

## **WE ARE WHAT WE WATCH AND READ**

*Here is an adapted excerpt from "Asceticism and the Electronic Media: Technophilia and Technophobia in the Perspective of Christian Philosophy," an essay by Hugh McDonald, who teaches at Niagara University.*

**By Hugh McDonald**

Technology forms our human milieu. It is our environment. As an environment it is hidden from us, and we must deliberately direct our attention to it in order to see how it affects us. Technophobia is the attitude of one who desires a return to a mythical state before technology, a return to a natural state. Technophilia is the attitude of one who sees all hope for mankind's future happiness in technical and scientific progress.

The technophobe is often called a Luddite, after the revolt of cloth-workers in England who destroyed the machinery in cotton mills that were rendering their work obsolete. The technophile is often the technocrat, one who believes that industry and government should invest heavily in technical solutions to human problems. In the field of education in particular, the technophile demands that man learns to conform to the demands of new technology.

Technology in general and the electronic communications media (including all types of information technology) represent great goods, but as with any great good, they can be the occasion of great evil. It is necessary to recognize the effects of the media on ourselves as individuals and on society. As with anything that offers great attractions, it is necessary to develop an asceticism that preserves us from the abuse of technology.

### **Discarnate man and angelism**

Although the intellectual understanding is not the act of any physical organ, the intellect of man must mature through the process of sense cognition. Without a sensory life man has no contact with reality, and the intellect remains empty. One peril of technology is in the illusion that we can transcend the limits of our bodies. In this sense, Marshall McLuhan and Bruce Powers warn of the danger of "discarnate man," where man loses contact with his body, also called "angelism."<sup>[1]</sup>

Every technology has specific and predictable effects on the user. As an instrument it will extend and amplify some pre-existing human power or organ. When one power of man is amplified, this affects the order and equilibrium that exists within man. A man who loses his sight becomes more aware of his other senses. In fact, parts of the brain which process visual data in a sighted person, are used to process the data of other senses in a blind person. When a man regains his sight, the other senses recede.

Each technology requires man's attention in a new way, as it accelerates and extends a particular human faculty. This requirement of attention means that man is not only the master and creator of technology, but that there is a reverse process, whereby man becomes dependent on technology and is shaped by it.

The user of information technology finds that physical distance and physical limitations become irrelevant. It changes the way we relate to our own psychosomatic unity, and how we relate to others. The telegraph was the first electric information technology, and it made people aware of events on other continents more quickly than they were aware of events in neighboring villages. Starting with the telegraph, our picture of the world has changed. The removal of the barrier of distance in communications has created what McLuhan called the "global village."

In the English language, the term "village" means a small community, but also has a pleasant emotional resonance, of a place of loving neighbors. McLuhan, however, warned that the global village is not necessarily a friendly place. The removal of the barriers of distance can also worsen conflicts.

The overcoming of physical limitations, and the appearance that the human body itself is obsolete, is an effect of technologies such as virtual reality and many modes of computer communications. It is part of modern life that we can form friendships and associations with people over the Internet without ever seeing them, and yet may never have spoken with our closest neighbor.

The temptation of technology has always existed. The Book of Wisdom describes the effects of idolatry, where man worships the works of his own hands [Wisdom, 14-15; Psalm 15]. The work of man's hands is something dependent upon man for its existence and meaning, and when man puts his own works in place of a superior being, or as the Supreme Being, he begins to imitate his own works, and is demeaned. The makers of idols shall become like them, with eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear. The reversal of the proper order of man to his products leads in turn to disorder in all realms of man's life.

Electric communication technology goes further than any of the previous products of man's skill. Earlier technologies extended the power of man's limbs, and with the invention of writing, man's memory in a sense could be placed outside of himself. Present communication technologies supplant man's external senses, and more recently, the internal senses of imagination and the most important, the central or common sense, which brings the various data of the external senses together into a cohesive unity.

The world of information, however conceived, may appear to exist in its own right by means of electronics, and the human user becomes a mere participant in that world. This involves a process that Marshall McLuhan called auto-amputation.[2]

At a biological level, the human organism seeks to maintain a state of homeostasis or equilibrium. Anything that upsets that balance is a shock to the system and the system will react in order to restore the balance. This sums up the clinical observations of Hans Selye, who formulated a general theory of disease based on stress.[3]

Hans Selye's observations concern man's somatic dimension, but he is aware of the psycho-somatic unity of man. A perceived threat will result in a physical reaction as much as actual physical injury. When our ability to gather information is enhanced by technology, we are placed under greater stress, and to maintain equilibrium we must find strategies to cope with it.

One strategy is to withdraw from the flood of information. Another strategy is to try and absorb it. This has two effects. One effect is that of numbness or anesthesia. If we cannot control the speed with which information comes to us, then we become less sensitive to it. The numbing effect is auto-amputation, where we try to separate the offending faculty from ourselves. The other effect is pattern recognition. At the same time we become insensitive to the increased number of individual details, we may become aware of larger patterns. Another strategy, is to try and fight the threat to equilibrium, in this case, the increased flow of information.

In order to give a concrete example, if we watch television or travel in cars, we are able to see within a very short time, even within an hour, more individual faces than our ancestors, who traveled by foot, would see in their whole lives. Our ability to absorb new faces is limited. The driver reacts properly by focusing on the task of driving, and diverting his attention from the increased flow of details such as the faces of pedestrians.

The television viewer may react by becoming numb. The faces on television no longer have an emotional effect on him. He may also feel threatened, and this, I think, is the root of the feeling that there are too many people on the earth. A traveler who goes through China and India on foot does not get the impression that there are too many people. A person in a large crowd sees perhaps 20 people around him, but a camera above the crowd reveals a crowd incomprehensible to human imagination.

The widespread anxiety among people in the First World about there being too many people is an effect of them seeing thousands of faces on television, whereas someone may walk for hours on the streets of the suburbs without seeing a single person.

Thomas Aquinas was aware of the effects of the senses on the intellect. The senses are necessary to the life of the intellect, but the senses should also be properly ordered to the intellect and subordinate to the intellect. A disorder or imbalance in the sensory realm can lead to a disorder in the intellect. Since the

new technologies place more demands on our senses as they extend the power of the senses, this same technology also demands new forms of asceticism.

### **Medium is message**

Every thing that acts, acts for an end. It is easy to reduce all man's actions to the desire for happiness. The ultimate purpose of our actions is the reason for all the intermediate purposes. To understand the meaning of McLuhan's phrase "the medium is the message," we need to look to the philosophy of Aristotle and Thomas. Marshall McLuhan wrote in a letter to J.M. Davey, in the office of Prime Minister Trudeau:

It turns out then, that my communication theory is Thomistic to the core. It has the further advantage of being able to explain Aquinas and Aristotle in modern terms. We are the content of anything we use, if only because these things are extensions of ourselves.[4] ...

McLuhan's primary insight was that a communication medium apart from the content of its overt messages has a definite effect on the viewer. With regard to television, McLuhan's observation was confirmed when scientists at General Electric discovered that the brain waves of a television viewer are altered in the same way by viewing television, without regard to the content. The measurable effect of television was the same whether the person was viewing programming or commercials.[5]

The experiments were repeated by others who expected to disprove McLuhan's hypothesis that "the medium is the message," only to have the findings confirmed.[6] The brain reacts in the same distinctive way to television as a medium in general. The variety of content has no specific measurable effect.

Activists often express grave concern over the moral effects of the content of television and other media. They are rightly concerned about bad role models and a high incidence of violence and sexual sensuality. They are also legitimately concerned about how affluence portrayed on television can make people dissatisfied with their material condition.

I recognize these as legitimate concerns, but the primary concern should be on the medium itself. The electronic media have in themselves a narcotic effect on the abuser. In a day when governments and international bodies battle the marketing of chemical substances, no one is mobilized to counteract the negative effects of the electronic media.

The electronic media upsets normal community and family relations based on physical contact and proximity, leading to an ersatz community where people have the illusion of being angels. People in their relations are reduced to being pieces of disembodied information without context or substance.

We do not distinguish between the use of morphine as an aid to inspiration (Edgar Allan Poe), and its use as an escape from intolerable conditions (the user in the American slum). The extensive use of such drugs is dangerous and addictive in both cases. Yet we do not apply the same prudence with regard to the media.

The level of sensation present in our lives affects our intellectual judgment. Thomas Aquinas discusses two related cases of intellectual debility arising from an imbalance in the sensory realm. The first is dullness of the intellectual sense (*hebetudo sensus*), which arises from immersion in the pleasures of food. The second is intellectual blindness (*caecitas mentis*), which arises as the result of excessive sexual pleasures [Summa Theologica II-II q. 15 a. 1-3; q. 46. A. 1-3]. The dulling of the intellectual sense stills leaves a functioning intellect. However, what a pure heart can see quickly, the dull of sense must labor to see. The intellect is lacking in penetrative power. In the case of intellectual blindness, the intellect is completely unable to consider spiritual realities.

If we extend this to the effect of the media, the media serve to provide us with greater amounts of information. This is true of the printed media, since the amount of information disseminated by books and newspapers is far more than what one could learn from conversation in a pre-literate society. It is more true of the electronic media, where we are provided not only with the entire world through symbols, but we are provided with the auditory and visual sensations of the whole world. The media would not continue to grow unless there were an immense appetite for knowledge. Such as it is today, that appetite is disordered.

If truth is a good, and even the truth about worthless or evil things is a good compared to falsehood about the same things, then how can the truth be a danger? The human mind has for its purpose to know the truth. Aristotle taught that when we know something, in a way we become that thing, and in a way we make that thing [De Anima, III, v-vi. 430a 10-20].

Knowledge is the intentional existence of the known object in the knowing subject, where the object forms or informs the subject as knower. Each person has but one mind, and that mind can only know one thing at a time. If we think of several things at once, it is only because we have grasped them in some unity, as in knowing a whole, we know in a confused way the parts, or in knowing a relation, we know in a confused way the things that come together in a relational unity [Summa Theologica, I q. 84 a. 4].

In knowledge itself, there is an hierarchy of values. The highest value is to know God, and other values in knowledge come below that. A mind distracted by lesser things cannot know God.

**We may draw some practical conclusions.**

First, it is necessary to become aware of the effect of any media upon our cognitive relation to reality, and its effect upon our appetites.

Second, we should recognize that technology is a good thing in itself, as it is part of God's command to man that he subdue the earth, but we should recognize that if we rely on technology to solve all human problems, we are becoming idolaters. Idolatry puts man at a lower level than the idol, and the result is personal and social disorder.

Third, the right use of technology means that we should also counteract its attractions. Communications technology concerns man's most basic appetite, the appetite to realize one's self through knowledge. However, the mere quantity of information may distract us from knowledge which is of true value.

The most dangerous attitude is that of one who sits in front of the television set or computer terminal without a critical attitude. Since the machine is on, he takes up a passive and receptive stance. The Christian practices of fasting and abstinence are perhaps easy compared with consciously limiting of our use of the media, yet that is required for mental and moral health.

#### *Footnotes*

[1] Bruce R. Powers and Marshall McLuhan, "The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century," Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 1989. Chapter 1 "The Resonating Interval."

[2] Marshall McLuhan, "Understanding Media," McGraw-Hill, 1964, Chapter 4, "The Gadget Lover."

[3] Hans Selye, "Stress without Distress," J.B. Lippincott Company, New York, 1974.

[4] "Letters of Marshall McLuhan," selected and edited by Matie Molinaro, Corinne McLuhan, William Toye; Oxford University Press, 1987. The Thomistic and Aristotelian ground of McLuhan's work is treated briefly in Brigid Elson, "In Defence of the Human Person: The Christian Humanism of Marshall McLuhan," in The Canadian Catholic Review, May 1994.

[5] "Letters of Marshall McLuhan," ed. Matie Molinaro, Corinne McLuhan, William Toye, Oxford University Press, 1987: "Letter to Hugo McPherson, Professor of English at McGill," 1970. In the letter McLuhan refers to findings that were later published in Journal of Advertising Research, vol. II, no. 1, February 1971, "Brain Wave Measurement of Media Involvement."

[6] see Bruce R. Powers and Marshall McLuhan, "The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century," Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 1989, Chapter 3 "Plato and Angelism."