His resolution of the debate between rationalism and empiricism by neuroplasticity (p. 28) is vastly oversimplified – and more evidence of his unwritten assumption that the methods and results of modern science, which owe much to the book, are true knowledge, and are at risk in the internet age. Unfortunately, despite all the dots he tries to connect, not much deliberate research is available to help decide this question, and so he makes his case with very specific studies that suggest more general support for his position. For example, he cites evidence that multi-tasking reduces comprehension to support his point that distracting web pages impede our ability to learn, without any demonstration that the web page constitutes sufficient distraction to bring about this effect (pp. 130-33). Again, the conclusions aren't hard to accept, but it is worth reserving judgment while research continues in this area.

Postman prefers to make his case rhetorically and through illustrative anecdotes,

though he cites some statistics in defense of his claims. On the other hand, we have nearly thirty years to reflect on his predictions, and television turned out to be merely a stage in the development of media after all. If Carr is right, then the internet has become an even more significant and urgent problem. The question is whether thirty more years will develop yet another media revolution that will marginalize the effects of the Internet.

We frequently say that the pace of technological change is accelerating; we expect more changes in media in shorter periods of time, largely because when we look at the trend leading from book to telegraph to photograph to radio, TV, the web, the personal music player, and smart phones, we see ever-compressing waves of introduction and adoption. That has contrasting implications for us as consumers of technology: we are always in the midst of a media revolution, and yet the frequency has to have some upper bound beyond which no wave can ever achieve critical mass before the next obliterates it.

One consequence of this continual revolution is that we are effectively subjected to a series of grand experiments. The evidence proves Postman's warning has merit: the fundamental change in discourse brought about by television has turned some of the most sobering subjects into entertainment. But how many are left to take note of the change? It takes a critic who straddles the technological divide to recognize the possibility that something valuable might have been lost with the new medium, and for this reason alone Carr should be given a fair read, even if he appears alarmist.

The pace can't increase indefinitely; in order to spark a media revolution, there must be sufficient participants to make the technology pervasive, or it remains a subculture. Even if we eventually invent instantaneous delivery or reconfiguration of devices, humans require time to adopt and become dependent on a new technology or medium. Although there may always be a generation not yet weary of upheaval, we need not follow Postman into an inevitably Huxleyan future, or relapse into Twitter-addiction with giddy despair along with Carr.

Before confronting questions of how much internet or television is too much, and before trying to decide which devices and channels to buy, it is worth stepping back and asking what constitutes true knowledge and real discourse. We probably already have answers to those questions, and Carr and Postman give us an opportunity to reflect on them with fresh perspective, and to refine or amend our answers.