Teaching Digital Discernment

Exploring the effects of informationism, mediationism, and narcissism.

"We become what we behold. We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us."

(Culkin, 1967)

By Chris Parker

Have you had the experience of reading educational technology articles that basically spruik benefits for learning, making you feel guilty because you just can't seem to keep up with it all? This article has neither of these aims. What I hope to do is explore some of the subtle shaping effects that a digital technology immersed life is having on our students, and to explore the role we have as Christian teachers in deliberately discipling them towards 'digital discernment'.

Digital technologies, and their associated devices, have become part of the air we breathe. We are now weaving these technologies into the very fabric of everyday functioning, communicating, thinking, feeling, and relating. The length and breadth of this shaping is highlighted by Turkle (2011) in her research where she found that many teenagers discover their feelings by texting them! Another example is found in the commentary from the field of neuroscience suggesting that neurologically the smart phone is becoming, measurably, an extension of our brain (Carr, 2011).

Digital technologies have not only changed the look and feel of the landscape of modern life, but they are shaping how we now think about the world, the way we understand and process relationships, our view of ourselves, notions of truth, visions of the 'good life', and what is virtuous character. Some of these influences happen at a deep pre-thought level—they are shaping our worldview.

Christians are not immune from having their biblical worldview massaged and nuanced by these technologies. Christian schools and Christian teachers need to ask questions in this space, not only about how much this cultural storyline has impacted them, but how are they proactively teaching their students to be discerning about these effects as they attempt to unfold for them a biblical view on all things.

The professional reading that might come by your desk— or hit your inbox—will largely take a utopian approach to the potential benefits of digital technologies to improve, and possibly revolutionize, education. However, there is a growing collection of publications from sociologists and cultural commentators projecting a more dystopian perspective on our technological immersion (Turkle, 2011;

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Birkerts, 2015; Powers, 2011; Carr, 2011; Detweiler, 2013; Bauerlein, 2009). Boyd (2015) in her book *It's Complicated*, helpfully suggests, based on the research she has done on teenagers across America, that the truth perhaps lies somewhere in the complicated middle. I suggest in this article that the biblical worldview brings a rich and beautiful lens that can help to uncomplicate our understanding. I will do this by exploring three areas of influence; informationism, mediationism, and narcissism.

Informationism

There was a time when the fastest way that information could be transmitted from one place to another was the fastest it could be transported by a person—horseback, steam train, etc. This changed with the invention of the telegraph. Suddenly, not only could information be transmitted as fast as it could be tapped out, but it could also go to multiple places at once. This social change birthed a cultural change in our view of the importance of information and being 'informed'.

Postman (1992), in *Technopoly*, explains that prior to the telegraph, people in one city in America didn't know what crimes, for example, happened overnight in another city—but now they could. This was the beginning of an idolizing and shallowing of information. As Postman suggests, "the telegraph may have made the country into one neighborhood, but it's a peculiar one populated by strangers who knew nothing but the most superficial facts about each other." Schultz (2004) in his book *Habits of the High Tech Heart*, coined the term "informationism" (p. 21). He states, "we are succumbing to informationism, a non-discerning, vacuous faith in the collection and dissemination of information as a route to social progress and personal happiness" (p. 26). Informationism was birthed with the invention of the telegraph.

This results in a mindset that craves to be 'informed'. Being informed brings a sense of security, safety, and satisfaction. There is, of course, nothing wrong with information; it's good to be informed. However, when any good thing becomes an ultimate thing, it becomes an idol and the resulting idolatry begins to shape our hearts and minds—the subject of our worship. With informationism we see a tendency towards settling for context-free knowing and the shallowing of understanding. Schultz acknowledges that "As the pool of information grows our actual knowing declines" (p. 32). He continues, "Reading online about the needs of the world, for

instance, is never the same as personally knowing people in need" (p. 34).

As context is reduced, we begin to lose our ability to discern between what is valuable information and value-less information. Have you noticed this in your students? The efficiency and effectiveness of information and communication technologies have resulted in an increase in being informed, but, ironically, a decrease, or shallowing, of knowing. The technologies that we have woven into the fabric of our lives—and education—are masterful at collecting data and communicating information: so much so that there is less time and 'space' for deeper knowing. However, a mindset of satisfaction with shallow knowing is permeated. Does this bend us further away from wisdom?

If the sentiments in the poem, *The Rock*, by T.S. Elliot were insightful back in 1934, how much more are they worth considering now in the light and shadow of the Internet:

> Where is the wisdom that we have lost in knowledge?
>
> Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

The abundance of information, and our informationism, are also effecting our reading. Carr (2011) in his book *The Shallows* (I highly recommend this book to educators of all grades) cites research showing that our reading speeds have not decreased with the abundance of information, but the nature of our reading has changed:

> We read if anything, faster than ever. Our reading rates have not slowed down. But we are no longer guided toward a deep, personally constructed understanding of the text's connotations. Instead we are hurried off toward another bit of related information, and then another, and then another. (p. 166)

Potted punchy grabs of information littered with hyperlinks ready to bounce you across the surface to some other context-less morsel, and all this wrapped up in a medium bordered by ads and other less than helpful temptations for informational-transportation. Hence, says Carr (2011), "The strip-mining of relevant content replaces the slow excavation of meaning" (p. 166).

Our idols become the objects of our affection, focus, and security. They can be subtle and abstract like our drive to 'be informed' so as to avoid the fear of missing out. However, these subtle idols are just as effective at distracting us from truth that Christ alone is worthy of our ultimate worship; He provides the rest He promises when these false idols ultimately provide anxiety and insecurity.

Mediationism

Technologies are increasingly being adopted in ways that have them mediating between the user and more embodied, authentic aspects of life. By way of illustration, consider the technology/innovation of cartography. Indigenous peoples—and Western folk prior to the innovation of mapping—had a more intimate, direct relationship and knowledge of the land where they lived. Maps begin to mediate and our spatial knowledge is potentially diminished—how much more so with GPS technologies (have you experienced this?).

I am not suggesting that maps, mapping, and cartography are in any way bad. Our ability to invent and innovate is a blessing from God—as are maps! However, if we acknowledge the mediating nature of the map, how much more must we acknowledge the mediating nature of social media, text messaging, and photo-blogging etc. Digital technology is increasingly mediating between us and authentic communion.

Have you ever sent a text message, for example, when you probably should have made a phone call? Texting can seem easier than a phone call as the technology plays a mediating role. It comes at less relational cost and if it draws less from my emotional account, I can perhaps have many more of these types of relationships. Powers (2010) reflecting on how his family now disperses to their rooms in the evenings, cynically asks, "Why not flee the few of the living room for the many of the screen, where all relationships are flattened into one user-friendly mosaic. A human collage that's endlessly clickable and never demands our full attention" (p. 53). The more we allow technologies to play a mediating role in our relationships, the greater the potential for a diminishing of authentic, relational engagement. Perhaps—as the increasingly popular meme suggests—we may at times need to *disconnect to connect*.

The more we weave these technologies into the unquestioned day-to-day of our lives and relationships, the greater potential to move away from authentic, embodied intimacy. As Groothius suggests, "The voice extends but the person recedes" (p. 38). Or as one discerning teenager puts it:

Facebook and MySpace sell themselves as social networking sites, but I think they actually do more to keep people apart than unite them. Why bother calling a friend when you can post on their wall? There's no need to visit a friend to catch up when you can just check their profile to see what's new. (Twenge and Campbell, 2009, p. 111)

This mediation then results in a growing dependency on these technologies: specifically in the context of relationships. A dependency on being *connected* but not necessarily on *connection*. Explain to a Year 10 class that they cannot bring any devices on their week-long school camp, and you will see the fear—a now clinically recognized anxiety—in many of their faces. Along with the fear of boredom, the anxiety of not having their brain-extension with them, and the disconnection from the flow of bite-sized updates of information, there will be the fear that they won't have their relational mediator. Unmediated connection can be confronting.

We can also use our digital technology to construct alternative mediated self-identities. Many of your students are spending a significant amount of time and emotional energy massaging and nurturing their online personas. While including himself, Challies (2011) suggests that "many of us are more concerned with who we are in a mediated context than who we are before those who live in the same neighborhood or who attend the same church" (p. 105). With each of the teenagers (and increasingly tweens) in your classes, are you relating to the whole unmediated child? Or are they holding something back of themselves that is saved for their digital projection?

Christ is the ultimate mediator between us and God. Could it be that the more we incorporate technology as a mediator between ourselves and authentic communion with others, we not only miss out on the relational richness that God has designed for us, but we also may be subconsciously bending ourselves towards a disposition that seeks to replace Christ as mediator in our communion with God? "We become what we behold", says Culkin (1967), "We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us."

Narcissism

Digital culture didn't give birth to narcissism. The first lie whispered to Adam and Eve contained a narcissistic temptation and it's been an expression of our fallenness ever since. However, the temptation is now stronger than ever for our students—and us if we are honest. The digital technologies that we have so successfully woven into the very fabric of our lives are often self-focused by design. They have an architecture that normalizes narcissism.

A longitudinal study of over 16, 000 students at San Diego University from 1982–2006 measured the level of narcissism of undergraduates using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). During this time period a 30% increase in the NPI was measured, and the study's report states, "gadgets and online social networking sites have stoked the self-loving tendencies of modern students" (Hoover, 2007, p. 1). Postman (1992), who was not aware of the Internet, prophesied, "Will the computer raise egocentrism to the status of a virtue?" (p. 17). How much more so with the invention and integration of the Internet, social networking,

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and pocketable devices that are connected to both?

In *The Narcissism Epidemic*, Twenge (2009) suggests four main contributing factors for the increase in narcissism; permissive parenting, celebrity obsession, access to easy credit, and not in the least, digital technologies (particularly social networking). She helpfully explains that not only is social networking designed for egocentrism, but it can drag the worldview norm to the narcissistic center:

Social networking sites reinforce narcissism in an endless loop. Narcissists have more 'friends' and connections on these sites, and narcissistic behavior and images are rewarded with more comments and more 'adds'. Thus users are more likely to be connected to people who are more narcissistic than the average person. So in addition to the site structure facilitating narcissistic self-promotion, the way users are connected may pull the norm of behavior and self-presentation toward narcissism. (p. 111)

Technologies contribute to the development of cultural storylines and then, in the case of communication technologies, becomes the amplifier of the storytelling. Could it be that our immersion in narcissistic-nurturing digital technologies subtly hinders a pursuit of Christ-likeness?

Christian education

Christian education is a wonderful opportunity to teach for transformation. Additional to the curriculum—or is it through the curriculum—we seek to teach our students to:

- understand and celebrate the intricacy, beauty, and grandeur of all strands of the creation
- recognise the places and ways that the goodness of God's world now tends away from Him—the "pattern of this world" (Romans 12:2)
- participate in a transformation that begins with "the renewal of their minds" (Romans 12:2) and extends into all the dark cracks in the creation that desperately need the light of the gospel.

The "patterns of this world" are sometimes really obvious—to both teacher and student. Often, however, they are subtle. Technologies often create subtle patterns of thinking that draw us away from God and towards an idolatry of some form. By their very nature, technologies are adopted into the everyday frameworks of life, and therefore their shaping effects can be less obvious to us—like the fable of the frog in the pot of hot water that doesn't realise the need to jump before he boils to death.

Perhaps never before has a younger generation embraced

a suite of technologies with such passion, assumption, and dependency. This provides Christian educators with a rich opportunity to teach for transformation through discernment—digital discernment.

By acknowledging that we have a tendency to be shaped by the patterns of this world towards idolatry, of one form or another, a biblical worldview recognises the non-neutrality of technology. Technology is good—in fact our ability to invent and innovate is a rich blessing from God—but if we embrace it uncritically we risk being shaped by it. We may be shaped towards idolatry and away from shalom and the full and flourishing life God has designed for His people.

Christian educators will courageously go further than just teaching their students to make sure they use digital technologies in godly ways. Even as they use the technologies in their classrooms to teach the curriculum, they will seek opportunities to disciple their students to see that even when they approach their technological engagement in a godly manner, they may still be being shaped by it. The media commentator McLuhan didn't pull any punches when he stated that:

Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot. For the content of a medium is just the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind. (p. 18)

There are many questions that this call for teaching digital discernment raises, such as: "What about when parental modeling and family culture are completely at odds with this message, making us seem like Luddites?", "Aren't we as teachers just as immersed?", "The government curriculum barely has space for us to teach *with* a technological integration let alone teach *for* a philosophy of technology". At what age/stage do we start teaching discernment, as it seems irrelevant when they are really young but too late when they are older?"

These are important questions that I suggest schools should be discussing.[1] However, I would like to conclude with three questions that flow from the notions of informationism, mediationism, and narcissism that may be profitable to discuss as a staff group after reading this article:

How well are we inspiring our students toward wisdom through their learning and not just toward contentment with a collection of information—even though their technologies shape them to think this way?

As we, and our students, increasingly embrace mediated

living through our digital devices, how can we best model and disciple a more frequent seeking of authentic relational intimacy and a reducing of the distancing effects?

What can we do as a school community (what story do we need to tell) to winsomely, yet powerfully, unfold for our students that they are not the center of the universe—even though the technologies that they live and breathe are screaming at them that they are?

Footnote

[1] I highlight here the great work of Covenant Christian School in NSW with their Digital Discipleship program for senior students. A number of Christian schools have embraced and adopted these resources to their own context. Visit www.digitaldiscipleship.com.au or contact Dave Youl for more information (dyoul@covenant.nsw.edu.au).

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Discernment or Deception
By Dr Ken Dickens

I think it was Martin Lloyd Jones who said that discernment was the last thing to be developed and the first thing to go in Christian character. It is biblical discernment that stops us being sucked into false stories in which we are immersed. To discern means to distinguish, which in a relativist age, smacks of intolerance.

The two common memes of "Whatever" and "It's all good" urge us not to distinguish, not to discern. In Colossians 2:8 Paul urges us "not to be taken captive to the hollow and deceptive philosophies that depend on human tradition and the basic principles of the world rather than on Christ". The contrast is stark—either discern or be deceived!

Discernment is not just resistance to being sucked in, it is active critical engagement with ideas, trends, and habits. In 2 Corinthians 10:5 Paul writes "We take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ".

So our curriculum—an unfolding of the world to our students, needs to be concerned with discernment—distinguishing between conflicting stories. Our curriculum needs to promote critical thinking that is not based on autonomous human rationality but on biblically informed wisdom.

This discerning wisdom is not a crass black/white, good/bad exercise. It is finely nuanced. Returning to our memes, it requires reclaiming "Whatever" and saying, "Whatever I do I do in the name, in the character of Jesus". It's seeking and finding whatever is true, noble, right, pure, and admirable. Discerning wisdom means affirming that it is indeed 'all good' because of creation, but that it's all distorted and corrupted because of the fall and it's all in need of redemption.

This is the transcript of a video resource used in the Certificate of Christian Education (Deliver) developed by the National Institute for Christian Education. The video can be watched here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWLU2d4xfrs