The Medium and the Mission

"Technological change has become the most visible and authoritative indication of our historical location."[1] Marshall McLuhan is widely known as the father of media studies. He coined the phrase "the medium is the message" back in 1965. While some today believe that the medium or method of communication is neutral and that only the content of the message is vital, those like Marshall McLuhan, who have spent a lifetime studying the effects of media (technology) would say otherwise.[2]

McLuhan states, "societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which people communicate than by the content of communication."[3] He makes the case that we are often blind to the way that technology shapes us, and that "any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments." A number of Christians who have thoughtfully engaged in the study of technology would agree. In a brilliant study on how technology shapes us, Paul C. Hiedebrecht writes, "Technological artifacts, systems and ways of thinking are not morally neutral because they are heavily laden with ideals that have deep moral implications. In short, technologies always come equipped with an inherent moral trajectory."[4] In other words, we create and choose the tools we use, then the tools we use in turn shape us.

Defining Media (technology)

McLuhan defines media or technology as an extension of humanity; the phone is an extension of the ear and mouth, the car is an extension of the foot, the shovel is an extension of the hand and the book is an extension of the eye.

How Technology Shapes Us

For a lot of history, human beings lived in an oral culture. With the invention of the printing press we became oriented around print. With the invention of the radio and TV, we became a broadcast society, and since 2010 we have official entered the digital age, virtual reality.

After meeting a Bishop from Kenya, I (JR) was dragged by God into development work in Kenya. I started a foundation where we give micro-grants to help start new businesses in the Turkana region of Kenya, an extremely remote area that most Kenyans don't even visit. When we connect with people who are desert nomads, they live in a complete oral society. Some of the strengths are that they have the amazing ability to remember. They remember all kinds of stories, the pastors have the scripture living deeply in the hearts, and most of the time that people learn it is within the context of community, thus they have much to teach us about what it means to live communally.

1   Paul C. Heidebrecht, *Beyond the Cutting Edge? Yoder, Technology and the Practices of the Church*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), p. xi
2   Some key voices include Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids: Eermans Publishing, 1990); Marva Dawn's *Unfettered Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 2003); Albert Borgmann's *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 1984) and *Power Failure* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press 2003); and Shane Hipps's *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), and *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) and all of Marshal McLuhans books.
3   Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), p7.
4   Paul Heidebrecht, *Beyond the Cutting Edge?* Pg. 10

With the invention of the printing press, we essentially became a print oriented society. Print media leads people to become more detached, logical and individualistic. While the digital media causes people to become more involved and to participate. Think about how the digital age has re-shaped television. It is much more participatory now.

The Power of the Medium

Are you starting to understand the hidden power of how the medium shapes us? McLuhan writes, "media works us over completely. They are so pervasive in their person, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message.[5]

Technology is Not Neutral

Technology not only has the power to rewire our brains, as we have discovered[6], "particular technologies embody particular ideals, and as a result, they are not morally neutral but have moral implications. They shape our moral visions and our characters."[7] Too often we use technology without asking *how* the technology shapes us, how the use of a particular technologies elevate a particular way of living. We need to have ways to examine how technology encourage and embody a particular way of being. One of the ways to do this is through the "laws of media" developed by Marshall McLuhan and his son.[8]

The Laws of Media

Eric, like his father, believed that "serious artists are the antennae of the race." So the four laws of media can act as an "antennae" for us to understand the hidden power of the Internet. The four laws of media are in the form of questions, for when we ask the right questions; we are better able to discern the proper vocation of any medium. These are questions we can ask anywhere about any human artifact, any technology.

1. What does the medium *extend*?
Every medium is an extension of humanity. We have already talked about this. The phone is an extension of the mouth and ear; the car is an extension of the foot…

2. What does the medium *diminish or make obsolete*?
When we progress in one area, we tend to regress in another. This doesn't mean that the former medium completely disappears. For example, the stove replaced the open fire, but we still cook over open fires when we grill or camp. The use of open fires has simply diminished. The open fire went from being the primary mode of cooking to being a secondary method, used more for pleasure than necessity.

5   Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects (New York: Bantum Books, 1967), 26–41.
6   See Shane Hipps's The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005)
7   Paul H. Pg. 112
8   Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

3. What does the medium *retrieve*?

Not only does each medium both extend and amputate things, it also retrieves something from the past. Shane Hipps describes this well. He says, "Every new medium retrieves some ancient experience or medium from the past. In other words, there is no such thing as a completely new technology. When we discover which medium is retrieved, we can study its effects in hindsight in an effort to anticipate the future of the new medium. For example, the medium of email retrieves the telegraph. If we want to understand the future effects of e-mail, we would be wise to study the cultural effects of the telegraph in the 1800's."[9]

4. What does the medium *revert to* or become *when pressed to an extreme*?

When a car is pressed to the extreme, it creates pollution, traffic, and car accidents. The pleasure of drinking wine pressed to the extreme can become depression and hangovers.

This tetrad of questions was McLuhan's way to gauge the health, status, heartbeat and prognosis of our media. So let's take a minute to apply McLuhan's four questions to one of the most popular forms of social media, facebook.

ENHANCES	REVERSES INTO
Global Village Social Connecting Networking Variety of Ways to Connect Speed of Connection Access to knowledge Ability to Meet More People	Identity Fraud Disembodied Community Disincarnate People Blurring of Business and Pleasure Blurring of Work and Art Blurring of Public and Private Blurring of Childhood and Adulthood
RETRIEVES	**AMPUTATES or DIMINISHES**
Village-like Encounters Participation Decentralization Independent Artist Literacy Connection with old Friends	The Walls of the House Space and Time Judgement (What is real?) Mass Culture (No Gatekeepers) Nation-STate Allegiance Local Neighborhood

The tetrad applied to Facebook

9   Hipps, *Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, 41.

While this analysis is far from complete, it's a tool that helps us to analyze how the technology we use. The four laws of media enable us to pay attention to the life-shaping forces of the medium itself. As Neil Postman says, "No medium is excessively dangerous if its users understand what its dangers are. It is not important that those who ask the questions arrive at my answers… This is an instance in which asking of the questions is sufficient. To ask is to break the spell."[10]

All of this to say, we must remember that not only is our message and mission important, but *the medium* by which we accomplish our mission is just as vital. If we want to conscientiously engage technology, we need to think through each part of our mission and consider the best medium in which to accomplish the different aspects of our calling. For the ends never justify the means, the means actually bring about a particular end. If we hope to witness to the reality of God and his kingdom with integrity, the medium needs to correlate with the mission.

Incarnational Holograms
A significant trend in the modern evangelical church is the multi-site *video* venue, where people come to a weekly gathering to watch the teaching from a screen. In fact, some churches are using holographic projection technology, the technology behind the surprise appearance of Tupac Shakur at Coachelle 2012 and Madonna's performance at the Grammy Awards in 2006.[11]

I (JR) want to write a book entitled *Incarnational Holograms*, in hopes that we might give some deeper thought to the medium and the mission. It interesting that Yoichi Ochiai and his fellow researches in Japan have recently created holograms that you can actually touch.[12] So maybe in the future we will just have our three-dimensional holograms go preach, live in community and serve in the neighborhood. I'm mean, as long as it works, right?

The "hologram" preacher or video venues not only embodies and encourages a celebrity culture in the church, but it significantly minimizes the role of the Holy Spirit in the physical body of Christ, the priesthood of all believers. It elevates "words" above incarnation (the living word), proclamation above demonstration. It flows against a movement mentality, because movement is about flesh and blood imitation in the concrete world. If incarnation is vital aspect of mission how does our use of technology erode incarnational mission?

It is interesting that in the incarnation, Jesus left a realm in which time and space had no consequence in order to live in a particular time, in a particular place, with a particular people. How should this speak to the people of God living in the digital age?

While virtual reality retrieves and enhances a number of good things, we need to be aware of what it diminishes and reverts into, when pushed to the extreme. As we seek to live faithfully to God in the digital age, we need to take the "laws of media" and examine the mediums we use in light of movemental thinking. We need to consider the reality of virtues as we seek consciously engage the virtual world. "For what matters is not simply the outcome, but the process that leads to the

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10 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1973), 161.
11   This technology is used by NorthPoint church and others. It isn't exactly a hologram, it is more a life size projected illusion. The explanation on NorthPonits site says, "Using high definition (HD) and standard definition (SD) video systems, we are able to capture and present separate images on multiple screens that are perceptually identical to the original environment.
12 See http://www.iflscience.com/technology/scientists-create-holograms-you-can-touch

outcome... The church does not simply proclaim God's message to the world, it is God's message to the world. It is the means of God's transformation of the world, more than it is an end."[13]

Formation Learning

Meta-Learning
When you hear the phrase "the medium is the message", what do you think it means?

Reflective Learning
- If the medium is the message, how should this inform the way we approach our strategy in regard to discipleship, community formation, mission and movement?
- How can we develop a rule and rhythm that helps us more conscientiously engage technology today, and elevate the virtues we value?
- How can I on-going evaluate the various tools I use in ministry, including the ones I am learning in this book?

Experiential-Learning
Take the time to work through the four questions in "laws of media" like we did with Facebook, and answer the questions in regard to video venues/holograms as it relates to weekly gatherings and movement.

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13 Paul Heidebrecht, Beyond the Cutting Edge? Pg. 133