



Flickering Pixels

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Author's Note

Some of the material in this book was previously published in *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Zondervan, 2006). That book was aimed at people in church leadership. If you want to explore the topics addressed in this book more deeply, or want to know their implications for leaders and pastors who are trying to form God's people in a changing world, you can go deeper there.

If you've read that book, some of these themes will be familiar. However, in my speaking and travels, I began to hear a growing chorus of voices hungry to know how the connections I was making applied to the rest of life, not just church leadership. I wrote *Flickering Pixels* to apply insights about media and technology to some of the basic issues of our faith and life. While you will find some practical application, the main point of the book is to help you see the world in new ways.

In a sense, this book uses the same color palette but different brush strokes applied to a fresh canvas—I hope you enjoy the painting.

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HiddenPixels

I instinctively grabbed for the dashboard. The car was careening toward a sudden U-turn curve in the track. I glanced at the driver, expecting him to hit the brakes and avert catastrophe. Instead, he yawned. The car rocketed into the corner as my heart leapt to my throat. Breathing is overrated. The car glided smoothly in and out of the turn as if it had prepared its entire life for that moment. Afterward, the driver apologized for not going faster.

This was part of my “research” for the new ad account I was working on—Porsche cars. The people at Porsche had taken us to a racetrack to develop an appreciation for their product, and apart from nearly soiling my drawers, it worked.

My role as an advertising account planner was to serve as a kind of “consumer anthropologist.” That’s the sanitized description. More accurately, my task was to hijack your imagination, brand your brain with our logo, and then feed you opinions you thought were your own.

You're welcome.

Much of what I did involved unearthing private, exploitable data from consumers' lives—what we called “The Leverageable Insight.” An effective ad tries to tap viewers' most intense and emotional experiences, the trigger for all consumer impulses. My job was to save people from feeling impotent, unattractive, or powerless by offering them a Porsche, which promised to fix those problems.

I'm a slow learner. It took me a few years to realize that I was actually promoting a counterfeit gospel. Before you start judging, you should know I never offered cheap grace—the gospel according to Porsche will set you back between \$80,000 and \$150,000, depending on how much salvation you need.

Shortly after my awakening, I committed career suicide; I turned my back on a lucrative and enjoyable career and entered seminary. Four years later I accepted a call to serve as the pastor of a church. The emotional and spiritual whiplash was as bad as it sounds, yet the experience led me home.

The conversion began as a result of my own ambition. In an effort to sharpen my ability to manipulate the masses while I was in advertising, I stumbled upon a thinker who had been considered irrelevant for decades. He was an obscure literary professor who studied media and communication in contemporary culture. During the 1960s, his prescient cultural predictions earned him a place on the covers of *Newsweek* and *Life*; it was said his “theory of communication offers nothing less than an explanation of all human culture, past, present, and

future.”¹ The *New York Herald Tribune* breathlessly declared that he was “the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Einstein, Freud, and Pavlov.”² His name was Marshall McLuhan, and chances are he’s the most important thinker you’ve never heard of.

I began to read McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*, which took a wrecking ball to my worldview and became a penetrating alarm that woke me from slumber. I was given a vision of what my profession was doing—and undoing—in our culture, and it wasn’t pretty. As I continued reading, I learned something even more important: McLuhan’s insights about human culture and communication had profound implications for the Christian faith.

Christianity is fundamentally a communication event. The religion is predicated on God revealing himself to humanity. God has a habit of letting his people know something about his thoughts, feelings, and intentions. God wants to communicate with us, and his media are many: angels, burning bushes, stone tablets, scrolls, donkeys, prophets, mighty voices, still whispers, and shapes traced in the dirt.³ Any serious study of God is a study of communication, and any effort to understand God is shaped by our understanding—or misunderstanding—of the media and technology we use to communicate.

This book explores the hidden power of media and technology as a way to understand who we are, who we think God is, and how God’s unchanging message has changed, is changing, and will change. It’s about the way God communicates with us and the way

we communicate God to the world. Mostly, though, it's about training our eyes to see things we usually overlook.

Like tiny pixels of light, for example.

Every day we are entranced by a mosaic of flickering pixels. These little dots of light are practically invisible, so minuscule that we often ignore them.

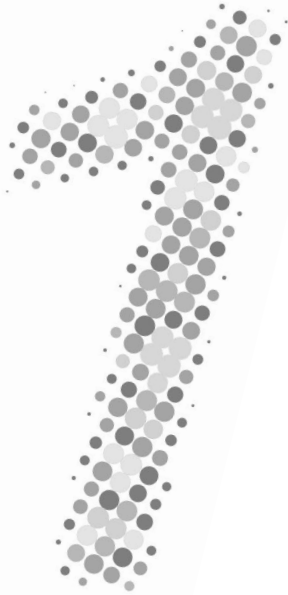
Nevertheless, they change us.

Flickering pixels compose the screens of life, from televisions to cell phones to computers. These screens, regardless of their content, change our brains, alter our lives, and shape our faith, all without our permission or knowledge.

These pixels are only one example of the technologies that shape us. There are more—many more. It is only by shifting our attention that we are able to see them, and in so doing learn to *use them* rather than be used by them.

CHAPTER 1

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 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 that he cannot perceive depth or distance.

Mr. No-Depth Perception is excited by the prospect of skydiving, imagining how thrilling it must be to “pull the rip cord at just the right moment” — an impossible feat for him to accomplish. Later, he shatters the living room window with his head in a simple attempt to see who is knocking at the door. As his guests, Brenda and Gary, come in and sit down for dinner, Mr. No-Depth Perception turns to his wife and says loudly, “I can't believe Brenda's dating this loser!” 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.

Mr. No-Depth Perception reflects the condition most of us find ourselves in when we try to understand how our culture shapes our faith. We see certain elements of our culture, but we have great difficulty *perceiving* their real importance. For example, we recognize that images and icons are fast displacing words as the dominant communication system of our culture — a trend easily identified by Nike’s ability to use its wordless Swoosh icon without losing any brand recognition — but we fail to perceive that the system of visual communication has the capacity to shape and influence faith.

Like Mr. No-Depth Perception, we are often oblivious to the limitations and dangers of our disability, believing instead that we can already see and perceive everything we need. We herald the high virtue of efficiency and effectiveness, eagerly embracing new cultural methods, media, and technologies. We assume our lives and our faith will be stronger, faster, and more relevant, yet we are surprised each time we shatter a window with our heads. All of a sudden life feels more complicated, unmanageable, and dizzying.

One-Eyed Prophets

Humans have a lengthy and ambivalent relationship with technology, something the films *Minority Report*, *The Matrix*, and *I, Robot* have explored. Such films present apocalyptic visions of social control and the unintended consequences of our obsession with creating ever-more-powerful machines.

In many ways, these movies are contemporary retellings of the dystopian novels of a previous era. George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *A Brave New World*, both written before 1950, are prophetic visions of societies overtaken by technological power. Orwell's novel introduces us to the all-seeing, always-watching "Big Brother" and warns of a dark future where conformity is guaranteed by invasive and controlling technology. In contrast, *A Brave New World* describes a seductive, seemingly utopian future in which technological promise is the succulent but poisoned apple that leads to humanity's downfall.

In nineteenth-century England, a group of disgruntled textile artisans known as the Luddites destroyed the machinery in wool and cotton mills to protest the dehumanizing technological advances of the Industrial Revolution.

In our time, the Amish maintain an equally radical, albeit less violent, rejection of certain technologies. 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 warnings about the dangers of technology are not the earliest. Several thousand years ago, a nomadic culture wandering in the Sinai desert was warned about the technology of images. The Hebrew people tell the story of a God named Yahweh who issued ten moral teachings, one of which explicitly prohibits using images as a medium for worship: "You shall

not make for yourself graven images.”¹ There is no explanation beyond this, but for some reason this God is concerned about the things we use to communicate and make meaning. In fact, his concern is so strong that the warning comes in second on his top-ten list.

Not long after this, in another part of the world, a Greek philosopher named Plato retells a story about Socrates teaching one of his pupils. In Socrates’ story, there are two Egyptian gods: a king named Thamus and an inventor named Theuth, who was known to have invented, among other things, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and writing. As Socrates tells it:

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 ... When it came to writing, Theuth declared, “... I have discovered a sure receipt for memory and wisdom.” To this, Thamus replied, “... you have attributed to it quite the opposite of its real function. Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful ... 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 because they are filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom they will be a burden to society.”²

In his book *Technopoly*, cultural critic 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.³ They each speak a measure of truth while simultaneously conveying a subtle error. Thamus has a point: Writing does erode memory, and while writing can provide new knowledge, it’s not the same as wisdom.

A friend recently said to me, “I had the most amazing insight about my spiritual life this morning. It was . . . basically, like . . . uh . . . let me get my journal, I wrote it down.” He then read his insight to me, periodically interrupting his own reading to enjoy his discovery all over again—“Oh yeah, *that’s* what it was!” He couldn’t remember the meaning or specifics of his spiritual breakthrough from just four hours earlier. When he was finished reading, he reported, “Since I’ve started writing this stuff down, I can’t remember anything without my journal.”

The erosion of memory is, in fact, a downside of the invention of writing; however, there is also an upside that Thamus failed to perceive. Reading and writing have an incredible capacity to expand consciousness and advance the common good. Consider the Reformation, which challenged the corruption and abuse of the medieval Catholic church. This would not have happened without a rise in literacy among the masses. Their ability to see directly for themselves what Scripture said is what gave traction and support to Martin Luther’s cause. Or consider the fact that free democratic forms of government have a tendency to take root and thrive in cultures with high literacy rates. Democracies demand that citizens have access to information in order to make informed decisions. Literacy provides this on a scale that a purely oral culture does not.

We need both eyes open if we are going to perceive the multitude of subtle forces that shape our lives. Technology both gives and takes away, and each new medium introduced into our lives must be evaluated. As Postman put it, our culture is teeming with “thronges of zealous Theuths, one-eyed prophets who see only what new technologies can do and are incapable of imagining what they will *undo*.”⁴

On the road ahead, we will see what it means to keep both eyes open.