



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Faithful Criticism
of Popular Media
Technologies
(*Virtual Lives*, pp. 29-36)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Faithful Criticism of Popular Media Technologies

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

Prayer

Creator God, the universe and all that it contains are yours. You formed us in your image, giving us the ability and responsibility to continue your work of creating. We celebrate the ingenuity behind the ever-evolving technologies that have given birth to the virtual worlds that are part of our common life.

We seek your guidance in their use. Give us clarity to examine the virtual lives that they make possible, and holy desire to live virtuously in and through them. In Christ's name and through the Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 8:3-5

Reflection

Often we ignore media technologies. We object to violence in certain films or sexting on smartphones, but fail to examine the nature of films and phones. We act like "what makes a particular technology good or bad is the actual use to which it is directed," observe Robert Woods and Paul Patton, as though "it is good in the hands of good people and bad in the hands of bad people." But it is a mistake to think technology is neutral in this way.

Because popular media technologies—like television, film, paperback books, magazines, smartphones, computers, and video games—are human creations, they express and nurture the values and biases of their human inventors. Woods and Patton give an example: "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."

Further, each communication technology has a "language"—"its own unique way of capturing and presenting reality to audiences that involves a structural bias in its communication," they note. "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."

Faithful media criticism should address not only the *content* of media and how it affects individuals, groups, and organizations in society, but also the communication *technology*. Woods and Patton illustrate the latter process by examining television's inherent values and biases, and the nature of its language.

- ▶ *Television inherently values or favors images over words* (doing the imagining of things for us and making us think seeing—more than reading or hearing—is believing), *visual interruption* (rather than sustained reflection), *interpersonal distraction* (drawing our attention



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to its flashing images, away from family members and friends in the room), 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’s language is inherently intimate and immediate*. This intimacy is evident in how the medium accentuates character’s faces and personalities over ideas and propositions. Television “often creates the illusion of face-to-face interaction between individual viewers and people on the screen... a phenomenon that researchers refer to as para-social interaction (PSI).” Some viewers may come to prefer TV personas to real-life characters. And television celebrities may promote their own personality cults, whether they intend to or not.

The immediacy of television is evident in live programming like President John F. Kennedy’s funeral, the moonwalk, O. J. Simpson’s trial, 9/11, the Iraq War, and Barack Obama’s inauguration. “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.”

“Each technology comes with benefits and burdens apart from the content it delivers,” conclude Woods and Patton. “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.”

Study Questions

1. According to Robert Woods and Paul Patton, media technologies reflect the “values and biases” of their creators. What inherent values and biases of television do they identify? Select another popular new communication technology – for example, laptop computers, portable music players, smartphones, or video games – and discuss its inherent values and biases.
2. How do Wood and Patton characterize television’s “language”? Continue your critique of the media technology you chose in the previous question by examining its language.
3. The *Rule of St. Benedict* (sixth century) prescribed that each year a monk in the community be given one book to read for the entire year – meditatively, over and over. What are the values and language of that technology and practice?

Departing Hymn: “Dear Lord, Take Up Our Tangled Strands” (vv. 1 and 4)

Dear Lord, take up our tangled strands
where we have worked in vain,
that by the skill of your own hands
some beauty may remain.

Take all the failures, each mistake
of our poor human ways,
then, Savior, for your own dear sake,
make them show forth your praise.

Mrs. F. G. Burroughs (1920), alt.
Tune: DUNDEE

Faithful Criticism of Popular Media Technologies

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider the need to faithfully critique not only popular media *content*, but also the *technology* that delivers it.
2. To identify the inherent values and biases as well as the “language” of television.
3. To practice applying this form of critique to other popular media technologies.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Virtual Lives (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Dear Lord, Take Up Our Tangled Strands” locate the familiar tune DUNDEE in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“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.”

Robert Woods and Paul Patton draw an analogy with how we typically evaluate popular television shows, movies, Internet sites, and so on. “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,” they write. “But from the other side of the mountain, media technologies are seen as...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.” (*Virtual Lives*, 30)

Using television as an example because it is a familiar and powerful technology, Woods and Patton lead us to “the other side of the mountain” for a more adequate way of examining popular media technologies.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 8:3-5 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study introduces the view that the communication technologies that make our virtual lives possible are not morally neutral. Each one has inherent biases and values from its human creators and its own “language” that

gives shape to its messages. Or, as communication theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) famously put it, “the medium is the message.” The next two study guides in this series, “Religious Authority in the Age of the Internet” and “Making Moral Choices in Video Games,” apply this form of faithful criticism to the Internet and video games.

Study Questions

1. The *technology* of television is designed to bring an eye-catching spectator experience into the home. Robert Woods and Paul Patton note that this favors “image over word, visual interruption, interpersonal distraction, and physical inactivity.”

Encourage members to follow Woods and Patton’s lead by examining the inherent values of another popular media technology. (These values and biases are more obvious when you compare a new technology with one that it competes with or replaces.) For example, members may suggest that while computers favor “efficiency, information sharing, speed, and globalization,” laptop computers and smartphones are designed to add the value of mobility, or disconnection from fixed place of usage. Portable music players (in contrast to radio, record and CD players, etc.) favor personal preferences over a shared canon of music. Video games (in contrast to fantasy novels) favor preset images over imagination; and so on. In each case, evaluate the new technology’s inherent values and biases from the perspective of Christian discipleship.

2. Woods and Patton say that *intimacy* and *immediacy* characterize television’s language or “way of capturing and presenting reality.” These features depend on the structural limitations of television: intimacy is a function of the low resolution and size of the television screen; immediacy is made possible by smaller cameras and satellite technology.

Invite members to make a similar analysis of the language of the media technologies they discussed above. In addition to structural features of the technology, consider how costly it is to own, complex it is to operate, difficult it is to maintain and repair, and other factors will determine how the technology will be distributed in the world, among social and economic classes, and so on.

3. Encourage members to consider first the technology of reading a book—it must be done by the individual; requires and nurtures the reader’s concentration, memory, and imagination; builds a common vocabulary and experiences with others; depends upon private or shared ownership of the book; and so on. These values are the same across social contexts. Some salient features of the “language” of this media technology are that the reading experience is quite variable (a reader may skip around the book, go back and reread a passage, or stop reading), it unfolds at the reader’s chosen pace, and can be focused or casual. Again, this language of book-reading is the same across social contexts.

Consider next the social context. By using its books according to the Rule, the religious community is highlighting some values and features of the language of book reading and discouraging others. A certain relationship of readers to their books, to the knowledge they gain from them, and so on, is being fostered. Virtues of obedience, discipline, attention, and personal involvement are fostered, while vices like laziness, casualness, and vanity are corrected. Shared experiences are being developed among members of the community.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.