

“Author’s Response” by Wes Avram for @ *This Point*, © Columbia Theological Seminary

A strength of the church, and its theologies, is a remarkable adaptability to changing culture. That will surely remain true in the face of the digitally mediated cultural change we're going through now. Yet I agree with Douglas Rushkoff, who has recently called what we're living through "present shock," playing off of Alvin Toffler's 1971 idea of "future shock."¹ Missiologists, sociologists, artists, rhetoricians, and cultural critics must become partners to more traditional theologians. It's for these reasons that the kind of conversation convened here is so important: provisional, creative, and responsive. And it's for these reasons that I'm so grateful to David Forney, Stacy Duke, and Raj Nadella for their careful and provocative responses to my unformed thoughts on social media. They've offered correctives, clarified language, and taken the conversation further.

Mr. Forney's critique is perhaps the strongest among the three, so I'll begin with his. I should note that I don't disagree with him. He offers helpful corrections and complements. That said, I'll respond to his points as I hear them.

First to his observation that I might have overblown the generational divide between digital immigrants and natives. He's surely correct, as is the research he cites. My observations are meant to be measured less by systematic verification than by intuitive application. I'm trying to name a reality that is increasingly true for increasing numbers, even while not *universally* true. There are wide numbers of folks, even among those under forty, who aren't digitally saturated. That can't be forgotten. And there's no doubt that the personal approach I took in my essay was somewhat limited my observations to the American upper-middle class.

Nevertheless, two things are worth considering. One is that the rise of the "smartphone" might be a game changer, to which our analyses just haven't caught up. It's democratizing digital access quickly and spreading social media into parts of our society where it might have been less available even three or four years ago. Second is an observation based on Barry Sanders's and Ivan Illich's writing on literacy. In *ABC*, they suggest that within the millennium of Western "bookish culture" now past, it was a mistake to say that some were "literate" and some "non-literate," for in a culture in which literacy is a measure for access, power, learning and more, those who are "non-literate" intuitively understand themselves by reference to literacy.² They are, in fact, "illiterate" by social measures (even absorbing the elitist judgment that the literate often gave that term). To borrow the immigration metaphor, an immigrant is not on one side of a line and a native on the other. An immigrant lives within the world of the franchised, increasingly seeing herself by reference to the perceived native. And the natives see themselves in relation to the immigrant. There are fewer and fewer zones of life that are not experienced to some degree by virtue of where they are on the continuum of digital connection—with either a subtle devaluation or a reactive romanticizing of disconnection coming with that.

I take Forney's second critique to suggest that I've committed an errant dualism by implying that what's been considered the private realm is the sole location of moral formation, and that in doing that I've undervalued the public realm. One might read that claim into my essay, and I need to take responsibility for any lack of clarity that invites such a reading. *But that is not my claim.* My claim is rather one of important *tensions* in moral development. I mean to say that healthy moral, political, and ecclesial development require a lively *distinction* between public and private, and ongoing discourse *about* the distinction. The line is never fixed, but the healthy positing of such a line is vitally important—as are virtues developed on *both* sides of that line. They mutually interact. An overweening private realm opens space for abuse and loss of conscience. An overweening public

realm opens space for other forms of loss. My argument is about the need for a working distinction and the ways in which social media render discourse about such a distinction far more difficult. One simply has a different moral relationship with a screen than with a face, even if one imagines a face on the other side of the screen. One can only attribute a moral dimension to screen-based communication if one can mirror the complex experiences of face-to-face communication. That requires the development of a complex, morally shaped memory of living interaction that one can bring into digital discourse. That is the moral habit necessary for the development of conscience. Without that, we have only *rules*. Rules are fine, in and of themselves, but are far less powerful in creating culture than *habits*.

Forney also addresses nonverbal communication being lost in screen-mediated communication. In light of all I'm suggesting here, I can only agree. I would, however, suggest that we might need to expand his language as well, for digital communication is not "verbal" communication as opposed to "verbal/non-verbal" communication. That distinction presumes an information-channel understanding of communication that has been reconsidered in communication theory. There is no uninflected communication, even if it is purely instrumental. Even on the screen we can't make meaning of an utterance without attributing some form of performance to it. We imagine something being *said*. The challenge of social media is not simply the *lack* of non-verbal presence, but the multiplication of *error* in attribution of non-verbal meanings.

Finally, Forney suggests that I assert a Niebuhrian "Christ and culture in paradox" view of these things, while flirting with a "Christ against culture" conclusion. He suggests that a "Christ transforming culture" frame might be more productive in a context in which digital technologies and social media are not going away. Perhaps so. I simply prefer to see that Niebuhrian typology as an interesting heuristic for self-critique, but not a fixed set of options. As I strive more for intuitive application in my essay than quantitative verification or systematic theorizing, I think I'd rather suggest that we're in a time now when we need to be able to tack a bit, like a sailboat, among the various critical stances available to us. This will include rejecting, accepting, qualifying, transforming, analyzing without conclusion, rethinking, and more. We need to be far more ad hoc in our responses, I fear.

Maybe I'm just too confused by the realities I swim in as I push a congregation toward using these technologies even while I mourn what we're losing as we do. I watch my children and accept even as I'm concerned. And I believe that one of the ways we participate with the Spirit in cultural transformation is the development of critical awareness. I don't want to romanticize either the past or the present. Nor do I want to indulge either a utopian or dystopian view of the future. Instead, my purpose would be to develop a robustly eschatological view—both critical *and* hopeful.

To Stacy Duke's essay, my response is less complete, for she seems less anxious about my anxiety, and so illuminates and extends my thoughts more than she challenges them. I'm pleased to see her bring Sherry Turkle's and Albert Borgmann's work into the conversation, for they have each wrestled with the social changes informing these questions in extraordinary ways for some time. Turkle's question of how we form our identities on screen has forever changed our ways of thinking about our technologies. Borgmann's careful ways of identifying differences between tools we participate in shaping and tools to which we give ourselves without understanding might be helpful in this conversation. Duke brings personal examples from her ministry that are both interesting and helpful.

Her several examples of positive use of social media are a helpful reminder that we shouldn't be overly reductive, in either positive or negative ways. Nevertheless, I would still note that her examples continue to be of how social media and related technologies are used to help us more widely, or efficiently, or more enjoyably do things we used to do without them. They are what I call "utilitarian" or "instrumental" uses rather than uses that make these technologies part of our very being. What will happen when we pass the tipping point from social media adding value to our lives to social media *radically* changing our lives? There might be some good from that. There might also be some irreparable loss. And I'm still left wondering if our children, who will have no social memory before social media, will have anything like the experience of it that we describe.

Shortly before her death at 99, my grandmother reflected on life before telephones, cars, airplanes, and such. "We were promised these things would give us more freedom for relationships. They didn't," she said. Intuitively, I think she was right. That doesn't mean I want to live before these things. But it does mean I don't want to be fooled about them or what they've done.

To Raj Nadella, I'm grateful for his extensions and questions. He more eloquently described some of the tensions I was trying to get at than I, and in doing that brought helpful perspective and critique. For my reply to his response, I'll simply pull a couple of quotes out and respond with a little friendly self-defense.

Early in his essay he says that, "Contrary to fears that technology has turned the private into public or the public into private, social media allow people to decide how much they want to share, with whom, when, and in what fashion." Now, while social media might bring more choice in ways of interacting, and to some more control, as a general observation, I simply disagree Nadella here. For the space of social media is not a "commons" in any traditional sense. It is not commonly owned. It is a commercial space into which we project our identities and construct our social lives, but which we do not hold in common. Others control our access and structure our "privacy," setting the boundaries in which we only partially control our façade. As social media more and more monopolize how we communicate (and we're a ways from that now), it will become incomprehensible that one is not plugged in. One will be largely excluding oneself from social life if one excludes oneself from this commercially owned and operated—and barely regulated—grid. And we have little shared, or democratic, control over it.

Later in his essay Nadella interestingly notes the following:

His anxiety seems to stem from an assumption that an individual's encounters with God occur only in the traditional embodied spaces and ways. Does one connect with God only in the "physical, patient, and prolonged" spaces/forms of connection, as he seems to suggest? It has yet to be established that the new social media prevent people from experiencing God.

Well, I guess so, but I don't really know how one would confirm or disconfirm that. Can God use social media? I hope so. Is social media a gift from God? In some ways, it might be, but in some ways I'm quite sure it's not. I guess one could say the same about alcohol. This is why I note my "anxiety" rather than my outright rejection. We don't know where this is going, and I doubt any one of us should presume we do. I'm less interested in asserting that God won't be encountered in social media than in suggesting that in a social media-saturated experience there will be some core experiences by which God has been traditionally encountered in Christian life that will be less and less accessible to us. Still, I want to believe God will have God's way.

As to whether social media make more vivid for us how we once related in embodied settings or, rather, actually change how we relate, I'll let the interesting differences between Nadella's assertion at one point that they *don't* stand alongside his example of Klout.com. I'd think the answer is yes and no. For some, virtual relations are imitations of embodiment. For others, and I'd think an increasing number of others, they have their own being and will be increasingly less based on embodied analogies.

I noted Douglas Rushkoff above. In the preface to his most recent and sweeping view of our so-called digital age, he describes his view of the ontology of digitized consciousness:

We tend to exist in a distracted present, where forces on the periphery are magnified and those immediately before us are ignored. Our ability to create a plan—much less follow through on it—is undermined by our need to be able to improvise our way through any number of external impacts that stand to derail us at any moment. Instead of finding a stable foothold in the here and now, we end up reacting to the ever-present assault of simultaneous impulses and commands. (12)

Here again is an observation born not of systematic verification but of critical intuition. Whether every "digital native" (however many of them there are) lives this way or not is less important than the prescience of this observation to describe an increasingly present reality. I basically agree with Rushkoff, and my agreement makes me anxious for where we're going, how we're believing, and who we're becoming. The Jewish Rushkoff begins the same book with an ironic, eschatological comment on our present moment: "*The messianic age is no longer something to prepare for; it is a current event. What would Jesus do?*" (9) In my own eschatological way, I have the same question.

¹ Douglas Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* (Current, 2013).

² Barry Sanders and Ivan Illich, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (Vintage, 1989).