

Faithful Criticism of Popular Media Technologies

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What values and biases are inherent in each communication technology? How do they affect one's relationship with God, oneself, others, and the environment? These questions help us recognize the significant relationship between the content we consume and the delivery systems that bring it to us.

The Sherpas know intimately the face of Mount Everest, but only as seen from their home valley. Sometimes when climbers show them a different side of the mountain, they refuse at first to believe. How could it possibly be the same mountain from a different angle? But they are moved emotionally, and their disbelief eventually turns to amazement at the revelation that their timeworn mountain can open to them in a new way.¹

So it is with most Christian media use and criticism, driven both by belief and disbelief, the familiar and unfamiliar. Christian critiques of media focus only on one side of the mountain. On this side, popular media *content* matters most when it comes to influencing our culture. They think that media technologies (or channels that carry communication) are neutral – albeit powerful – channels of communication that simply transmit news and entertainment to eager audiences.

But from the other side of the mountain, media technologies are seen as more than just neutral. Rather, they are value-laden human constructions that send their own messages in addition to the actual news or entertainment they carry. Each technology influences the way people think about themselves

and interact with others and institutions in society. On this new side of the mountain, media technology, as well as media content, is a cultural creation and therefore falls within the critic's scope of analysis.

In this article, we argue that technology *is* culture. Just as popular media content reflects the values of its writers and producers, so too do popular media technologies themselves reflect the values of their human creators. Each communication technology has values—or things it considers valuable—apart from the messages it sends that influence individuals and societies. Also, each technology—whether radio, film, or computers—has its own unique language (or grammar) that gives distinct shape and bias to its messages.

More important, perhaps, a particular technology's values and biases present additional opportunities for faithful Christian critique and media stewardship. Therefore, in approaching any popular media technology critically, we need to ask some basic questions: What values and biases are inherent in each medium? How do such values and biases affect one's relationship with God, with oneself, with others, and with the environment? These questions allow us to critique popular media in fresh ways, recognizing the significant relationship between the content we consume and the delivery systems that bring it to us.

TECHNOLOGY IS NOT NEUTRAL

Generally speaking, with some notable exceptions, Evangelicals pay little attention to the media technology itself.² Many suggest that technology is neutral, meaning it is morally neutral, or amoral. They believe that technology, like rocks and trees, is soulless; only humans have souls and are capable of sin. Accordingly, what makes a particular technology good or bad is the actual use to which it is directed. It is good in the hands of good people and bad in the hands of bad people. Although much has been written to demonstrate that technology is not neutral, we can best serve our readers by offering a simple but helpful explanation of two foundational ideas.

First, a belief in technological neutrality confuses inanimate objects in nature with objects created by human beings. Popular media technologies are human creations and as such are cultural artifacts, or products, that nurture the values and biases of their human inventors. For instance, personal computers were created by people like Bill Gates, who valued organizing vast amounts of information, sending messages (at high speeds), and connecting individuals and businesses worldwide. Thus, regardless of the actual messages sent, computers nurture efficiency, information sharing, speed, and globalization. These values are the additional *message* of the computer system that accompanies any content, regardless of whose hands the system is in.

Computers indeed consist of soulless microchips and motherboards, but the values they nurture still affect human life and consciousness in positive and negative ways. For instance, computers let us organize and send vast amounts of information, but also encourage *informationism*—an almost religious “faith

in the collection and dissemination of information as a route to social progress and personal happiness."³ Computers create jobs and allow us to work efficiently, but research demonstrates that heavy users typically communicate differently from the rest of us. And despite our reported "global village" sense of belonging, our collective sense seems to be that community is diminishing rather than increasing. As one critic put it, "The planet is falling precipitately [abruptly] apart and coming reluctantly together at the very same moment," a phenomenon described as "McWorld."⁴

Second, although technology does not speak directly, it has its own language apart from the content it delivers. By language we mean that each communication technology has its own unique way of capturing and presenting reality to audiences that involves a structural bias in its communication. In this sense, the potential of any technology is limited not just by social institutions or by its human operators, but by the very language of the technology itself.

For instance, we cannot watch radio—its bandwidth is too narrow to carry pictures. We can only listen to it. Theater requires a different kind of acting than film or television does. In most instances, the theater audience is far away from the actors' faces. Audience members must be told in a loud voice what is going on, and plot movements must be marked vividly rather than gently shaded by subtle facial expressions. And filmmakers must decide whether their work will be released in its original format or reformatted to fit the different aspect ratio of the television set. If reformatted, it loses some of its original image quality; if not reformatted, images may be too small for people at home to see adequately.

We agree that a communicator's message may be aimed at improving or demeaning the human condition whether it is carried by voice, print, or electronic technology. We also acknowledge that technology is not deterministic: our computers or cell phones do not make us do anything. People still act or fail to act based on their interpretation of certain messages. Despite these acknowledgments, however, we maintain that technology is not neutral. It clearly affects how messages are constructed and delivered, and it shapes the individuals who are immersed in its use. It is helpful, then, to view faithful media criticism as a type of social criticism that addresses not only (1) the *content* of media itself, and how such content affects individuals, groups, and organizations in society, but also (2) the communication *technology* (or channels) that distribute songs, novels, newspapers, movies, and other cultural products or artifacts to large numbers of people in society.⁵

As a way to encourage additional analysis of technology beyond these pages, we illustrate the key concepts presented thus far as they relate to television. We demonstrate how television's inherent values and biases ultimately interact with the messages it sends, and how understanding its unique technological properties help us to make better, more discerning choices about which content to consume.

TELEVISION VALUES

Although each medium needs to be understood and critiqued, we chose television for several reasons. First, television continues to be the most influential popular media in the United States more than sixty years since it first became commercially viable. Second, in recent years, smaller, more portable, and less expensive video equipment has led to an explosion in new programming by mainstream and independent producers. Third, despite ever-increasing picture quality and media convergence – or the appearance of older media on the new media channels – television retains its key values and distinguishing properties.⁶ Finally, as the reigning champion among evangelical media, television is an excellent candidate for analysis and critique.⁷

When it comes to television's inherent biases, television values images over words and encourages us to think that seeing – more than reading or hearing – is believing. It also can weaken our imaginative capacities. Unlike books, television does the imaginative work for us: it pictures the castle, shows us the landscape, and draws the detailed contours of the protagonist's face. Over time, under the guise of the least effort principle, we may come to accept and even prefer the imagination of others over our own.

Television for the most part is “visually hyperactive”: it values the dramatic cut and short commercial over the long-term event.⁸ Television thus values interruption rather than continuity or sustained reflection, such as that found in a Mozart symphony. Imagine an orchestra stopping every seven minutes so the conductor can pitch his sponsors' latest products!

As we watch television, our attention is attracted to the images on the screen more than to others in the room. The bursts of color ignited with every scene change and camera angle change draw the attention of the viewer much like the flames of a campfire draw the visual focus of those gathered around it. But unlike the campfire, there is typically no conversation around the television by its viewers. Faces are glued to the screen and drawn away from family members and friends.

Finally, television encourages physical inactivity. As we watch and enjoy our favorite sporting event, for instance, we are discouraged from practicing the sport we are watching. Television's very popularity is built upon the vicarious experiences it offers, from sports teams to soap operas. The phrase *couch potato* refers to individuals who spend too much time in sedentary activities, such as watching television or playing computer games.

Hence, the values inherent in television include image over word, visual interruption, interpersonal distraction, and physical inactivity. Over time, these values can subtly influence our interactions with others, including our desire for face-to-face interaction in community and the world around us.

TELEVISION LANGUAGE

In addition, each technology has its own unique language, or way of capturing and presenting reality. Television's unique language, or iconogra-

phy, includes at least two properties that are specific to this medium: intimacy and immediacy.

Television is inherently an intimate medium. Compared with other dramatic media, television emphasizes intimacy and accentuates characters and personalities over ideas and propositions. In fact, the face is the image that television captures best. It fits the size of the TV screen and overcomes issues related to picture resolution. Most fine details on television are lost – even with a high-definition quality picture – unlike on film, which gives us a view of the wider world.⁹ With its huge screen, film is perfectly suited for Civil War epics, panoramas, the sea, and so forth.

The small screen's constraints force producers to develop the drama by concentrating on characters' faces and trusting them to unfold the beauty and depth of the human personality in all its complexities. A television actor's facial expressions are as important as the dialogue in interpreting the actor's character. Television's visual scale grants a level of privacy unavailable elsewhere and thereby demands a believable performance. Vivid and highly professional acting over the history of television accounts for nearly all those series most highly rated for quality – *Hill Street Blues*, *M*A*S*H*, *The West Wing*, and *Law and Order*, to name a few.

Not surprisingly, given television's emphasis on characters' faces, it often creates the illusion of face-to-face interaction between individual viewers and people on the screen. Because of the close-ups of faces and private content, many viewers feel they have a personal relationship with certain characters – a phenomenon that researchers refer to as para-social interaction (PSI).¹⁰ On the positive side, the illusion of intimacy makes for good television by providing characters that audiences can connect with along the dramatic journey. On the negative side, it leads some to find interaction with real-life characters less rewarding than interaction with television personas. It further accounts for powerful personality cults that form around mainstream celebrities.

The same effect occurs among audiences of various Christian programs. Thanks to television's inherent intimacy, even when it is not intended, viewers often feel as if they know Joel, Joyce, Kenneth, Pat, Robert, Charles, and T. D. (Do you recognize any of these personalities?) Media personalities may not seek to promote their own personality cults, but their use of the medium counteracts even their best of intentions.

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Television is inherently an immediate communication technology. Some of the most powerful moments in television programming have been live transmissions – the funeral of assassinated President John F. Kennedy, the moonwalk, O. J. Simpson’s trial, 9/11, the Iraq War, and Barack Obama’s inauguration, to name just a few.

Partly due to the multi-camera setup and the instantaneous switching capacity from one angle to another, television captures immediacy and eventfulness; its portrayal of reality often coincides with a particular event’s origination. John F. Kennedy’s burial did not take place in Arlington Cemetery alone, but in the living rooms, bus terminals, and town squares of the world. Because of television, his “casket did not ride down Pennsylvania Avenue only. It rode down Main Street.”¹¹ Television made the land mines in Iraq explode in our own backyards. And because of television, we were at ground zero for 9/11 as helpless victims jumped from the smoke-filled Twin Towers. Television has the tremendous advantage of enabling us to participate in events as they occur. As one critic explained, each shot provides the viewer with a “God’s eye view” that is always front and center.¹²

Sometimes television’s immediacy is used purposefully to increase viewership: Princess Diana’s royal wedding or a “very special live episode” of our favorite show during sweeps week. Celebrities and activist groups alike regularly leverage live media coverage of staged events not only to spread the word about their causes but to connect immediately and emotionally with potential supporters. Similarly, in the hands of certain religious communicators, immediacy can narrowly serve personal or institutional agendas. Television creates a sense of visual immediacy even when – much like intimacy – it is not intended, communicating televangelists as power-brokers over empires, for example, and audiences as members of their worldwide congregations.

These brief examples of some of television’s technological properties illustrate the potency of technological biases. These biases place limits on television’s symbolic capacity, or the way it captures and presents reality to its audiences. Audiences, for better or worse, are affected by these biases as they interpret content and assign meaning to certain events. The challenge for faithful critics, then, is to respond creatively and imaginatively to a medium’s inherent biases, or its symbolic limitations, in ways that promote peace and justice.¹³

CONCLUSION

Back on Mount Everest with the Sherpas: what you once perhaps took for granted now appears fresh. What was once unfamiliar now appears familiar, even if you cannot yet fully grasp its splendor. In any case, it is clear that things are not always as they appear. Tired from the journey? Perhaps. Intrigued enough to keep exploring? We hope so.

Media content is an easy target for Christians, and for good reason. Concerns about the coarsening of cultural life through excessive displays of sex

and violence are legitimate. But the technologies that deliver the content are also made by human beings, and as such reflect human values, desires, and aspirations. Each communication technology has its own unique DNA, or characteristic predispositions that shape human communication. Playing video games is fun, but it may desensitize us to the lasting consequences of our choices. Television delivers important news and rich entertainment, but it encourages us to think that seeing is believing. In short, each technology comes with benefits and burdens apart from the content it delivers.

For now, remember that developing technological literacy begins by asking some basic questions: What values and biases are inherent in each medium? And how do such values and biases affect one's relationship with God, with oneself, with others, and with the environment? To the extent that we understand the inherent potential and limits of any particular technology, we open up its redemptive possibilities – whether as critics, consumers, or creators of popular media and technology.

The goal of our brief expedition was not to exhaust every nook or cranny of television's technological landscape. In actuality, we only scratched the surface of one particular medium. But if our bird's-eye view of both sides of the mountain planted a seed compelling enough to convince you to take further expeditions on your own, then our journey, at least for the time being, was a success.¹⁴

NOTES

1 Jacob Bronowski tells the story of the Sherpas in *Science and Human Values*, revised edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1965 [1956]), 30-31.

2 Recent notable exceptions include Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), and *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009); Quentin J. Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002); and Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World: Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998).

3 Schultze, *Habits of the High Tech Heart*, 21.

4 Benjamin R. Barber, "Jihad vs. McWorld," *Atlantic Monthly* 269:3 (March 1992), 53-63, here citing 53. Available online at www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1992/03/jihad-vs-mc-world/3882/ (accessed December 7, 2010).

5 Elsewhere, we explain that faithful media criticism must also consider "the practices and process of various social institutions that surround and regulate the channels of communication and determine how and when content is delivered." See Robert H. Woods Jr. and Paul D. Patton, *Prophetically Incorrect: A Christian Introduction to Media Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010), chapter 1, here citing 13.

6 The medium of television has evolved since its inception in the late 1940s not only in screen size (which now varies from fifty-inch flat screens to palm-sized models) but also in its interfacing with other communication media (e.g., in viewer voting by phone for reality television contestants, shopping online, or downloading television programming to view on computer). Such interfacing, we suggest, intensifies television's inherent properties of intimacy and immediacy. For an introduction to the wildly changing media

convergence landscape, see Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

7 Several sources have critiqued how religious television shapes culture and how culture shapes religious television, for better or worse. For example, see Malcolm Muggeridge, *Christ and the Media* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977); Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1991), and *Redeeming Television: How TV Changes Christians—How Christians Can Change TV* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

8 Schultze, *Redeeming Television*, 86.

9 We recognize that with high definition (HD), news stations must now find more graphic content to fill the sides of the screen and background. And, in dramatic programming with HD production, set designers must now pay closer attention to props and scenery. Yet it is unlikely that increased attention to such superfluous elements as a result of HD will detract from television's bias toward a character's face. News and dramatic television are still driven by personalities and characters. It is more likely that HD will bring increased attention to the lines and subtle expressions visible on a character's face.

10 Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl introduced the term "para-social interaction" (PSI) for the perceived relationship of friendship or intimacy by a media consumer with a remote media "persona" in "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observation on Intimacy at a Distance," *Psychiatry* 19:3 (1956), 215-229.

11 *Newsweek*, December 9, 1963, 88.

12 Thomas de Zengotita, *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), 7.

13 For now, space precludes us from exploring such responses in detail. The interested reader should consult the last half of Woods and Patton, *Prophetically Incorrect*, 113-119.

14 This article is drawn from chapters 1 and 7 of our book, *Prophetically Incorrect: A Christian Introduction to Media Criticism*. Much of the material in chapter 7 was adapted from material authored by Clifford Christians that originally appeared in Quentin J. Schultze, ed., *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 331-336.



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