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Abstract

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SOCIAL AND ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA

Justin Ariel Bailey

REAL LIFE

Someone has kidnapped Princess Susannah, the Duchess of Beaumont. They have released a video on YouTube threatening her execution if their demands are unmet. But these terrorists are asking for neither prisoner release nor financial remuneration. Their sole request is that the British prime minister performs a humiliating sex act on live television in prime time. What should be done? What is the responsibility of the public, of the press, and of those in power?

This is the premise of the pilot episode of *Black Mirror*, a British television show developed for Netflix that explores the dark side of our fascination with technology. While it may initially seem like a stretch, the episode's story is driven by media phenomena that make it familiar and believable. The power of smart phone videos. A major story breaking through social media. The struggle to control the story in official media channels. Pundits discussing every angle of the story, using instant polling. YouTube. YouTube comments. New possibilities for entertainment. New possibilities for degradation and shame. And through it all, eyes fixed on screens.

Each episode of *Black Mirror* probes a different angle of the perils and possibilities of life in the age of entertainment. The scenarios are science fiction, yet they are rarely so far-fetched that viewers are unable to imagine similar situations unfolding in contemporary life.

Indeed, when it comes to new media, sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. Consider the 2015 hacking of Ashley Madison, the infamous company with the tagline "Life is Short. Have an Affair." Hackers gave Ashley Madison a month to shut their website down, threatening to release a massive leak of "customer records,

profiles with all the customers' secret sexual fantasies, nude pictures, and conversations and matching credit card transactions, real names and addresses, and employee documents and emails." When their demands went unmet, all the data was released. Chaos ensued, millions of names were exposed, the CEO of Ashley Madison resigned, and concerns about online security and data protection rose to new levels.

The story got stranger, however, when a researcher analyzed the source code and found that more than seventy thousand fem-bots had been created "to send male users millions of fake messages, hoping to create the illusion of a vast playland of available women." In other words, there were vanishingly few actual women among the 5.5 million alleged women (compared to thirty-one million men) boasted by the site. The grand twist of the story is that millions of men were logging on to have racy conversations with Internet bots.¹

Churches were not unaffected. One researcher estimated that as many as four hundred pastors, elders, and church leaders were expected to step down after being implicated on the list.²

REAL WORLD

Our ubiquitous screens. Incidents like the Ashley Madison hack provoke us to consider some disquieting realities about life in our brave new world, where almost everything has become a matter of public consumption and entertainment. Social and entertainment media sprawl promiscuously across all spheres of life, and we reflect upon our subject as those who are deeply embedded in it, awash in the imaginations of Facebook, Amazon, and Google.

Parents talk about limiting electronic "screen time" for their kids, especially in light of research that links excessive screen time to a list of ills ranging from obesity to violent behavior. But even once we leave adolescence, screens are almost impossible to avoid. The data measurement company Nielsen estimates that in an average day, Americans spend more than ten hours staring at a screen.³

Our screens, after all, offer windows to other worlds. They draw us into an ocean of signification. They chime to remind us of urgent messages to which we must respond. They supply endless distractions to stave off boredom. (To resurrect an

¹Annalee Newitz, "Ashley Madison Code Shows More Women, and More Bots," *Gizmodo*, August 31, 2015, <http://gizmodo.com/ashley-madison-code-shows-more-women-and-more-bots-1727613924>.

²Ed Stetzer, "My Pastor Is on the Ashley Madison List," Christianity Today Exchange Blog, August 27, 2015, www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/august/my-pastor-is-on-ashley-madison-list.html.

³Nielsen, *The Nielsen Total Audience Report: Q2 2017*, 2017, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports/2017/the-nielsen-total-audience-q2-2017.html>.

already distant advertising slogan: “Bored? There’s an app for that!”) They function as portals, ensuring that we are always accessible and available to those not immediately present to us.

We may sometimes be disgusted by what our screens present. We may find the content objectionable and choose to consume something else. We may feel paralyzed into passivity. We may retweet a link and feel that our activism is complete. We may do all of this from the comfort of our beds. But we can rarely excuse ourselves from the constant barrage of infotainment fed to us through our myriad screens.

Most of the time we enjoy the possibilities that the digital age affords us. We enjoy staying connected with friends through Facebook, following celebrities through Twitter, posting pictures of our meals on Instagram, and catching up on episodes through Netflix. These technological fixtures have become so commonplace that we usually see them as sites of entertaining distraction rather than serious ethical deliberation.

Connected? Empathy, slacktivism, and the digital divide. Yet all of this screen time is having an effect, for better and for worse. Nicholas Carr has argued that although our Internet use may help us develop skills like multitasking, hand-eye coordination, reflex response, and the processing of visual cues, these gains seem to be coming at the cost of contemplation, attention, memory, and empathy.⁴

Indeed, research has shown a correlation between the social media saturation and social disconnection.⁵ The result is paradoxical: “high connectivity for the Wi-Fi generation and low connectivity in terms of emotional concern for others.”⁶

Social media has also facilitated a thin version of advocacy, derisively called “slacktivism.” Seth Myers captured the phenomenon memorably on *Saturday Night Live* in 2012: “Look, make a Facebook page, and we will ‘like’ it. It’s the *least* we can do. But it’s also the *most* we can do.” Slacktivists offer token public support, reposting links or clicking “like” to signal their identification with a cause. While some advocacy groups have hoped to raise their public profile through such efforts, research has shown that such token displays are unlikely to generate a meaningful contribution to a cause.⁷

⁴Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

⁵Sarah H. Konrath, “The Empathy Paradox: Increasing Disconnection in the Age of Increasing Connection,” in *Handbook of Research on Technoself: Identity in a Technological Society*, ed. R. Lippicini (Hershey, PA: IGI Global), 204-28.

⁶Clifford G. Christians, “Evangelical Perspectives on Technology,” in *Evangelical Christians and Popular Culture*, ed. Robert H. Woods Jr. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 323.

⁷Kirk Kristofferson, Katherine White, and John Peloza, “The Nature of Slacktivism: How the Social Observability of an Initial Act of Token Support Affects Subsequent Prosocial Action,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, no. 6 (April 1, 2014): 1149-66.

In other parts of the world, connectivity is a currency in limited supply. As of March 2018, just over 54 percent of the world population is connected to the Internet. Researchers speak of “The Digital Divide,” which refers to the differing amount of information between the Internet haves and the have-nots.⁸ While the have-nots suffer from a lack of access, the haves suffer from paradoxical maladies: too much information, online experiences driven by ads and algorithms, and the triumph of “fake news.” In a hyperconnected world, not everyone is connected equally, and this means that the utopia visions of web-driven equality have not been realized.⁹

Nevertheless, the promise and power of connectivity for the developing world should not be understated. Consider the role that social media played in the Arab Spring. In what some have called “Leaderless Revolutions,” social media facilitated the rapid sharing and spreading of information, creating a “virtual collective consciousness” that catalyzed a succession of regime changes in these countries.¹⁰ Indeed, social media was so effective that the Egyptian government pulled the plug on digital access. But “hacktivism” cuts more ways than one: the interference of Russian hackers with the 2016 US presidential election shows that global superpowers are no less immune to the power of new technologies. Media has always been powerful, but it has never been so instantaneous, democratized, and spontaneous.

The dark side: Doxxing, cyberbullying, and technology addiction. Yet therein also lurks social media’s liability, for hell hath no fury like the Internet unleashed. Often the dark side of social and entertainment media comes with a blurring of the two, for example, when private life (social) becomes a matter of public consumption (entertainment).

Consider the phenomenon of “doxxing,” in which hackers publicly post a target’s personal information, seeking to humiliate and expose. Andy Crouch argues that doxxing is representative of a shift to a media-amplified “fame-shame culture.” Here “fame is a public estimation of worth, a powerful currency of status. But fame is bestowed by a broad audience, with only the loosest bonds to those they acclaim.” This

⁸“The digital divide is not indeed a clear single gap which divides a society into two groups. Researchers report that disadvantage can take such forms as lower-performance computers, lower-quality or high price connections (i.e. narrowband or dialup connection), difficulty of obtaining technical assistance, and lower access to subscription-based contents.” www.internetworldstats.com/links10.htm.

⁹Safiya Umoja Noble argues that the combination of private interests in promoting certain sites, along with the small number of Internet search engines, leads to a biased set of search algorithms that discriminate against people of color. See Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

¹⁰For a treatment of the role of social media in protest movements, see Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

means that our sense of self is “constantly endangered, fragile, and desperately in need of protection.”¹¹ When all our most intimate details seem suddenly accessible, we are terrified of being exposed and excluded.

With so much of our lives broadcasted and recorded online, there are unparalleled possibilities for humiliation, blackmail, and shame. Sometimes these possibilities are deeply ambiguous; others are downright diabolical. The World Wide Web often resembles the Wild Wild West, with few marshals to police the shootout in the comments section. Under the immunity of anonymity, things are seen and said that plumb the depths of depravity. It takes little tech savvy for cyberbullies to shame rivals and victims into self-harm and even suicide. Bullying has always existed, but it has never been so seemingly inescapable, easy, and consequence free.

Yet, just as often the pitfalls of media are the traps we fall into ourselves. Certainly, the many media choices (and the powers that produce them!) aim to captivate us. Entertainment is big money, but how we spend often shows us the (not-so) hidden idols of our heart. \$22 billion a year on video games. \$10 billion a year on movie tickets. \$10 billion a year on pornography, which incidentally exceeds the profits of professional football, basketball, and baseball combined.¹²

But pornography addiction is less pervasive than media addiction in general. Similarly, we are less addicted to particular media pieces than to the practices of comprehensive media consumption. We now constantly snack on media, filling up all our time and space with entertainment; innumerable vicarious experiences are available to us with the tap of a finger.

This can be distracting to say the least. But more than our attention is at stake. My interest in the ethical implications of media came into sharp focus during fifteen years as a youth pastor. For my students, screens became irreducible extensions of themselves. I once had a student who told me that his beloved computer had broken early in the week. I asked him if he was bored but was unprepared for the honesty of his answer.

“No,” he said. “It’s so lonely.”

Loneliness and connection. Fame and shame. None of these tensions are new; what is new is the sense of possibility that social and entertainment media technologies provide for remaking ourselves and our life together, for better or for worse.

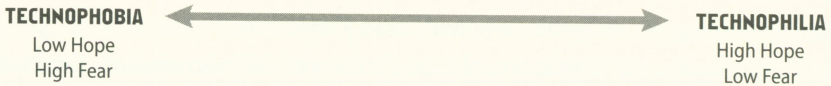
¹¹Andy Crouch, “The Return of Shame,” *Christianity Today*, March 2015, 38.

¹²“Porn Profits: Corporate America’s Secret,” <http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/story?id=132001>. See also “Internet Pornography by the Numbers,” www.webroot.com/us/en/home/resources/tips/digital-family-life/internet-pornography-by-the-numbers.

RANGE OF RESPONSES

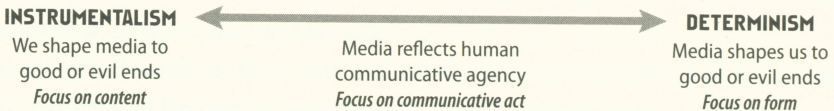
Ethical response to media: A conceptual map. With the increasing ubiquity of social and entertainment media, reflection has proliferated in turn. I first want to sketch a conceptual map, which locates Christian ethical approaches to media in relationship to two diagnostic questions.¹³

Question one: What is the posture toward media? Technophobes tend to be suspicious and critical, emphasizing the negative potential power of media to deform us, while technophiles tend to be optimistic, exulting in media as full of positive potential.



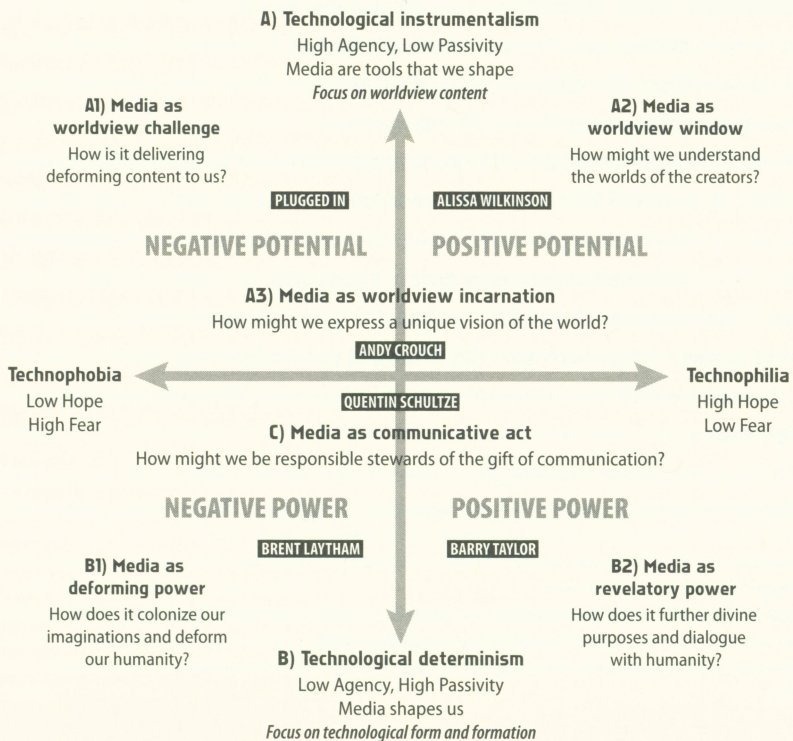
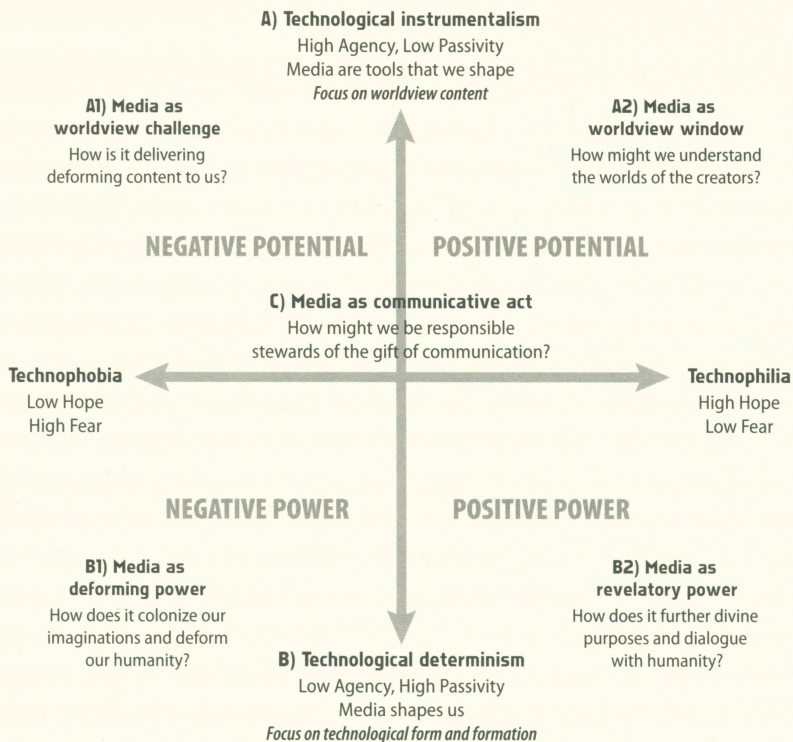
It is very rare to find evaluations of media that are simply one extreme or the other. Nevertheless, the general evaluative posture is usually evident.

Question two: What is the understanding of human agency? Instrumentalists tend to construe media as a tool that we can shape for our own ends, while determinists emphasize the ways that media form us, structuring our interface with the world. The former group emphasizes content; the latter, technology. Mediating between the two is a focus on the act of communicative agency. Within this spectrum, human actors are afforded various levels of agency.



Each approach to media will place itself somewhere between the poles. Most approaches tend to seek a middle way or dialectic between them. The purpose of this map is to sketch a range of responses, as well as ethical emphases that emerge along both continuums.

¹³These framing questions represent an expansion of Ian Barbour's threefold typology. See Ian G. Barbour, *Ethics in an Age of Technology: Gifford Lectures, Volume Two* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993). This section has also been modified from an earlier article. See Justin Bailey, "Braving the New World (Wide Web): Mapping Theological Approaches to Media," *God and Nature Magazine*, American Scientific Affiliation, Fall 2015.



In this section, we will look at six basic perspectives on social and entertainment media. Three evaluate media through the lens of content: as a challenge to the Christian worldview, as a window into the worlds of others, or as an incarnation of a unique vision of the world. Two other approaches focus on the way that technology restructures modern life, understanding media as a power that is either deforming or revelatory. Finally, a sixth approach centers on the media as a communicative act, governed by the ethics of virtuous communication.

Worldview (content-based) approaches. The first approach evaluates media based on how it is used. These *worldview* approaches center ethical use on discerning, consuming, and creating quality *content* that guides individuals and society toward God, virtue, and greater flourishing.

Media as worldview challenge: Discerning worldview compatibility. A familiar Christian approach to entertainment media is found in the question, “How much sex, violence, and profanity are in this movie?” Emblematic here is Focus on the Family’s *Plugged In* media project.¹⁴ The website, which aims to “shine a light on the world of popular entertainment,” provides media reviews through “a biblical worldview filter.”

The site warns viewers of sexual content and language, as well as alerting them to possible faith connections. Although reviewers identify positive themes, the reviews tend toward a strong antithesis toward the *world* of entertainment, which provides a foil for the Christian *worldview*. Underneath *Plugged In*’s approach is a commitment to the preservation of family values. The reviews hope to help Christian families make better choices concerning the media they consume.

Nevertheless, discerning worldview compatibility is often more difficult in practice than in theory. A biblical worldview is not something that we can just go out and get, nor does thinking the right thoughts about reality necessarily entail ethical action.¹⁵ Furthermore, family values are not necessarily synonymous with Christian virtue.¹⁶ Indeed, part of the problem in evaluating media content is discerning *which* vices of modern society are most deforming to our discipleship. Selective focus on sex, violence, and profanity may obscure blind spots such as consumerism, vanity, and prejudice.

Media as worldview window: Discerning the worlds of content creators. In contrast to *Plugged In*, entertainment reviews found at *Christianity Today* tend to focus more

¹⁴“Plugged In,” www.pluggedin.com.

¹⁵See the critique of the concept of worldview in James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

¹⁶Cameron Lee, *Beyond Family Values: A Call to Christian Virtue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

on artistic quality—not sex, violence, and profanity but storytelling, acting, and cinematography. Instead of seeking to legitimize the Christian worldview, entertainment consumption is an opportunity to view the worlds of others.

Media critic Alissa Wilkinson is representative of the approach.¹⁷ Wilkinson argues that Christians must get beyond the question “Do I agree with this?” and ask instead “What need is the audience looking to fill when they go to see this movie?”¹⁸ Here the ethical responsibility shifts away from an evaluation of the content itself and toward an appreciation of the imaginative vision contained therein. This appreciation may also include an evangelistic impulse to understand and engage our culture’s stories with the gospel, following Paul’s example at the Areopagus (Acts 17).

Here listening to our culture’s stories is an act of love and hospitality, and the ethical focus is on understanding rather than critique. Cultivation of empathy is valuable, but this approach may assume that consumers of media are firmly grounded in their faith and can engage in world viewing without being captivated by a vision of the world that undermines Christian faith.

Media as worldview incarnation: Content creation as (sub?) culture making. There is a third variety of worldview approach, one that centers on content *creation*. This perspective argues that Christians must not only be discerning consumers of media but also distinctive creators: we criticize by creating! Andy Crouch is representative, arguing that the only way to change culture is to make more and better culture.¹⁹ Working to leverage new technologies for kingdom purposes, these Christians work to provide quality content and content channels. The question, as Crouch concedes, is what constitutes *better*. Christians have certainly excelled at making more, churning out a massive output of alternative content in keeping with traditional Christian worldview and values.

Yet Christian media offerings have had negligible impact the wider public. Those who have broken through eschew the “Christian” label that relegates their work to a marginal subculture. With such a heavy focus on content over artistry, Christian entertainment media often comes across as sterile, sentimental, heavy-handed, and moralistic. It remains to be seen if Christian entertainment can escape the tendency

¹⁷Wilkinson is a professor at King’s College in New York and the film critic for *Vox*. Prior to this she was the chief film critic for *Christianity Today*. For an extended example of Wilkinson’s approach see Robert Jousta and Alissa Wilkinson, *How to Survive the Apocalypse: Zombies, Cylons, Faith, and Politics at the End of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

¹⁸Alissa Wilkinson, “Asking Insufficient Questions.” *Christianity Today*, March 2015, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/march-web-only/asking-insufficient-questions.html.

¹⁹Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

to perpetuate sectarian Christian subcultures. Nevertheless, the strength of the content creation approach is that it recognizes the need to offer a compelling alternative vision of human beings and the human good.

Technology-based approaches. Whereas the first three approaches center on content, a second family of response focuses on form: the power of new media technologies themselves. This perspective argues that although Christians should be taught to discern questionable content, fixation on content distracts from the media technologies themselves. These technologies, as partisan powers, arrest our attention, inscribe our imagination, and change our relationship with the world, for good or evil.

Media as deforming power. The cautionary posture toward technology is usually drawn from the larger world of media criticism, where Marshall McLuhan's mantra "the medium is the message" remains the central insight.²⁰ In other words, the way content is communicated (verbally or virtually, in person or online) is meaning- and value-laden, carrying properties that shape the communication regardless of what the communicator wants to say. There is, of course, a difference between getting the message "I love you" by text, email, postal mail, carrier pigeon, or in person. The method of delivery means something.

Technology critics argue that the sheer omnipresence of social and entertainment media has a more profound effect than any specific messages media carry. Media prophets warn of entertainment technology's propensity to breed distracted multitasking, novelty addiction, vulnerability to hype, superficial relationships, inattention to others, and narcissism.

Brent Laytham is representative: he approaches entertainment under the theological category of "principalities and powers."²¹ As a created power, entertainment is meant to serve and enrich life. As a fallen power, entertainment has diverged from its purpose, becoming "self-referential and self-aggrandizing."²² Media shapes the moral imagination, which is "increasingly constrained by corporate scripts" and "limited by capitalistic interventions."²³ Our daughters no longer simply want to be

²⁰Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Message* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko, 2001), 8. Appropriations of the McLuhan stream can be found in many astute Christian assessments of media, most notably in Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

²¹Laytham is dean of the Ecumenical Institute of Theology at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore, Maryland.

²²Entertainment as a power is more than the sum of its individual and institutional parts, and its capacity for malforming us is "greater than the sum total of the human sinners involved." Brent D. Laytham, *iPod, YouTube, Wii Play: Theological Engagements with Entertainment* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 27.

²³Laytham, *iPod, YouTube, Wii Play*, 13.

princesses; they want to be Disney princesses, facilitated by myriad products conveniently made available for parents to purchase. Laytham wants to draw our attention to the unconscious ways these principalities and powers “shape our sensibilities, cultivate our desires, form our feelings, discipline our bodies, pattern our actions, and determine our relationships.”²⁴

Laytham’s engagement with entertainment media as a rebellious power leads him to advocate for an ethic of resistance. This means resisting its idolatrous trajectories, unmasking it as a colonizing principality, and treating it instead as a triviality.²⁵ Laytham admits this is difficult to practice and prescribes a robust counterformation wherein the rhythms of the Christian story, rather than entertainment technology, determine the shape of our lives.

This school of thought presents an ethical critique that social and entertainment media technologies are embedded with reductive, commodified, and unhealthy visions of personhood, community, and human flourishing.²⁶ The call for ethical action is usually framed in terms awareness and resistance: an appreciation for the gift of technology along with a refusal to idolize it. Ethical prescriptions within this second category of response emphasize counterformation as well as moderation in the time and space we give to media.

Media as revelatory power. Where the former category of response tends to emphasize the deforming power of technology, a second type of technology-based response reverses the emphasis. Although they are willing to note some pitfalls of our hyper-connected world, these thinkers are more interested in the way that technology has created new conditions for God’s work among humanity.

Barry Taylor, an artist and theologian, is representative of this position.²⁷ He calls for Christians to come to terms with the way that technology has changed the game. He writes that the Internet has led to a radical democratization of society: “a less hierarchical and authoritarian exchange of ideas, ethics, information, and just about everything else in contemporary society.”²⁸ Taylor writes that it is not for us to declare

²⁴Laytham, *iPod, YouTube, Wii Play*, 11.

²⁵Laytham, *iPod, YouTube, Wii Play*, 29.

²⁶This technological pessimism can also be found in popular mainstream works. See Franklin Foer, *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech* (New York: Penguin, 2017); Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (New York: Henry Holt, 2018).

²⁷Taylor is the artist-in-residence for the Brehm Center at Fuller Seminary and an adjunct professor for the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. He is also associate rector at All Saints Episcopal Church in Beverly Hills.

²⁸Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology: New-Edge Spirituality in a Digital Democracy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 12.

this new reality good or bad; rather we must simply deal with the facts on the ground. Rather than reacting to the deleterious effects of entertainment, we should embrace the “democratization of spirit” that tech and entertainment culture has produced.²⁹ He calls this new world spirituality “techno-spirituality,” where the static, rigid, dogma of traditional religion is being replaced by a more fluid and vibrant spirituality that abounds with new possibilities.³⁰

Taylor is concerned that the Christian church is lagging behind the advances of contemporary culture, unwilling to meet people in the hyperconnected world where they are. Taylor believes that if Christians would venture out into the new world of spirituality, they would meet not just people but God at work in surprising ways.

While the former thinkers sound an alarm over the changes, Taylor calls us to embrace them and to step in to the new reality where God, through his Spirit, continues to be present and active. In any case, this second family of response focuses on media rather than message.

Communication-based approaches. We now turn our focus from content and technology to evaluate social and entertainment media as acts of mass communication. Those who take this approach argue that media should be governed and guided by God’s vision for human communication and community.

Quentin Schultze is representative. He argues that as a species of communication, social and entertainment media are “are really extensions of our God-given ability to cocreate culture. . . . [They are] potential resources to help us serve our neighbor by telling the truth and building communities of shalom.”³¹ Media technologies may alternatively promote flourishing or perpetuate conflict, and each new media technology, Schultze writes, is “both a source of social and spiritual problems and also a reservoir of opportunity.”³²

In emphasizing the potential of media, Schultze understands it terms of its propagation by culture-making social institutions, “communities with their own values, practices, and beliefs.”³³ This means that we can evaluate social and entertainment media in terms of: (1) the kinds of communities they engender, (2) how they serve our cultural mythologies (“public expressions of what most people truly

²⁹Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 17.

³⁰Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 15.

³¹Schultze is professor of communication arts and sciences at Calvin College. Quentin J. Schultze, *Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 105. See also Quentin J. Schultze and Jean Elshtain, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

³²Schultze, *Communicating for Life*, 104.

³³Schultze, *Communicating for Life*, 101.

believe and value”),³⁴ and (3) how accurately they represent truth and our shared moral values.

First, we can evaluate media through the lens of community. Entertainment media are designed to engage and amuse, but they also can build community through connecting people who share common enjoyment. It is interesting to note, however, that while the television set redesigned the American living room around a shared viewing experience, the smaller screens of smartphones privilege more individuated media consumption. Similarly, social media arguably exist for little else than connecting people to community. Yet in the center of online communities are not only common interests but also brands. Consumption, not just connection, drives both social and entertainment media enterprises. Surely it can be a boon to connect with others who enjoy the same products and entertainment. The problem is that if this becomes the primary basis for common life, it is a thin substitute for embodied, local communities where thick flourishing can actually occur. In “consumption communities,” rather than drawing our sense of identity and belonging from the stories of our faith community, we now draw our identity and belonging from stories told by the brands that we consume.³⁵

Second, we can evaluate media by the role that they play in propagating and legitimizing cultural mythologies. Schultze notes that media often fulfills this priestly role by means of scapegoats, demonizing certain individuals and groups and reflecting cultural judgments on the nature of virtue and vice. Media may also function in a prophetic role, challenging existing beliefs, but this prophetic edge is not necessarily virtuous. Powerful institutions control entertainment media, and these institutions stay in power by playing to the broadest possible audience. Entertainment power brokers make carefully calculated moves, paying careful attention to the pulse of a culture. By contrast, social media represents a grassroots approach in which under-represented stories can “go viral” and become a cultural phenomenon. In this sense, the kinds of stories that go viral can tell us a lot both about our cultural mythologies as well as attempts to subvert them.

Third, we can evaluate media by how authentically they represent persons and groups within our larger society. The practice of “doxxing” mentioned above is rare compared to the more everyday practice of filming people in their worst moments. An embarrassing moment, indiscretion, or angry tirade can be captured on a

³⁴Schultze, *Communicating for Life*, 108.

³⁵Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Vintage, 1974), 89-90. Cited in Schultze, *Communicating for Life*, 98.

smartphone and instantly uploaded where its shame can live in infamy. Those who delight in this power argue that it holds people, especially public figures, accountable. But we should be cautious: although a short video clip may capture a person in a bad moment, it hardly gives us a comprehensive picture of their character. Schultze argues that virtuous communication requires deep respect for the personal and public reputation of others and a refusal to violate the privacy of a person or organization unless there are “compelling reasons grounded in love.”³⁶

Even more contested is the question of whether social and entertainment media give a fair and balanced representation of the truth. While mass media has always held out the promise of connection, not all parties are connected equally. Notwithstanding furious debates over “fake news” and “net neutrality,” media continue to favor those with power, money, and social standing. Seeking fair representation in social and entertainment media means asking *whose* stories are consistently being told, *which* perspectives are consistently being shared, and *why* other voices are being consistently overlooked and excluded.³⁷

A communication-based approach pays attention to the intentional acts of communication in social and entertainment media. Since the goal of virtuous communication is the cultivation of a moral community, ethical criteria tend to focus on how social and entertainment media contribute to or undermine greater human flourishing (*shalom*).³⁸

Summary. As we have seen, approaches to social and entertainment media tend to locate their ethical engagement in terms of one of three focal points: the *content* communicated, the *media* that enables the communication, or the *act* of communication the media represents.

To return to the *Black Mirror* scenario that opened the chapter, we might judge social and entertainment media deficient because it contains salacious content (depicting a sex act in prime time), because it addicts us to distraction (dominating all of our attention through myriad content channels), or because it misrepresents a particular group (designating a particular group as likely terrorists). Each of these is a legitimate ground for ethical concern and deliberation, and within each category there is a range of responses bearing a family resemblance. Some might respond by censoring

³⁶Schultze, *Communicating for Life*, 126.

³⁷Media theorists have long connected the representation of minority groups in fictional worlds as either legitimizing or annihilating a group's social existence. George Gerbner and Larry Gross, “Living with Television: The Violence Profile,” *Journal of Communication* 26, no. 2 (1976): 173–99.

³⁸Another robust articulation of this perspective, grounded in the field of media studies, is found in Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

questionable content or producing more wholesome fare. Others might respond by encouraging formative online and offline practices. Still others might investigate the structural conditions, and the way that more voices can be represented in media rather than those that serve the interests of the powerful.

AUTHOR'S OWN RESPONSE

How do we navigate between these positions? We should begin by acknowledging that optimism and alarmism over new media is nothing new. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates recounts the legend of King Thamus of Egypt and the god Theuth, inventor of writing. When Theuth displays writing to King Thamus, declaring that it will "improve both wisdom and memory," Thamus argues that the opposite will be the case.³⁹ Neil Postman writes that both are "one-eyed prophets" who only see half the picture, either the blessing or burden of technology.⁴⁰

With every new technological innovation—the telephone, the television, the Internet—this scenario plays out afresh. One-eyed technological determinists speak of how the new medium will "change everything" for good or for ill; one-eyed technological instrumentalists maintain that our innovations are simply tools to be used for good or for ill. The challenge for Christians is to appropriate media in a way that avoids the naiveté of instrumentalism and the inevitability of determinism.

Media is neither neutral nor necessary in conditioning of societal change. Take the opening example of Ashley Madison. Websites like Ashley Madison feed on and fuel the way that popular culture imagines love, sexuality, and fidelity. New technologies provide new avenues for hiding and cheating even as they provide new ways for hidden things to be exposed and for cheaters to be caught. Even as new technologies and media practices privilege deformative visions of the good life, our ability to realize these new possibilities remains bounded by the fact that we remain embodied persons who are embedded in local communities where our common life is continually negotiated.

It is for this reason that I remain cautiously hopeful as I consider the challenges presented by entertainment and social media (this places me in the bottom right quadrant of my typology). My confidence is rooted in a particular creation structure: our bodies. It is possible, after all, for technology to undermine aspects of embodied life without fundamentally effacing it. It is sometimes necessary to unplug and rediscover offline practices, but it is also important to say that online life is already grounded

³⁹Plato, *Phaedrus and the Seventh and Eighth Letters* (New York: Penguin, 1973), 96-97.

⁴⁰Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 5.

and governed by our offline practices. We are embodied beings, and bodily interaction continues to give shape to our interaction online. Media culture forms us, but we in turn make something of the culture that made us through “living, on-the-ground, variable practices.”⁴¹ In other words, the fact of digital distraction rarely exempts us from regular physical interaction with the people that we see at work, church, school, the gym, or the grocery store. Our responses to each of these embodied domains form us deeply as well, becoming part of a larger narrative in which we pursue a meaningful and integrated life.⁴²

Albert Wolters highlights an important distinction between structure and direction to help us with our cultural task. “Structure” refers to “the order of creation . . . the constant creational constitution of any thing,” whereas “direction” is the “distortion or perversion of creation through the fall.”⁴³ When we apply this to social and entertainment media, we can affirm the structural good of technology and entertainment as part of the human project of unfolding creation, but we must evaluate and critique the direction in which specific technologies take us.⁴⁴ So how might we do this faithfully and fruitfully?

Reflecting on media habits. When evaluating media culture, it is easy to say, “Kids these days!” and miss the invitation to self-examination and (if necessary) repentance. We should start by reflecting on media pathologies in our own lives. Whether it is an inability to put down the smartphone or the increased propensity to binge-watch seasons of content on Netflix, plenty of us suffer from media addiction. Furthermore, recognizing that we all have different sensitivities and sensibilities, we should also be aware of what kind of media content dulls us, incites us, energizes us, and positively provokes us.

As Sherry Turkle puts it, “We have to love our technology enough to describe it accurately. And we have to love ourselves enough to confront technology’s true effects on us.”⁴⁵ I would add that we have to love God enough to discern technology’s effects

⁴¹Sherry B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 129.

⁴²See my argument that the success of social media technologies is always already funded by particular “norms of embodiment” such as corporeality, locality, temporality, and visibility. Our bodies set the parameters for how we engage the world, even in online contexts. Justin Bailey, “The Body in Cyberspace: Lanier, Merleau-Ponty, and the Norms of Embodiment,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 45, no. 3 (2016): 211–28.

⁴³Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 49.

⁴⁴For an astute application of this, see Derek C. Schuurman, *Shaping a Digital World: Faith, Culture and Computer Technology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 55–56.

⁴⁵Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 243.

on our discipleship and formation, and that we have to love our neighbor enough to discern technology's effects on our practice of love, time, and attention.

At the same time, we can give our attention *to* media and not just in spite of it. Social and entertainment media offer windows into the world that we have been called to love. We can seek to understand the grammar of life made visible there before seeking to critique objectionable content. At some level, this can only be done with a healthy sense of hope that God is still actively engaged in the world and that the Spirit continues to do God's creative work in surprising ways.

Entertainment media and the church. Churches should also reflect on their institutional relationship with social and entertainment media. Many church services have embraced the production values of entertainment culture, emphasizing media excellence and polished presentation. The execution, of course, can come across as staged and sentimental. What is more important, however, than making value judgments about production value (or about the fact that production *is* a value) is intentional reflection on how well these implicit values fit with the explicit values of the church.

Churches also need to consider the ways that the larger culture has been shaped by entertainment media and what that means for the church as a part of the culture (since every church is culturally embedded), as an agent of counterculture (since we are citizens of an upside-down kingdom), and as a missionary agent (since we are working for the advance of the gospel and for the common good).

This requires a constant dialectic between discerning adoption and discerning resistance. Restraint and reflection are critical: we can become obsessed with innovation and fail to see the relevance of anything or anyone moving at a slower pace. Churches must find creative ways to remain conversant with culture while celebrating history, embodied presence, the limitations of locality, and the wisdom of experience.

Social media and the church. Since the Internet first began connecting computers, it has been a place for connecting people. Zadie Smith's profile of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg reports that Zuckerberg uses the word "connection" the same way that a Christian uses the word "Jesus," as if it were sacred in itself.⁴⁶

Although Smith argues that these connections tend to be weak and superficial, it is difficult to argue that the impulse to connect is ill-conceived. Humans deeply desire connection with others. Christians must begin by admitting that many seek online community because they have not found it in churches.

⁴⁶Zadie Smith, "Generation Why?" *New York Review of Books* 57, no. 18 (2010).

We would do well to discern what longings lie beneath new media technologies. Social media in particular trades on visibility: “Here I am. See me. Take me seriously.” Our appropriation of Facebook, for example, should include not just a wariness of its tendency to waste our time but also a willingness to take seriously the faces of those who are visible there.

And yet, virtual community can never really replace embodied fellowship. Some of our most important ecclesial practices (like the sacraments) require physical, flesh-and-blood presence. Indeed, research into online religious practice has found that despite fears of disembodied spirituality, most online “congregants” were also significantly involved in offline communities. Online community served as a “supplement, not substitute” for offline church involvement.⁴⁷ The success of social media (in all its iterations) is a call to build robust local communities, where social media serves as a salutary supplement rather than superficial substitute to embodied common life.

Indeed, superficiality thrives in the absence of mutual trust that usually comes from commitment to local, visible, embodied communities. Our hypermodern condition is one of oversaturation and overstimulation. Media makes more information available to us than ever before: it is quite literally fed to us through our myriad “feeds.” The glut of information facilitates the opportunity to feed on information and feel emotion without having to take meaningful, committed action.

C. S. Lewis wrote that the more humans grow accustomed to feeling without action, the harder it becomes to act, and finally the harder it becomes to feel.⁴⁸ Our endless options so often catalyze our emotion but paralyze our action. When this happens, we grow numb.

The only antidote for this is a community of committed action, where flesh-and-blood connection can take place between hurting bodies. Media culture threatens to drown us in the twenty-four-hour news cycle. Yet thoughtful and engaged presence among the least of these can give us all a healthy glimpse of what is real. There is simply no substitute for this.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where on the “conceptual map” would your own understanding and use of media fit?

⁴⁷See Heidi A. Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship Between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012): 69.

⁴⁸C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 67.

2. How many hours do you spend each day using social and entertainment media? How does it fit within, compete with, or otherwise affect the rhythms of your life (e.g., family, work, studies, service, worship)? How can you develop and maintain life-giving rhythms of media use?
3. How does time spent online integrate with our offline lives? How might embodied presence in local communities of trust create opportunities for more holistic formation and discipleship across online and offline contexts?
4. In a culture of instantaneous outrage, concerns over doxxing, cyberbullying, and invasion of privacy abound. How do we create structures that safeguard the privacy and reputation of others? How do we distinguish between exposing injustice and public shaming?
5. What role do social and entertainment media play in shaping our moral and social imagination? How does unequal representation in media influence our perception of reality? What might be done to create inclusive platforms for more diverse voices?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books

- Alter, Adam. *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*. New York: Penguin, 2018.
- Callaway, Kutter, with Dean Batali. *Watching TV Religiously: Television and Theology in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016.
- Campbell, Heidi A., and Stephen Garner. *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016.
- Detweiler, Craig. *iGods: How Technology Shapes Our Spiritual and Social Lives*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013.
- Gay, Craig. *Modern Technology and the Human Future: A Christian Appraisal*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018.
- Lanier, Jaron. *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*. New York: Henry Holt, 2018.
- Noble, Safiya Umoja. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: New York University Press, 2018.
- Schultze, Quentin J. *Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000.
- Schuurman, Derek C. *Shaping a Digital World: Faith, Culture and Computer Technology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013.
- Shatzer, Jacob. *Transhumanism and the Image of God: Today's Technology and the Future of Christian Discipleship*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019.
- Tufekci, Zeynep. *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.

Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2012.

Articles, statements, and reports

Campbell, Heidi. "Understanding the Relationship Between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012): 69.

Gentzkow, Matthew, and Jesse M. Shapiro. "Ideological Segregation Online and Offline." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126, no. 4 (2011): 1799-1840.

Gerbner, George, and Larry Gross. "Living with Television: The Violence Profile." *Journal of Communication* 26, no. 2 (1976): 173-99.

The Nielsen Company. "The Nielsen Total Audience Report." www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights.html.

Smith, Zadie. "Generation Why?" *New York Review of Books* 57, no. 18 (2010).

Media and documentaries

Black Mirror. Created by Charlie Booker. Netflix, 2011.

Generation Like. Written and produced by Frank Koughan and Douglas Rushkoff. Frontline, 2014.

Her. Directed by Spike Jonze. Warner Brothers, 2013.

Social Animals. Directed by Jonathan Ignatius Green. Conscious Minds Productions, 2018.

The Social Network. Directed by David Fincher. Columbia Pictures, 2010.

Terms and Conditions May Apply. Directed by Cullen Hoback. Variance Films, 2013.

We Are Legion: The Story of Hacktivists. Directed by Brian Knappenberger. FilmBuff, 2012.

We Live in Public. Directed by Ondi Timoner. Independent Release, 2009.