

Young adults, communication technologies, and the church

David Balzer

Three recent interactions I had with youth and young adults have gripped me and won't let me go. Three questions that came out of these moments frame my response to the topic of young adults, communication technologies, and the church: Can we speak positively about technology? Can the church be a refuge? And can adults take responsibility for the world we've made?

It hardly needs to be said that our experience of communication technologies and the formation of young adults provokes strong emotions, desires, and questions. My hope is to probe these questions for the sake of a healthy conversation.



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Can we speak positively about technology?

At the end of a week during which I served as guest speaker at a local Christian high school, we designed the closing Friday session as a panel discussion with six students and two staff members. I had the privilege of facilitating this live-talk-radio-style experience, with a couple jazz musicians serving as the house band.

The opening comment came from a grade 10 student who looked out at 430 of his peers and said, "When was the last time we heard anyone speak to us about technology in a positive way?" I was heartened that he felt I had offered something in a positive vein, but his comment raises a deeper question. How is it that critiques are abundant but tangible life-giving visions are few and far between in our naming of technology?

Granted, we have cause for concern. According to Nicholas Carr, who writes on technology and culture, the Internet, with its interactive, immersive, and repetitive stimuli, constitutes an unprecedented mind-altering medium that is creating a society of distractedness, a society where

the capacity for crucial deep thinking and creativity are quickly waning.¹ He argues that this reality has significant implications for public discourse and the development of civil society.

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count. Here we encounter a remarkable scene in the creation narrative. “So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Gen. 2:19, NRSV). Perhaps this was one of God’s most audacious acts: to imbue God’s creation with a capacity for symbolic action on such a fundamental level that humans ever since are invited to co-create culture with God. We co-create through language, hardware, and software. As one of many continuing expressions of this co-creative capacity, we have the remarkable privilege of naming our children.

As Quentin Schultze (professor emeritus of communication at Calvin College) writes, “I believe that God created us to be stewards of symbolic reality.² Like symbolic gardeners, we have to figure out which symbols to plant, where to plant them in space and time, and how to nurture them so that they will bear the fruit of shalom.”³

Andy Crouch, who writes about culture, creativity, and Christian faith, posits that the biblical calling initiated in Genesis is to literally make something of the world. “If we seek to change culture, we will have to create something new, something that will persuade our neighbors to set

1 Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton & Co., 2011), 116.

2 Quentin Schultze, *Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 23.

3 Schultze, *Communicating for Life*, 61.

aside some existing set of cultural goods for our new proposal.”⁴ God’s call to us to participate in the creation of reality is a high calling. Understanding technology as an expression of this creative capacity anchors our deliberations in a positive biblical framework that is life-giving and worthy of our discerning stewardship.

One example of the stories we may want to tell is about the reCAPTCHA project of Luis von Ahn at Carnegie Mellon University.⁵ Ahn and his team asked the marvelous question: What kind of good could we create if we had access to just a tiny slice of the untapped mental capacity of millions of people? This untapped capacity is what New York University writer in residence Clay Shirky calls the “cognitive surplus” available to us for the first time in world history as a result of living in the digital age.⁶ Von Ahn has found a way to help digitize millions of books each year by getting users to decipher and type two words during the online authentication process often linked to sites such as Ticketmaster. Here, for a couple seconds, the genius of the human brain is harnessed to read a word that a computer can’t, and the correct spelling is validated. This insight adds another word to the digitized database. I’m inspired by von Ahn’s creativity. I believe young adults are ready to be invited into this kind of Genesis 2 vision.

Can the church be a refuge?

My second question emerged out of a conversation with a recent alumnus of Canadian Mennonite University. As we were making our way over to the picture windows in the Marpeck Commons with coffee cups in hand, I mentioned this article and asked about the church and technology. The response I got—“I think I’d like the church to be a refuge”—has stuck with me.

The notion of refuge reminded me of a growing theme in a media audit assignment I give my students every year. An open-ended invitation to reflect on twenty-four hours of their media use is generating more and more responses like this one: “The amount of time I spend with media is

4 Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 67.

5 Luis von Ahn, “Massive-Scale Online Collaboration,” video filmed at TEDxCMU, April 11, 2011, 16:33, https://www.ted.com/talks/luis_von_ahn_massive_scale_online_collaboration.

6 Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (New York: Penguin, 2010).

concerning. I realized that almost every hour of my day had some interaction with the Internet and media. But the thing that scares me is that of most of my peers and friends, I am one who uses the Internet the least. And that makes me wonder, What causes us to become addicted to media, and how does that affect our relationships?”⁷ Perhaps refuge is what is needed. And if the church is going to be exactly that in a technologized culture, we’ll need to do at least three things: shift our model of communication from transmission to ritual, nurture an incarnational bias, and enact embodied worship practices.

Shifting from a transmission to a ritual model of communication.

Communication theorist James Carey held that our assumptions about the nature of communication have fundamental implications for the shape of our communicating. In his seminal essay, “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” he writes, “In one mode communication models tell us what the process is; in their second mode they produce the behavior they have described.”⁸ He elaborates two views of communication, the transmission view and the ritual view. “If the archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control, the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality.”⁹ His interest is to mount a critique of the transmission view, which has dominated academic and cultural understandings of what it means to communicate. Our predisposition toward conquering geographic space with information rather than investing in social cohesion through time has significant consequences.

Notice how Carey differentiates between a horizontal communication that conquers geographic space with information and a vertical communication that invests in social cohesion through generational time.¹⁰

7 This response came from a September 2016 media audit assignment in which students tracked their use of media by type and quantity in fifteen-minute increments for twenty-four hours, then wrote a reflection paper.


8 James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 24.

9 Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 15.

10 James Carey is drawing significantly on the work of Canadian thinker Harold Innis. Innis was a contemporary of Marshall McLuhan and a thought partner in what came to be known as the Toronto School of Communication. In *The Bias of Communication* (1951), Innis argues that certain mediums of communication are biased toward spanning geographical space, while others are better at moving meanings through generational time. Thinking in terms of space-biased and time-biased mediums is helpful in making

We need to attend to how our media are biased toward one or the other of these dimensions. Taking a ritual view of communication as a priority creates a more dialogical and relational approach to making meaning and pushes back against more monologic, selfish, and abusive communication tendencies.

I raise the matter of transmission versus ritual communication here because I perceive a prevalent, largely uncritical adoption of presentational and other technologies in worship spaces. In that context we seem to be enamored of spanning space, but I'm not convinced that these technologies enhance relational connectedness. Carey and John Quirk argue



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compellingly that many in our society are caught up in the mythology of the electronic sublime, the “impression that electrical technology is the great benefactor of [hu]mankind. . . . They hail electrical techniques as the motive force of desired social change, the key to the re-creation of a humane community. . . . Their shared belief is that electricity will overcome historical forces and political obstacles that prevented previous utopias.”¹¹

More often than not, when a technology upgrade or videocast is heralded in the church, I hear this kind of salvific rhetoric being offered as a rationale, and I am concerned that we are shifting from

faith *and* technology to faith *in* technology. Quentin Schultze masterfully assesses this dynamic in his analysis of Christianity and the mass media in North America.¹² A ritual view of communication pushes back against

sense of emerging technologies and their inherent strengths and weaknesses. Innis was particularly interested in assessing sweeps of world history related to empire and how particular space- or time-biased mediums made certain political and social realities possible.

11 James W. Carey, with John J. Quirk, “The Mythos of the Electronic Revolution,” in Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 88.

12 Quentin J. Schultze, *Christianity and the Mass Media in America: Toward a Democratic Accommodation* (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 2003).

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Nurturing an incarnational bias. A concrete means of moving toward a ritual view of communication and refuge is to nurture what I call an incarnational bias in our worshiping communities. In a recorded conversation about catechism with Pierre Babin, a member of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and an expert in the field of religious communication, Marshall McLuhan says,

To teach catechism as a given or as content is to limit oneself to only half of Christianity. The formal cause—the ground that is perceived unconsciously—is not words, but that part of the faith which operates in our lives. The two should be united.

In Jesus Christ, there is no distance or separation between the medium and the message: it is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same.¹³

The fact that God chose to be revealed through Jesus in flesh and blood is significant to me from a communications perspective. Our worshiping communities would do well to learn from a person who “moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, *The Message*). We can so easily be consumed by an interest in transmitting data—words—rather than pursuing embodied manifestations of God’s presence.

Enacting embodied worship practices. Richard Gaillardetz, a specialist in Catholic ecclesiology, suggests that revitalizing our understanding and practice of the sacraments as multisensory immersive experiences is a unique opportunity for the Christian church.¹⁴ And in using the word *immersive*, I’m not surreptitiously making a case for full-immersion baptism, although it is exactly the kind of embodied enactment Gaillardetz is valuing! Spiritual practices that engage movement, sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell are a beautiful means of creating refuge. These practices are countercultural in our technologized age, which so often truncates our sensory experience in unhealthy ways.

13 Marshall McLuhan, “Religion and Youth: Second Conversation with Pierre Babin,” in *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, edited by Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szklarek, and translated by Wayne Constantineau (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 103.

14 Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture* (New York: Crossroad, 2000).

This emphasis on embodied practices is affirmed by social psychologist Sherry Turkle, who contends that face-to-face interaction needs to

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be reclaimed, even though it is demanding.¹⁵ “From the early days, I saw that computers offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship and then, as the programs got really good, the illusion of friendship without demands of intimacy. Because, face-to-face, people ask for things that computers never do. With people, things go best if you pay close attention and know how to put yourself in someone else’s shoes. Real people demand responses to what they are feeling. And not just any response.”¹⁶

We often call text messaging “instant messaging.” This is a misnomer. Consider how quickly you feel awkward in a face-to-face conversation when

you’re momentarily stuck for a response. Compare that reaction to receiving a text message and then responding. A student of mine in a reflection paper pointed to exactly this ability to pause between reception and response as the enormous difference between technologized and face-to-face communication. Face-to-face is instant; texting is not. This reality makes embodied relationships complex and increasingly unnerving, if not terrifying, for people who use texting as a primary mode of interaction. Turkle encourages us to embrace the awkward moments for the sake of regaining our capacity to be empathetic. The wonder of communion, baptism, and other embodied and immersive spiritual practices is that they achieve exactly what Turkle is commending.

Can adults take responsibility for the world we’ve made?

A recent informal survey of high school students generated my third question. I asked these teens, “If you could help your parents understand one

15 Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

16 Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 7.

thing about social media, what would it be?” Among several amusing entries, such as “The difference between Instachat and Snapgram,” this line caught my attention: “If they want us to put away devices, they need to do so too (hypocrisy).”¹⁷ I am a parent of three young adults, and this answer caught me up short. It raises the question: Can adults take responsibility for the world we’ve made? As I reflected on this student’s response, it struck me that all the communication technology infrastructure and access that exists today was invented, adopted, and promoted by adults,

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not teens and twenty-somethings. When I ask congregations who made personal video recorders, smart phones, and Internet access possible in their homes and churches, no one has said, “It’s the children.” So my plea is simply that we tread cautiously and graciously into conversation about this technology with young adults. To be blunt, if we are somewhat disconcerted by their usage patterns, we need to revisit our responsibility in facilitating the adoption of a very powerful and tantalizing medium.

New media scholar Danah Boyd argues that adults have often tended to falsely pathologize youth’s technology practices. She contends that youth are trying to meet real and appropriate social needs through their use of technology.¹⁸ In terms of content, their interactions are not significantly different from what earlier generations did in socializing at local hangouts, the difference being that now they meet online. The move toward adulthood includes learning about self-presentation and how to manage social relationships, and developing an understanding of the world.¹⁹ She writes, “Adults must recognize what teens are trying to achieve and work

17 This survey was conducted in Student Life Groups at Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute in Winnipeg, Manitoba, while I was the guest speaker for the school’s Spiritual Emphasis Week, September 25–29, 2017.

18 Danah Boyd, *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2014), 98.

19 Boyd, *It’s Complicated*, 95.

with them to find balance and to help them think about what they are encountering.”²⁰ What youth need are companions rather than combatants.

Concluding thoughts

We are all navigating a world in the making. We are one of very few generations in world history who have been asked to straddle a shift from one dominant medium of communication to another. We have the privilege of imagining and enacting a network society that fundamentally reshapes how we interact on a local and global scale.²¹ The church has an immense opportunity to nurture and inspire a life-giving vision in this process. Our vision for engaging this opportunity is enlivened when we reclaim our God-given creative calling, when we boldly pursue incarnational practices of refuge, and when we humbly and graciously enter into conversation with our children and young adults.

About the author

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²⁰ Boyd, *It's Complicated*, 99.

²¹ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, vol. 1 (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011).