

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON
New Media

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New Media



How is the new media that we use on a regular basis affecting us? In a previous booklet *A Biblical Point of View on Social Media*, we briefly mentioned some concerns.

For example, Nicholas Carr raised this question in an Atlantic article entitled “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” He observed that, “Over the past few years, I’ve had an uncomfortable

sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory.” He later went on to write *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*¹. He surveyed brain research that helped to explain why we don’t read as much and why it is so hard to concentrate.

New Media and How We Think

We are being told that all these new media devices and cell phone apps are going to make the next generation more productive and effective. But more and more psychologists and educators aren’t so sure. Professor Mark Bauerlein has been on our program many times to talk about the negative impact digital media has had on his students. His first book had the arresting title, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and*

Jeopardizes Our Future. Thirteen years later he did an interview with us on *The Dumbest Generation Grows Up: From Stupefied Youth to Dangerous Adults*. He observed that the problems were worse.

Many years ago, one writer for *The Wall Street Journal* took on the idea that the digital world would produce smarter and more civilized people:

Spare me the stories of your “genius” tech-savvy child who can name every country on Google Earth, or how, because of your iPhone, BlackBerry and three cell phones, you juggle 20 tasks at once and never miss any business—even at 4 a.m., because you sleep with your portable devices. Does anyone care that technology is destroying social graces and turning people into rude jerks?²

She also wondered, “When did it become acceptable for technological interaction to supersede in-person communication?” I have news for her. It happened long before cell phones were invented. When I was a graduate student at Yale University, I noticed something odd about my academic advisor. Whenever the phone would ring, he felt he had to answer it. He could be advising me or we could be deep in the midst of a discussion of a research project. But if the phone rang, he stopped the conversation and answered the phone, staying on the phone until that conversation was over. I began to think that the only way I could ever have a sustained conversation with him would be to call him on the phone.

Can the Internet change how you think? That apparently isn't even a

question anymore as illustrated by a recent article with the title: “How is the Internet changing the way you think?” The writers explained how the advent of computer chips, digitized information, and virtual reality alter how we think and how we receive information in this “collective high-tech electronic ecosystem for the delivery of information.”

We can see this in two different ways. First, you may have noticed that younger generations raised on digital media perceive the world differently from previous generations. Psychologist Jean Twenge even calls the youngest generation (Generation Z) the “iGen Generation” because they are digital natives and have always had an iPhone, iPad, or other digital devices. We have aired many radio programs about the younger generations, and we have also docu-

mented these changes. One major reason they think differently is due to the Internet.

A second reason goes back to that original Atlantic article by Nicholas Carr entitled "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" He felt that something was tinkering with his brain and neural circuitry. He explained that concentrating began to be very hard for him to do:

Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages."³

He believes this comes from using

the Internet and searching the web with Google. And he gives not only his story, but he also gives many anecdotes as well as research to back up his perspective.

A developmental psychologist at Tufts University explains, "We are not only what we read. We are how we read." The style of reading on the Internet puts "efficiency" and "immediacy" above other factors. Put simply, it has changed the way we read and acquire information.

Now you might say that would only be true for the younger generation. Older people are set in their ways. The Internet could not possibly change the way the brains of older people download information. Not true. The 100 billion neurons inside our skulls can break connections and form others. A neuroscientist at George Mason University says, "The

brain has the ability to reprogram itself on the fly, altering the way it functions."⁴

Concentration and Distraction

Have portable media devices altered our ability to concentrate? That certainly seems to be the case. Nearly all of us have noticed that people with a cell phone are often distracted. And after they answer a text or an e-mail, they seem to spend a few minutes trying to recollect their thoughts before they had the interruption.

One article documented what many of us have always suspected. There are two major drawbacks to these devices.⁵

The first is distraction overload. A study at the University of Illinois found that if an interruption takes place at a natural breakpoint, then

the mental disruption is less. If it came at a less opportune time, the user experienced the “where was I?” brain lock.

A second problem is what is called “continuous partial attention.” People who use mobile devices often use their devices while they should be paying attention to something else. Psychologists tell us that we really aren’t multitasking, but rather engage in rapid-fire switching of attention among tasks. It is inevitable they are going to miss key information if part of their focus is on their digital device.

Another hidden drawback associated is less creativity. Turning on a mobile device or a cell phone when you are “doing nothing” replaces what we used to do in the days before these devices were invented. Back then, we called it “daydreaming.”

That is when the brain often connects unrelated facts and thoughts. You have probably had some of your most creative ideas while shaving, putting on makeup, or driving. That is when your brain can be creative. Checking e-mail and scrolling the Internet reduces daydreaming.

Media Addiction

George Barna has done lots of surveys, and he was able to conclude that “media exposure has become America’s most widespread and serious addiction.”⁶ I have always been hesitant to label our high levels of media exposure an addiction. We seem to have an addiction label for every behavior. But George Barna makes a convincing case.

Addiction changes our brains by altering the chemical balance and flow within the brain and by even

altering the structure of the brain. According to the American Psychiatry Association, we can legitimately call something an addiction when certain symptoms manifest themselves.

For example, addictions change our brain structure, altering emotions, motivations, and memory capacity. Addictions cause withdrawal symptoms when exposure to the addictive item is eliminated. Addictions cause people to abandon or reduce their involvement in normal and healthy activities.

Certainly, media can be positive in terms of education and relaxation. But most media content, Barna argues, “winds up serving the lowest common denominator because that’s where the largest audience” is to be found.

There is a generational trend. The

builder generation did not grow up with media and never became accustomed to it. The boomer generation embraced media, and the following generations expanded its use in ways unthinkable a few decades ago.

If we were truly serious about controlling the media input in our lives and our children's lives, we would see examples of parents putting boundaries on media exposure. We see nothing of the sort. Expenditures on personal media, in-home media, and mobile media continue to increase.

It is not that parents don't understand the dangers. Barna reports that three-quarters of parents say that exposure of their children to inappropriate media content is one of their top concerns. But they continue to buy their kids the media tools and continue to allow them to be ex-

posed to inappropriate content.

This may be one of the biggest challenges for society in general and even in the church. Most parents recognize the danger of the media storm in which they and their children live. But they are unwilling to take the necessary steps to set boundaries or end their media addiction.

Biblical Principles

Christians need to evaluate the impact of media in their lives. We need to develop discernment and pass those biblical principles to our children and grandchildren.

The new media represents an even greater threat and can easily conform us to the world (Rom. 12:2). Media is a powerful tool to conform us to a secular worldview and thus take us captive (Col. 2:8) to the false

philosophies of the world.

Christians should strive to apply the following two passages to their lives as they seek discernment concerning the media. The first is Philippians 4:8. “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

The second is Colossians 3:2–5. “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”

A wise Christian will use discernment when using these various forms of new media. They provide lots of information and connect us with people around the world. But we should also guard against the worldly influence that is promoted on many of these platforms.

Additional Resources

Kerby Anderson, *Arts, Media, and Culture* (Cambridge, OH: Christian House Publishing, 2016).

Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical Point of View on Social Media*, POV booklet, 2019.

Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*, New York: TarcherPerigee, 2009.

Additional Resources cont'd.

Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation Grows Up: From Stupefied Youth to Dangerous Adults*, Washington, DC: Regnery, 2022.

Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *Atlantic*, July/August 2008.

¹Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, New York: Norton, 2011.

²Rachel Marsden, "Technology and the New Me Generation," *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 December 2009..

³Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *Atlantic*, July/August 2008.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Sharon Begley, "Will the BlackBerry Sink the Presidency?" *Newsweek*, 16 February 2009.

⁶George Barna, "Media Addiction," 25 January 2010, www.barna.org.



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