

FOREWORD BY
BRIAN MCLAREN

THE HIDDEN POWER OF ELECTRONIC CULTURE



HOW MEDIA SHAPES FAITH,
THE GOSPEL, AND CHURCH



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The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church

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Youth Specialties resources, 300 S. Pierce St., El Cajon, CA 92020 are published by Zondervan, 5300 Patterson Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49530.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hips, Shane A.

The hidden power of electronic culture : how media shapes faith, the Gospel, and church / Shane A. Hips.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-310-26274-9 (pbk.)

1. Christianity and culture. 2. Mass media—Influence. 3. Mass media—Religious aspects—Christianity. 4. Technology—Religious aspects—Christianity. 5. Popular culture—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BR115.C8H56 2005

261.5'2—dc22

2005024206

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Web site addresses listed in this book were current at the time of publication. Please contact Youth Specialties via e-mail (YS@YouthSpecialties.com) to report URLs that are no longer operational and replacement URLs if available.

Interior design by Mark Novelli

Printed in the United States of America

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GRATITUDES	7
FOREWORD BY BRIAN MCLAREN	9
INTRODUCTION	13
PART I: NEW WAYS TO PERCEIVE	
CHAPTER ONE SEEING BUT NOT PERCEIVING	21
CHAPTER TWO PERCEIVING THE POWERS THAT SHAPE US	29
CHAPTER THREE PRINTING: THE ARCHITECT OF THE MODERN CHURCH	45
CHAPTER FOUR ELECTRONIC MEDIA: PLANTING THE SEEDS OF THE EMERGING CHURCH	63
PART II: ALTERNATIVE WAYS TO PRACTICE	
CHAPTER FIVE EVOLVING THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE	87
CHAPTER SIX COMMUNITY IN ELECTRONIC CULTURE	103
CHAPTER SEVEN LEADERSHIP IN ELECTRONIC CULTURE	125
CHAPTER EIGHT WORSHIP IN ELECTRONIC CULTURE	145
EPILOGUE	165
BIBLIOGRAPHY	167
ENDNOTES	171



SEEING BUT NOT PERCEIVING

CHAPTER ONE

A few years after I graduated from college, I became a lay leader at my local church. The pastor invited me to join a “task force” (a sexy name for a committee) that was assembled in order to rethink and revamp our contemporary worship service. At the time we had two services: a traditional service featuring an organist and a full choir leading hymns, and a contemporary service featuring a band leading praise music. Our contemporary service was floundering; the attendance was low and the energy lacking.

Our discussions as a task force centered on things like the style of worship leading, an inadequate sound system, and poor acoustics. Eventually, these conversations led us to consider the controversial measure of introducing a projection screen. The vast majority of our debate on this issue concerned questions of costs, logistics, and aesthetics. We wondered where the money would come from. Would the screen be obtrusive? Where would we put it? How would the older generation feel about it? These were all valid and important questions, but we began to believe these were not the most important questions for us to ask.

“IS TWENTIETH-CENTURY MAN ONE WHO RUNS DOWN THE STREET SHOUTING, ‘I’VE GOT THE ANSWERS. WHAT ARE THE QUESTIONS?’”¹

—MARSHALL MCLUHAN



Our original reason for considering a projection screen was largely imitative—all good contemporary services have one. But as we worked through the issue, we realized the rationale of “everybody is doing it” was flawed, and we began exploring different questions: Why do all contemporary services have a screen? What is the effect of using a projection screen versus using a hymnal or bulletin? How would this new form of media alter the congregation’s experience in worship?

After some discussion, we came to the conclusion that a screen frees the body from the bulletin or book. It invites movement, dance, and physical expression in worship. It lifts the heads of congregants, amplifying the sound and energy of their voices. We believed all of these were the chief marks of a “good” contemporary service, and they became our guides as we worked to implement this simple change. While this decision was about a relatively minor concern in the life of our church, there was great value in asking this new set of questions. When we considered the broader implications of a seemingly simple decision, it changed the nature of the debate, freed us from our opposing camps, and opened us to better ways of thinking about the rest of the service.

Our conversation was in no way unique to that church. Nor did our insights reflect a grand breakthrough in understanding worship technology. But I believe we hit on the fundamental issue of the ways in which media affect the gathered community. Unfortunately, these issues are often only raised—if they are raised at all—when dealing with simple forms such as the projection screen. We seem less interested in asking this question about the more pervasive and complex cultural forces at play both inside and outside of the church. For example, if something as simple as a projection screen can have a dynamic effect on a congregational experience in worship, what happens when more complex media are infused into the life of a church or into the lives of the people who are the church? What is the effect of the Internet on the way we think about and do church? How does the medium of television shape our understanding of community, leadership, and mission? In what ways is our understanding of the gospel altered when we communicate or preach with pictures instead of words?



MEDIA: THE CULTURAL ARCHITECT

The answers to these questions are based on a simple notion: The *forms* of media and technology—regardless of their *content*—cause profound changes in the church and culture. The power of our media forms has created both challenges and opportunities in the ways the people of God are formed. Unfortunately, just as Dorothy and her companions missed the man behind the curtain in *The Wizard of Oz*, we stand oblivious to the hidden power of media. Most of us point and stare at the giant wizard head wreathed in flame, quite unaware it is only a distraction—the con man’s sleight of hand.

The time has come for the church to pull back the curtain and expose the true effects of media. While this may sound like the hunt for some notorious villain, it is not. The media to which I am referring are neither evil nor good. Yet this in no way means they are neutral. Their power is staggering but remains hidden from view. Because we tend to focus our gaze on their content, the forms of media appear only in our peripheral vision. As a result they exert a subtle yet immense power. By exposing their secrets and powers, we restore our ability to predict and perceive the often unintended consequences of using new media and new methods. This understanding of media is crucial to forming God’s people with discernment, authenticity, and faithfulness to the gospel.

MR. NO DEPTH PERCEPTION

In 1991, *Saturday Night Live* introduced America to Mr. No Depth Perception, played by Kevin Nealon. The character made only one appearance, but for some reason the sketch left an indelible mark on my memory. The title tells the story: It’s a sketch about an enthusiastic and well-intentioned man who is completely unaware of the fact that he cannot perceive depth or distance in the world.

In the sketch, Mr. No Depth Perception is energized by the prospect of going sky-diving. He imagines how thrilling it must be to “pull the rip cord at just the right moment,” only to have his hopes dashed when his wife, for obvious reasons, adamantly refuses to support his eager aspiration. Later he crashes his head through the living room window in a simple attempt to see who is knocking at the door. It happens to be their friend Brenda with her new boyfriend Gary. They sit down for dinner, and Mr. No Depth Perception turns to his wife and says, “I can’t believe Brenda’s dating



this loser! You know what she's after, right?! I bet he's got money or something!" Gary, sitting only a few feet away, fidgets awkwardly in his seat. When Mr. No Depth Perception's wife reprimands him for his insensitivity, he responds by saying, "Oh, relax! He can't hear me way down there!" The sketch goes on like this, but you get the point.

If all comedy is a form of tragedy, then the tragedy for Mr. No Depth Perception is that this rather endearing adult is actually very much a child without any powers of discernment, which means he is quite dangerous to himself and others. As a result he must be tended to and cared for by his family at all times. It makes for good comedy, but it also makes you glad you aren't him.

I find Mr. No Depth Perception to be an appropriate metaphor for the church's relationship to media and technology. We are able to see, but we have great difficulty perceiving. We are able to make observations about what's going on around us, but we often misappropriate the meaning of these observations. We recognize that the use of image and icon is fast displacing the written word as the dominant communication system of our culture—a trend easily identified when Nike can strip its name from the swoosh icon without losing an ounce of brand recognition or equity—but we fail to perceive what the new iconic symbol system truly has the capacity to do and undo. We can see the glut of reality TV shows propagating the airwaves, but few understand that these shows reveal more about our understanding of community than our voyeuristic tendencies (something we will discuss later).

Our response to these shifts often stops with simplistic exhortations to either adopt or avoid the torrent of images. We either argue that electronic media have rendered old ways of doing church obsolete or that the new electronic storm is something to be resisted by creating a counterculture. These are not invalid responses; they are simply insufficient.

Like Mr. No Depth Perception, we are quite unaware of the limitations and dangers of our disability, sharing instead in his enthusiasm. Heralding the high virtue of efficiency and effectiveness, we eagerly embrace new media and technologies, assuming they will get the gospel message out better and faster. But prior to making decisions about how to appropriate new media, we must take seriously the role of technology and media in our culture and in the church.



A CULTURE OF ONE-EYED PROPHETS

My concern for the role of media and technology in culture is by no means new. Aside from the many recent cultural commentators who have issued warnings, this subject is also at the center of major films such as *I, Robot*; *Minority Report*; and *The Matrix*—all of which present apocalyptic visions of social control and the unintended result of technology's power to reverse roles with its creators. In many ways these are merely contemporary retellings of the famous novels of a previous era. George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, both written before 1950, are prophetic visions of societies overtaken by technological power. Orwell's novel introduces us to the ominous and all-seeing "Big Brother," who is always watching. Orwell warns of a dark and dangerous future where people are forced into conformity by invasive and controlling technology. In contrast, *Brave New World* introduces the critique in a more subtle way; the world Huxley describes promises a seductive, utopian future in which technological promise is the succulent yet poisoned apple.

Humanity's ambivalent relationship with technology has a long history, going back to the early 1800s when the Luddites, a group of mechanics in England, destroyed manufacturing machinery in reaction to the ways in which the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution were replacing human workers. Even earlier, the Amish maintained an equally radical, albeit less violent, rejection of certain technologies. To this day a prohibition on automobiles and electricity is central to the corporate practice of the Amish faith. While such a stance might appear to be an arbitrary time freeze, it is deeply informed by this community's theology of technology.

Even these are not the earliest prophetic warnings about technology. If we turn back time two-and-a-half millennia, we will discover Plato's *Phaedrus*, an account of Socrates instructing a pupil named Phaedrus. Amid the teachings, we learn of a legend that embodies one of the earliest critiques of communication technology in Western history. Socrates tells the story of two Egyptian gods: a king named Thamus and an inventor named Theuth. Theuth is known to have invented, among other things, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and writing. Socrates tells Phaedrus:

Now the king of all Egypt at that time was the god Thamus...To him came Theuth to show his inventions, saying that they ought to be imparted to the other Egyptians.



Thamus inquired into the use of each of them, and as Theuth went through them expressed approval or disapproval, according as he judged Theuth's claims to be well or ill founded. It would take too long to go through all that Thamus is reported to have said for and against each of Theuth's inventions. But when it came to writing, Theuth declared, "Here is an accomplishment, my lord the King, which will improve both the wisdom and the memory of the Egyptians. I have discovered a sure receipt for memory and wisdom." To this, Thamus replied, "Theuth, my paragon of inventors, the discoverer of an art is not the best judge of the good or harm which will accrue to those who practice it. So it is in this; you, who are the father of writing, have out of fondness for your off-spring attributed to it quite the opposite of its real function. Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of by their own internal resources. What you have discovered is a receipt for recollection, not for memory. And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality: they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant. And because they are filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom they will be a burden to society."²

Thamus is clearly no fan of this new invention of writing; his critique is scathing to say the least.

It may surprise and dishearten some to learn that the Thamus' insights bear striking resemblance to those who warn of the modern dangers of information overload due to television and the Internet. Quentin J. Schultze, author of *Habits of the High-Tech Heart*, describes the Information Age as one in which "...the information explosion will become a plague of *misinformation*—endless volleys of nonsense, folly, rumor masquerading as knowledge, wisdom, and even truth."³ While Schultze does not cite the ancient legend of Socrates as the source of his analysis, it is as though he took his insightful critique of the Internet straight from the lips of Thamus himself.

In his book *Technopoly* Neil Postman employs the Thamus story to illustrate an important point. King Thamus, who is opposed to writing, and Theuth, who heralds the promise of writing, are both "one-eyed prophets," each with the opposite eye closed.⁴ They each present a portion of the truth while simultaneously conveying a



subtle error. Thamus has a point: Writing does erode memory, and while it provides for new knowledge, this is in no way equivalent to wisdom. And yet Thamus failed to see the immense advantages of writing.

To perceive the true power and effect of any technology requires us to have both eyes open and to understand technology as Postman understands it—a Faustian bargain that both gives and takes away. This is, of course, hardly a groundbreaking idea. Nonetheless, this simple truth is often forgotten when we are considering the role of new media and technology in the church. I concur with Postman’s observation that our culture is teeming with “throng[s] of zealous Theuths, one-eyed prophets who see only what new technologies can do and are incapable of imagining what they will *undo*.”⁵ Still, while this is true of our culture at large, it is not quite so simple for the church. Depending upon the denomination, theology, and history of a given church, the positions of both Thamus and Theuth are well represented within today’s Christian culture.

To perceive media and technology with both eyes open, we cannot simply list the various benefits and liabilities of all new and existing media in hopes of understanding their power and meaning. Instead, the task before us requires an entirely different approach to analyzing media, recognizing them not simply as conduits or pipelines (i.e., neutral purveyors of information), but rather as dynamic forces with power to shape us, regardless of content. Such an approach invites us to ask different questions, *better* questions, and moves us beyond the oversimplified but common belief that media forms can be deemed good or bad based on how they are used. This perspective is deeply entrenched in the assumption that a medium can be considered “redeemable” if it dispenses the gospel or educational information, but “evil” if it distributes sex and violence. It is imperative we move beyond this paradigm and realize that our forms of media and technology are primary forces that cause changes in our philosophy, theology, culture, and ultimately the way we do church.