

"Faith and Facebook" by Wes Avram for @ *This Point*, © Columbia Theological Seminary

Communication theorist and Columbia University professor James Carey has written that the single most important invention of the post-industrial era is the invention of the signal: the ability to move messages without bodies, faster than human senses.ⁱ It's been 160 years or so since the telegraph became relatively common, moving signals faster than lines of sight or bodies on horses. The advance of information technology since then has been the further development of that singular revolution. Not only has the way we live been radically changed by these developments, our ways of understanding who we are as human beings have also changed. Our brains have changed.ⁱⁱ Our attention spans have changed. Our cultures, our politics, and our theologies have also changed. A collection of new web-based communications technologies we call "social media" collectively presents another innovation in this long and profound revolution. And, like other innovations in this line, their immediate utility in extending or improving things we're already doing is quickly overwhelmed by the more radical transformations they bring.

I want to identify some questions for theological reflection about this. I'm anxious about how developments within our technological culture do more than simply change how we do things. I'm interested in how they change how we *see* things, how we relate to each other, how we think of ourselves, what counts for knowledge, how we think about the church, and perhaps how we think of God.

I also write as a parent. I watch my teenage children using these technologies in ways I don't. And in watching them live within the environment these technologies create, I'm reminded of the obligation to avoid a mistake often made by interpreters of technology: looking at technological developments through the eyes of those for whom a new technology, or a radical innovation in the use of available technology, is, in fact, *new*. We miss some of the meaning of technology when we do that, because we think in available categories and we think of technology's *utility* rather than its *ontology*.

Technology may be a tool we pick up or put down to accomplish tasks for which there are multiple means (utility). Technology may also be the milieu in which we decide what tasks are worth accomplishing, how we accomplish them, and who we are as we do them (ontology). Because I came to consciousness in a world without Facebook, Twitter, Vimeo, Vine, LinkedIn, YouTube, Tumblr, Pinterest, etc., my experiences of these technologies will never be the same as my children's. I'll see things they won't. They'll experience things, and be *made* by these technologies, in ways I won't.

I want to belabor this point, for I believe its implications aren't always obvious. Consider the idea of a library, upon which a millennium of "bookish" Western cultures was built. Most readers of this essay have lived in a world where the library is the touchstone, tool, and location for research. As the Internet came into view, it appeared as a new, convenient, and marvel-filled way of doing what we had been doing in the library. Even if the Internet has profoundly changed our way of study, the library still rests as our reference point.

This is not so for my children. They don't think of the Internet by analogy to a library. The Internet is its own thing to them. At best, they think of a library by analogy to the Internet, and a poor analogy at that. With this shift, a "bookish" understanding of knowledge is completely and utterly gone for them. It's not quaint or dying; it's weird and dead. Therefore, if I'm to understand how the Internet creates a new relationship to knowledge, I should not speculate on its impact on most

readers of this essay, but on my teenage children and their peers. And, even then, I can only intuit—through observation, comparison, memory, and a little bit of theological anxiety.

The same is true for the new sociality that social media are creating. I look at my children and wonder how social media are influencing their sense of a *threshold between private and public realms* of life, their *experience of time and space* in the context of human community, and their *intuition of transcendence*. I explore each of these three below.

I. *Thresholds*. The exponential development of social media is transforming our sense of public and private realms. Indeed, while Mark Zuckerberg (creator of Facebook) insists that privacy is dead, a whole set of companies now sell services to protect our "privacy." But I want to ask questions that go far deeper than the details of "privacy policies" and controlling the online tracking or publicizing of what was once considered private information. They go to our experience of the difference between public and private, itself. Although we've never fully settled on how to mark the difference, the need to articulate a healthy distinction between public and private remains important to Christian ethics. It's also important to spiritual formation. Practices such as patience, forgiveness, tolerance, discretion, restraint, and modesty require a healthy distinction between private and public. I would suggest that Christian tradition has valued the private realm as protected space where virtues are developed, selves are shaped, and rhythms of interiority and responsibility cultivated. It is a zone of life that can be free of market logic, competition with strangers, and instant judgment. Instead, the private is (ideally) ruled by commitment, acceptance, and challenging love.

A few years ago, I bought a house in New Haven that was built in 1930. Among beautiful architectural details like leaded glass and sculpted walls, one thing struck me as curious. At the bottom of the stairs to the second floor, a niche was beautifully carved into the wall with its own carefully crafted wooden shelf. It had a top like a cathedral arch, designed to imitate the shape of the front door. After a while, I figured out that it was a niche cut for a telephone. Images came to mind of the house's first owner winding up the phone to get the attention of an operator and asking to be connected to another house in the city, of party lines shared with neighbors, of anxious calls from parents to a doctor when a child was ill, of that same child embarrassed to be in the middle of everyone when talking to a beau on the other end of the line, of parents counting the cost of long-distant calls and hanging up when too much had been spent, and other intergenerational practices that briefly hovered around that little niche.

A niche for a telephone in replica of the door to the house said far more than the architect who designed it might have realized. It was the perfect embodiment of an insight I heard Austrian historian and Roman Catholic priest Ivan Illich once offer, that the technology of the signal has had a profound effect on our notion of *threshold*. By *threshold* I mean a ritualized line between spaces. The telephone forever changed that idea of threshold, for no longer was the physical doorway the difference between inside and outside, intimate and shared, private and public.ⁱⁱⁱ

The public threshold entered private space. It was, at first, fixed and it imitated the only thresholds we knew, like that niche imitating the door. New rituals developed that attempted to preserve the practice of a threshold even when that practice was in fact under threat. It wasn't long before those new rituals were themselves overwhelmed by the advance of the technology. The threshold became movable and intrusive. Eventually it became multiple, with a phone (and, so, a threshold) in every room. The door lost its meaning. A knock on the door became the strange thing, itself intrusive and even threatening if not preceded by the phone.^{iv} Indeed, the home, itself, has lost its meaning as new

generations seemingly experience home more like a "docking station." Home might be private in the sense of personally controlled, but it is other than what was once experienced as a private realm.

When understood as a physical location, a threshold implied a set of practices that preserved its meaning. They included overture (a knock), greeting (grin or handshake), welcoming or guarding (gesturing permission to enter or signaling refusal), honoring (removing one's hat or shoes if customary, thanking and commenting on surroundings, offering to care for a coat or scarf), and marking an entrance (closing a door to indicate that one's guest is now in private space). At a threshold, cold turned into warmth or sun into shade. One can certainly talk of times when old thresholds became places of exclusion and hostility, when physical boundaries made what should have been public spaces private and privacy turned into secrecy. I don't want to naively romanticize older practices, but I don't want to lose their virtues either. Such threshold practices might be strangely imitated in what pop-culture journalist Melissa Guthrie recently called the "insane, anarchic, social media universe,"^v but the imitation is pale.

There remains some version of a distinction between private and public realm in the social media universe, but the basic experience of wired youth is of private and public less as spaces than as multiple networks of connection, disconnection, and desire. The "out there" is "right here" as virtual publics held in our children's hands or carried in their pockets are more enticing than the physical publics into which we might want to usher them. The virtual publics woo.

I sit in Starbucks and see teens at a nearby table, each ritually taking their smartphones out of their pockets and setting them on the table before they begin talking. They glance down at their personal screens every minute or two while talking to their friends. They sweep their fingers lightly across their screens to check for texts, tweets, posts, and other contact from disembodied others even while in the presence of embodied others. The signal that the physical sociality of coffee and conversation is done comes when one picks up her phone and puts it back in her pocket. This is not utility. It is ontology. It is the indication that physical presence now temporarily supplements virtual presence rather than virtual presence temporarily enhancing physical presence.

Very soon, our Google glasses will allow us to see Facebook and other media projected between us and the physical world, with our eyes moving and blinking and our voice recording directions to create a multi-media and multi-sensory experience of "connection" with things "outside" us. New forms of inclusion follow, of course, but also new forms of exclusion. This is connection, but it might not be connectedness. And it leaves me wondering what becomes of the longsuffering patience, shared formation, and redeeming forgiveness we've wanted the church to embody.

Christians have long thought of spiritual maturity as an internalized relationship with a present/absent God mediated by prayer and sacraments, and we've wanted to imagine that relationship as fully a part of our *material* relationships. We've called this incarnational theology. The virtually mediated social world is *like* God in this sense, with the screen a sacrament and the gestures of attention, touch, and input like prayer. But the virtually mediated world *isn't* God. It lacks character, virtue, and loving intent. And unlike God's absence, which is a dynamic of God's presence, absence in a world mediated by these technologies is nothingness. The public is privatized, and the private world becomes a controlled portal of sorts, with the space of the self now imagined as a kind of command center. This is different than the self imagined as created space layered by interiority, will, and responsibility.

Sitting at our "family computer," one of my children points out an extremely explicit photo another teen has posted on her virtual wall. I bluster, to signal parental concern for the youth and parental outrage at cultural realities that would prompt this. He simply responds, "No big deal. It's not my problem. And Facebook will (magically) find the picture and take it down." And he goes onto the next thing as though he'd simply seen a photo of somebody's lacrosse game. Things like this, of course, aren't new and the photo on Facebook might simply be a new generation's version of classic adolescent indiscretions--a new generation's "streaking." But I think that the use of social media changes things. The photo might be eventually removed from the wall by a software-generated filter, but it can't really be taken back. Via Facebook it comes into bedrooms and living rooms and onto smartphones. A choice is made that has a wide and lasting public.

In Steubenville, Ohio, a heinous crime by a group of teenage boys raping a young woman at a party is discovered by authorities because of photos and video put up on social media by one of the boys involved.^{vi} He apparently posted them as a sort of brag, as hard as that is to conceive. On the one hand, social media made a public that allowed justice—preventing the conspiracy of secrecy that can sometimes haunt misused privacy. On the other hand, one wonders to what extent social media also contributed to a culture of indiscretion, abuse, disrespect, publicizing of bodies and privatizing of limits that seems characteristic of a boundary-troubled youth culture.

The power by which these technologies allow us to more efficiently enjoy some aspects of our social lives should not blind us to the forms of social life they're creating. There is good there. There's also hazard.

In response to this, I decided as a parent that discretionary access to the Internet, including social media, might not be the healthiest thing for my children. Following the rules for media-sensitive parenting, I didn't put computers in their bedrooms. I also told them that they won't have a smartphone while in high school—a mobile phone, yes, but no device with constant and personal access to the Internet. When they insisted that "everyone has one," I assumed they were exaggerating and insisted that just can't be so. Then I discovered that they're not exaggerating that much. Somewhere between 31% and 58% of American teens have social media in their pockets (a percentage that is growing every year).^{vii} In my upper-middle class community, the percentage might be nearer 75%. In some places, teachers have given up their "no checking phones" policies and now give 5-minute breaks every half hour or so, so students can "check in" on the electronically mediated social world. If they don't, the level of distracted attention rises and focus is lost. ADD becomes the norm, fueled by these tools of focus-distraction. Denied smartphones, my children feel like outliers, isolated from the world because they lack universal and ubiquitous access to the virtual publics that their peers live in. I remain committed to not handing it to them (yet), but I'm fooling myself if I think that by not handing it to them I'm actually cultivating in them anything of a traditional sense of private and public realms. That possibility is gone.

II. Time and Space. When he was on Facebook at close to 11:00 p.m. one night, I reminded one of my children that his parents had asked him to make a practice of logging off at 10:30. "Why was that again?" he asked. I referenced that now-archaic idea of threshold, reminding him that social mores dictate a time after which one wouldn't knock on someone's door unless it was an emergency. I asked him what the difference is between a Facebook, Twitter, or other social media-mediated interaction and the act of physically welcoming someone into our home. I suggested that it might be appropriate to imagine a time after which our home is a private, *family* space. He struggled to understand my analogy, noting that many of the peers with whom he's "chatting" are actually friends two time zones away, for whom it's actually 2:00 a.m. The confusion seems to be mine, not theirs.

Once the threshold of space is gone, it's not long before time is no boundary either. Everything is happening at once—or so we're led to believe. And if it's happening at all, it's either entirely happening online or it's being traced and tracked and commented upon online. It exists if it has earned a tweet or post. Gaps in time normally experienced between action and reaction disappear. Yet these gaps are sometimes necessary for insight and almost always necessary for wisdom.

I've written elsewhere about a social media-exacerbated phenomenon that's driving this blurring of time.^{viii} I've asserted that despite all the claims that social media are driven by users' desire for connection and relationship, this phenomenon may have an even more powerful force: *fear*. "Fear of missing out" to be more precise. It's even risen to the status of an acronym: FOMO.

When I first heard the acronym in 2011, I was struck by how well known the term was among folks under 30. They assumed it to be a basic human experience and every one of them understood it to be a reason for linking and synching all the screens in their lives. It's this fear that the Cloud promises to allay, so that we don't miss out whenever we (impulsively) want instant access to our calendars, contact lists, bookmarks, email, Facebook/LinkedIn/Twitter/Vine/Google prompts, or the world these things bring us. We want to know what everyone else in our socially mediated world knows at the same instant they know it. Waiting is so five minutes ago.

In the 1920s, the great Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin rethought the literary representation of selves in time. He questioned the idea of time as a simple sequence of events that can be perceived by a knowing subject, writing of the relationship between time and space more as an event through which words push, echo from the past, intuit themselves for the future, respond to other words, and attach themselves in different ways to speaking persons. This is a multi-voiced *simultaneity*.^{ix} Theologians might speak of *kairos*, with the simultaneity of human experience textured by a moving and meaning-making grace. Grace-textured *simultaneity* expands time into an inhabitable and populated space.

I think the simultaneity promoted by social media is something different. It is a world of interaction that presents itself as always already happening outside the self. And without constant and ready access to it, one is indeed "missing out." I think that this simultaneity doesn't open or expand our experience of time at all. I think it *narrows* our experience of time. It collapses all time into the present, as if a life can be rendered on the "timeline" of a Facebook page. There's less nuance and more trivia; less of the resonance of memory and more reactive noise; less self-expression and more self-display. Nuance requires measure, qualifiers, appreciation for claims one doesn't agree with and a sense that some history can't be reduced to factoids and some ideas can't be catalogued on a "top ten" list. Memory requires the reverberation of conversations that haven't been recorded and are therefore re-remembered in varying ways and not simply re-read or re-processed. Self-expression unfolds over time and tends to hide as much as it shows. Martin Buber once wrote that the dilemma of the modern experience is that we are condemned to attend our own actions as spectators.^x If social media are among the mediators of post-modern experience, our dilemma is now doubled as the self observed is, itself, a spectacle, with splintered attention and an interiority increasingly hollowed out into continuous chatter.^{xi}

III. *An intuition of transcendence.* In a thoughtful nudge to the theological anxiety I'm claiming, theologian Cynthia Rigby has suggested that we shouldn't be so concerned about folks who mediate community, or even the church, through social media. She writes:

Think about it: these folks care so much about their communities that they carry them around with them. They are linked to them by way of smartphones, laptops, and tablets. They nurture them and are nurtured by them by way of life updates, fun pictures, theological insights, book recommendations, and shared 'likes' of all kinds. What is happening on Facebook is, in many ways, what we have always wanted to be happening in small group Bible studies and during 'fellowship' coffee hour.^{xiii}

She might be right, and my anxiety might be merely transitional. Yet I would return to my caution regarding interpreting technology through the lens of those for whom the technology is optional and improves practices they still remember. Her view might be positive on the potential utility of social media, but I fear it doesn't dwell enough on its ontology. Only time will tell, provided we'll still be able to remember enough of the old ways to assess the new. So my theological anxiety remains.

As fascinating and winsome as this "insane, anarchic, social media universe" can be, I still wonder how hospitable it finally is for the slow rhythm of habitation, reflection, and change that makes for tradition. *Trending* won't sustain tradition. I also wonder how hospitable this universe is for the longsuffering, messy, forgiving, peculiar community that is the church? Crowd-sourced awareness or affinity group tracking won't sustain the church. And I also wonder how to live in the social media environment and still sense God's transcendence as a presence requiring an absence. Linking to a divine profile is not a complex enough vision of religious communication to sustain prayer.

As I consider the ontology of these increasingly ubiquitous tools, and not just their utility, I conclude that if I'm exaggerating their impact I'm not exaggerating by much. Yet I'd like to think that we can still hold back a bit, and that we can help our children to do the same. We can remember forms of connection that are physical, patient, and prolonged. And we can find ways to let go of our "fear of missing out" in order to pause long enough and seek earnestly enough to accept the One who won't flee if we turn away. This is the same One who will suffer our silence as much as our hyperactivity. And this is the same One who is known to us in a kind of community built only through time, virtue, and real presence. Even while we use these technologies, I believe their meaning is an urgent topic for theological and pastoral conversation.

Maybe we should open a Facebook page or YouTube channel to start it!

ⁱ James Carey, *Communication as Culture, Revised Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

ⁱⁱ For a popularized overview, see Tony Dokoupil, "Tweets, Texts, Email, Posts: Is the Onslaught Making Us Crazy?" *Newsweek* (July 16, 2012), pp. 24-30.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ivan Illich, in lecture, University of Pennsylvania, 1993.

^{iv} Just a generation ago, one could still find pastors making a practice of unannounced visits—the purposeful interruption of an unannounced knock on the door, the brief hello that allowed a threshold crossing and a face-to-face blessing or prayer. My generation of pastors might admire the practice, but has generally given it up. When I mention the practice to younger colleagues, they find it peculiar and even offensive. In *Gender* (Marion Boyers, 1983), Ivan Illich states that it wasn't until the 12th century that a priest would ever enter a parishioner's home. We might be returning to that more ancient practice today, ironically driven by technology that promises to make us closer. I suppose one could argue that a "poke" on Facebook is a functional equivalent of a knock on the door, but I'm not so sure. Bodies matter in Christian ministry, and physical presence makes a

difference. Yet the only threshold I will now approach as a pastor without a preceding contact is a hospital room.

^v Appearing on "All In, with Chris Hayes," on MSNBC, April 4, 2013.

^{vi} News on this is available from many outlets. See New York Times, at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/18/us/teenagers-found-guilty-in-rape-in-steubenville-ohio.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

^{vii} Lower reports at <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Teens-and-smartphones/Cell-phone-ownership/Smartphones.aspx>. Higher reports at <http://www.digitaltrends.com/mobile/more-than-50-percent-of-teens-now-own-a-smartphone/>.

^{viii} "Connecting with a Theology of Technology," *Reflections: A Magazine of Theological and Ethical Inquiry* (Yale Divinity School, Winter, 2012), pp. 3-8.

^{ix} His idea *heteroglossia* is also relevant here. Among many of Bakhtin's writings, see *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist, et al. (Austin: U of Texas P, 1982).

^x See *Eclipse of God* (New York: Humanity Books, 1988).

^{xi} Due to new legislation, at midnight on April 5, 2013, United Kingdom time, the British Museum began collecting and archiving every website produced in the UK. When asked by an NPR reporter on April 5, the museum staffer noted that the museum will archive more digital data in a single day than is contained in all the books they've collected over 300 years—every day.

^{xii} "The Changing (Cyber) Face of Christian Community," *Insights*, Vol 128: 2 (Spring, 2013), p. 35.