The impact of communication technologies on the young: the challenge of evangelizing contemporary culture

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The joys and sorrows of human person of every society have been held together by certain modes and patterns of communication that create the kind of society and culture it is. One may call it as communication environment. The new digital environment certainly reshapes the spatial and temporal dimensions of social life of the young generations. In order to address this problem, I want to begin this presentation by exploring the meaning of technology and then by investigating some of the effects of contemporary technologies on youth and finally offer some suggestions that may help us for the evangelization of culture in the era of information overload.

With the accelerated stream of information in the last few decades, we have created a new kind of culture, the culture of digital activism. It is my assumption that the analysis on the effects of contemporary technology on youth must begin by making a distinction between a technology and medium. Neil Postman, who formally began the study on media ecology, makes this distinction in the following manner:

A Technology is to a medium as the brain is to the mind. Like the brain a technology is a physical apparatus, like the mind a medium is a use to which a physical apparatus is put. A technology becomes a medium as it employs a particular symbolic code, as it finds its place in a particular social setting as it insinuates itself into economic and political contexts. A technology in other words is merely a machine; a medium is a social and intellectual environment a machine creates.

The above distinction between technology and medium clearly infers that medium is what we do with the technology. In thinking about the effects of the contemporary technologies on youth, it is appropriate to assume that we are thinking not only of communication technologies but also how they have become communication environments.

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The Second Vatican Council perceives this situation and recognizes the modern technology as a sign of dominion over time—over the past and the future (GS 5).

1. Impact of Communication technology
The impact of new technology in terms of a change of ecology is tremendous. Time and space have been reduced, our thinking is now non-linear and discontinuous, our concentration is reduced, we are often mentally and physically uneasy, we prefer visuals over texts, social networking has raised newer issues of identity, of virtual relationships, of superficiality, etc. In what follows I will briefly highlight only the first five changes. It goes without saying that the effects of new media have a far greater impact on the life and habits of young people as they are more techno-savvy than their elders.

1.1. The reduction of space and time
One of the concerns of *Gaudium et Spes* was that brotherly dialogue between people cannot be brought to perfection by technical progress, but only by interpersonal relationships. The fundamental impact of technology is that it can change the spatial and temporal dimension of social life of the human person and relationships. In our post-modern world, cyber media, such as the Internet and mobile communication have reshaped spatial and temporal boundaries. This happy convergence of audio, video, text, photographs and moving images has turned time and space into *cybertime* and *cyberspace*, reducing if not eliminating, all distinctions between *now* and *then* and between *here* and *there*. Transnational calls can be made at any moment from any place to any destination. The Global Positioning System (GPS) keeps us informed and helps us navigate our journeys in all weather conditions, anywhere on earth or near the earth. In this way we have created a new kind of time in which all times past and future intersect. In another sense, we have created completely profane time, 24/7, completely uniform which has benefitted but also rendered us cyber dependent.

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6 Cf. Ibid., 27.
1.2. Discontinuous thinking

The reduction in time and space has contributed to the discontinuous thinking among the youth of today. One can say that the present information environment is characterised by the super compression of time. For example, by and large in the digital space a young person is confronted with one minute video, 30 seconds advertisements, short messages comprising of a few words etc. It probably widens the gap between information and reality. In addition, the super compression of time coupled with great speed in the digital environment probably drives the human person into the environment of information overload. In this strange media environment the young person, has neither time nor skill to ask why he needs this piece of information and what purpose it will serve the person to enhance the culture. In response to this alarming impact of technology the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (CSD) says that technological innovation must be guided by a comprehensive concept of the human person, with due respect for all the dimensions of human existence and needs.\footnote{C.f. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, “Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church”, 29 June, 2004. Art 458. Retrieved on 31 October, 2015 from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pe_justpeace_doc_20060526_ompendio-dott-soc_en.html.}

1.3. Visual over textual emphasis

*Gaudium et Spes* asserts that technology is viewed as capable of enriching human knowledge and influencing patterns of thinking and feeling.\footnote{C.f. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL “GAUDIUM ET SPES”, Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, 7 December 1965. Retrieved on 31, 2015 from http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.} The structure and pervasiveness of contemporary communication technologies however privilege visuals over words – a phenomenon that is highly attractive to young people. Speed editing and dramatic moving pictures are intended to help youth “stay tuned” into the programme such that the experience online or on television or movies is largely visual than textual. In such a situation the young person will not have the chance to savour or distinguish between excellence and banality. The dominance of the visual can be detrimental to the development of a writing culture. Furthermore, ideas not necessarily conducive to the maturing of youth infiltrate human consciousness with no time and chance for a discerning selection.
1.4. Psychological and behavioural concerns
Another strong cultural impact of the contemporary technologies on youth is the psychological and behavioural problems that stem from the excessive use of digital technologies. Catholic responses have largely mirrored these concerns with a particular stress on the dangers of individual isolation and the fragmentation of community ties. Pontifical Council for Culture (PCC) expressed the anxiety about the Internet in the following terms: “It is not simply a question of moral use of the Internet, but also of the radically new consequences it brings: a loss of the intrinsic value of items of information, an undifferentiated uniformity in messages which are reduced to pure information, a lack of responsible feedback, and a certain discouragement of interpersonal relationships.”

Similar important concerns on issues like virtual relationship and superficiality have been raised in Ethics in Communication. It says that the modern means of communication promotes packaged information, allows fragmented network of isolated individuals. They interact with data instead with one another in online relationship. It questions the meaning of love in the world of interacting with the machines.

1.5. Paradoxes of contemporary technologies
One of the principle concerns of the Church regarding post-modern technology is that the human person is now interacting more with machines than with other human beings. In this context I would like to enumerate a few paradoxes of contemporary technology. First there is uninolved involvement. In the digital activism, young people are emotionally pulled into a situation on digital media, however their distance from it keeps them from doing anything effective about it. Secondly, there is personalized impersonality. For Example, The host of the most of shows talk to camera, their set is like a living room in which we all are guests. Yet, we cannot really participate in this social event directly. We may feel like we know the characters we see close ups on social media, however in real life we do not. The virtual relationship remains really impersonal. This leads to the very important paradox of our digital age which may be called non-active information. It means that there is a certain amount of

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12 Ibid., 128.
gap between information shared on the digital media and action taken on the basis of the information given. In the past information was sought to perform a specific action. With the invention of telegraphy and photography the meaning of the information has been changed and it became a commodity and the action association began to diminish. By and large now with the splurge of information we are forced to consume it.

2. Challenges to the evangelization of culture

Having mentioned some of the impacts of contemporary technologies on youth, I now propose certain ideas that might serve to face the challenges in evangelizing contemporary culture in the present digital era.

2.1. The Christian Paradigm

As I see it, the best way to face the challenges in evangelizing contemporary culture in the environment of information overload is this: we must help the young to foster the idea of “loving resistance fighters”. I use the word “loving” to mean that, in spite of the complexity, confusion and errors, in the communication technological environment we must always be inspired and live by the narratives, symbols and principals that are essential to being Christian. They are splendidly expressed in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (CSD) under the title “For a Civilization of Love”. Aware of the concern of the human person who searches meaning for his/her existence, the Church first of all invites all of us to participate in the proclamation of the Gospel in which Jesus gives dignity to human person (575). Secondly, it invites us to start afresh from faith of Christ (576). Thirdly, it calls us to be rooted in solid hope. Fourthly, it invites us to live a life of solidarity and welcomes us to place ourselves in a solid hope of building “a paradise of earth” and by giving renewed value as the highest form of all activity (577-583).

2.2. Technology is a gift and a task

It seems to me that building the “Civilization of Love” (575-583),\(^{15}\) would be possible if we encourage youth to be critical users of media. In this process of educating the young one needs to be aware that technology is a gift as well as it poses a great challenge ahead of us in using it for the evangelization of culture. Pope Benedict XVI expresses this concern in his message for the 45\(^{th}\) world Communications Day:

> The new technologies allow people to meet each other beyond the confines of space and of their own culture, creating in this way an entirely new world of potential friendships. This is a great opportunity, but it also requires greater attention to and awareness of possible risks. Who is my “neighbour” in this new world? Does the danger exist that we may be less present to those whom we encounter in our everyday life? Is there a risk of being more distracted because our attention is fragmented and absorbed in a world “other” than the one in which we live? Do we have time to reflect critically on our choices and to foster human relationships which are truly deep and lasting?\(^{16}\)

2.3. Technology has an agenda

It would be easy for us to know what gift that the technology offers us and the challenge that is ahead of us if only we know that every technology has an agenda of its own. It means that there is embedded in every great technology an epistemological, political or social prejudice. Sometimes that bias is greatly to our advantage. Sometimes it is not. For example, the printing press annihilated the oral tradition; telegraphy annihilated space; television has humiliated the word; the computer, perhaps, will degrade community life.\(^{17}\) Thus, every technology has a philosophy which is given expression in how the technology makes people use their minds, in what it makes us do with our bodies, in how it codifies the world, in which of our senses it amplifies, in which of our emotional and intellectual tendencies it disregards. This idea is the sum and substance of what the great communication theorist, Marshall McLuhan meant when he coined the famous sentence, “The medium is the message.”\(^{18}\) Therefore, it would be desirable that we include in our Christian curriculum the history of communication technologies and their impacts on our culture.

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\(^{17}\) Cf. Ibid., 192.

2.4. Technological change is ecological

Another important element to include in the Christian curriculum is the understanding that the technological change is not additive; it is ecological. This idea ought to be placed as the fundamental principle in evangelizing contemporary culture. I can explain this best by an analogy. What happens if we place a drop of red dye into a beaker of clear water? Do we have clear water plus a spot of red dye? Obviously not. We have a new coloration to every molecule of water.\(^\text{19}\) That is what I mean by ecological change. A new medium does not add something; it changes everything. Furthermore, after knowing the media ecological implications of technological change we ought to face the challenges of using cyberspace for a constructive dialogue and debate which can promote harmony of the human family.\(^\text{20}\)

2.5. Mastering new languages of technologies

Aware of the great potency of the digital technologies to promote harmony in the world the challenge that the Christian educator would face is mastering the new language of the digital technologies. This theme was first articulated in Pope John Paul’s encyclical on evangelization, *Redemptoris Missio* in which he observed that media were a new “Areopagus” and that:

> Since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church’s authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the "new culture" created by modern communications. This is a complex issue, since the "new culture" originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology.\(^\text{21}\)

Such a challenge of understanding and mastering the “new languages” of the media ought to be taken up by the Catholic media professionals who are engaged in the *evangelization in the contemporary culture*.

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2.6. Media education as a thermostatic activity

From my point of view, obviously, in order to counter the challenges of “new culture” brought by the digital media and to master the new languages of the new media the Catholic media professionals must be trained in thermostatic view of education. It means that achieving balance in the information environment. The job of a thermostat is to make what is too warm cooler and too cool warmer.\(^{22}\) From this point of view, media education tries to conserve tradition when the rest of the digital environment is innovative. Or it is innovative when the rest of the society is tradition-bound. Thus the function of media education is always to offer the counterargument or the other side of the picture of the digital environment. It is balance-centered approach.\(^{23}\) It is therefore, the thermostatic view of media education ought to address the following questions. The first is, what are the specific media biases if left unchecked, will leave our young generations incompetent intellects? The second is, to what extent the present media education is competent to deal with such media biases? Third is, how emphatically and constructively the schools can hope to address such media biases?\(^ {24}\) Finally, what would be the content of the media curriculum so that it can foster the dignity of the human person and integral development of persons?\(^ {25}\)

Thus as I see it, the humanistic concerns are the true challenges one need to face in evangelizing contemporary culture. We ought to concentrate these challenges in the midst the impacts of the contemporary technology on youth. This concern is very well enumerated in the following words of Pope John Paul II, “In reflecting upon the means of social communication, we must face honestly the "most essential" question raised by technological progress: whether, as a result of it, the human person "is becoming truly better, that is to say more mature spiritually, more aware of the dignity of his humanity, more responsible, more open to others, especially the neediest and the weakest, and readier to give and to aid all”.\(^ {26}\)


\(^{23}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 25.


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