

Watching my Television

Gary Larson is probably my favourite cartoonist. He appeals to me because of his eye for the bizarre and the off-beat: from cows conscious that they are 'without opposable thumbs' watching helplessly as their telephone(!) rings, to the Lone Ranger discovering in retirement that when Tonto referred to him as 'Kemosabe' for all those years, he was actually calling him 'horse's rear end'. Occasionally, as philosopher Albert Borgmann notes on the same cartoon I am about to describe, the cartoonist is able to make explicit in an absurd way our tacit, faulty assumptions about cultural commonplaces. The *Far Side* cartoon by Larson I have in mind features, from memory, two parents sitting on a couch with their two children lying on their stomachs on the floor with their chins propped up on their hands, all of them facing an empty lounge room corner. The caption reads something like this: 'The family in the days before television.'

The scenario is clearly and deliciously absurd and yet it captures to a large degree the naive way we often think about the presence or absence of 'everyday technology'. We tend to treat technologies, particularly the new electronic devices we buy—personal computers, DVD players, VCRs, mobile telephones—as mere items that fill the empty spaces in our lives. Many of us tend to think that a new technology merely adds new capacities to our lives, improves sound or picture quality, promotes ease of communication, increases speed of tasks, enables access to information and entertainment and so forth. That may well be the case. But there is a whole lot more happening when modern technology is introduced into our lives, even when it is done with our full consent. A particular technology gives with one hand; but it will take with another. Knowing what that trade-off might be is a task for the discerning community and hence surely for Christians.

In his book *Technopoly*, Neil Postman recounts a pertinent story from Plato's *Phaedrus* in which Socrates discusses the invention of writing via a story of Theuth, an Egyptian god and King Thamus. Theuth brought his inventions before King Thamus for his evaluation before handing them on to his people. Theuth is particularly enthusiastic about writing, claiming it would make the Egyptians wiser and improve their memory. Thamus, the 'philosopher king' is less enthusiastic; and he warns that the inventor of something is unlikely to be the best evaluator of his creation. Thamus replies to the god Theuth thus:

O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.

The lesson is clear. The claims we make for particular technologies do not always match up quite so positively with the reality and, indeed, almost opposite effects can often occur. Socrates was particularly concerned to highlight the importance of conversation, of dialogue, and the art of the question, of adaptation and response in 'real time'. How much more important is this emphasis as the members of family gather around the television to be entertained rather than interact with one another.

A technology does not simply create *possibilities* but creates and pushes *actualities* upon us. It catches us up in a certain logic, a certain way of seeing things and treating other people. It recreates our habits. It reshapes our notions of time, space and of place. It changes the nature of our relationships. In fact, it is quite inadequate to talk about technology as merely having 'effects'. Rather, technologies *involve* us. As philosopher Langdon Winner puts it, technologies are 'forms of life'.

The introduction of a new technology does not merely fill empty space. As Borgmann says, life is 'already always full' and the introduction of a new device requires a reweaving of the fabric of life around it.

Let's return to our well-known and perhaps well-worn television example. Is a television simply another piece of equipment that exists alongside a piano or a bookshelf? After a day at work, is watching a couple of hours (or more) of lightweight television merely 'just another option' alongside reading a demanding book or generating a conversation... or prayer?

It is possible that incurable readers or classical music lovers may be exceptions, but in most cases the answer is simple and it is 'No': television has a prominent place. Chances are it is reflected in the arrangement of your home's living area and the question, 'Shall I watch television?' (if it is at all a conscious question) is hard to avoid. What's more, should you decide to limit your television viewing, there's a good chance you'll be on the outer as you listen to people at work discuss their latest viewing habits: 'How is he going to break his brother out of prison?' 'Where are the 'survivors' of Oceanic flight 815?' etc, etc. You may not be privy to what people are talking about when they say, 'Not that there's anything wrong with that...' Missing out on the banter of everyday discourse with its pop cultural references may be a minor thing (to you) but it illustrates yet another one of the levels on which media and technology is interweaved with social and cultural reality.

Television as a medium is impatient with words, or, as the visually-biased may say (tellingly), 'talking heads'. It favours the visual, the spectacular, and the rapid changing of images and camera angles rather than continuity and development of thought. It is, overall, a feast for the eyes and ears but not a genuine exercise of imagination. The exercise of imagination has largely been done for us by others and the results are on view. Television thus encourages passivity rather than activity and consumption rather than conversation. Its connection to a system of programming is likely to make constraints on our plans, VCRs notwithstanding when the 'best' shows are on. It demands our full attention in a room unlike music in the background.

Neil Postman asks, 'What do Americans do?' To sum up: 'Americans... watch... TV.' Australians aren't all that different. I'm not going to deny my own love affair with television. Along with my favourite dramas and comedies, I watch my fair share of SBS documentaries and current affairs on the ABC. I try to be 'informed' though I seem to have more information than I know what to do with. (Am I supposed to act on this stuff? I dunno... Maybe I should 'blog' on it... that'll help...) As Marva Dawn has noted, the constant flow of information widens the gap between 'knowing about' and meaningful response.

But returning to the *Far Side* cartoon, what has been lost? Is there space for conversation in the home that is being needlessly consumed? Can we really join in a pining for 'community' if we surrender our time to luxury and private preference? Are we less likely to visit or receive visits? Will we be as likely to learn new skills and crafts? Is our ability to question and think through issues—like technology—enhanced or lessened? We at least need to ask the questions.

Perhaps we require a reassertion of the primacy of our being created in the image of God rather than the image of our own creations. I am more than a fleshy second-rate computer. I am a body with a wondrous array of actions and senses and not just a passive mind, eyes and ears mounted on a desk chair or lounge chair. The people that God has placed around about me in real space and real time deserve my attention and conversation more so than the monologue of television.

Surely that's a genuinely Christian concern.

'All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything.' (1 Cor 6:12)

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