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Examining Trans–media Effects

A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them.

—Marshall McLuhan,
*Understanding Media:
The Extensions of Man*

This chapter will begin with the story of how I adopted the practice of extemporaneous preaching. This may seem an odd point of entry into a book on faith formation in a trans-media culture. I proceed, however, deeply influenced by Marshall McLuhan's approach to media studies. For McLuhan, the term *media* does not simply refer to a limited small group of media employed for communication, like the newspaper, radio, television, and Internet. Media are, instead, all the "extensions" of humanity, including clothing, housing, and in the case under consideration, language itself.[1]

For most pastors, the sermon is an ancient communicative "technology" that they inhabit more regularly than any other. It is one of the most important extensions of ourselves into the communities we serve. The unique dimensions of this medium, practiced week in and week out in a local congregation, illustrate the formative aspects of media more generally construed, and so offer an apt analog for the technologies of faith formation we will consider later in the substantive chapters of this book.

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1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko, 2003), 168.

Intimations: The Science of the Preaching and Reading Brain

I can still remember, vividly, the first sermon I preached on internship. Rather, I should say I remember vividly what it felt like to prepare the sermon, and the intense emotions and nerves that gathered around delivering it. I typed out a manuscript. I agonized over word choices, sought to align theology and homiletical aspirations, hoped to be interesting. Because I had worried over the individual words, the grammar of the sentences, the structure and ordering of paragraphs, the delivery of the sermon was closely tied to a written text. Sunday morning I read the text word for word out loud, like a poem.

Reading the manuscript aloud was agonizing, because my preferred approach to communication, in individual or group conversations, is to look people in the eye, speak freely, and not read texts to people (unless it is a recitation, in which case different habits and rules apply). Here I was, in a living worship environment, and instead of speaking freely and vibrantly, I was reading verbatim a text I had written earlier in the week. I can still remember what an out-of-body experience it was, watching myself deliver the sermon. Although I had attended many oral readings of written texts, such as poetry readings, and knew that reading from a text can actually be a legitimate (and even beautiful) approach to oral communication, I knew in that first sermon that it would not work for me as a preacher.

So I set myself the task of revolutionizing my preaching, abandoning the pattern of preaching I had received and observed throughout my lifetime. I had rarely witnessed a preacher preach extemporaneously. The majority of my experience had been with manuscript preachers. During the remainder of the internship—because I had time to do so and the inclination—I did two new things. First, I memorized the gospel lesson each week and proclaimed (performed) it, like a dramatized reading. Then, following the gospel performance, I preached a sermon working from an outline I had written and memorized. At first, I still wrote out an entire manuscript, then organized it down into an outline and memorized that. Later, as the year went on, it became increasingly easy to preach without writing the manuscript first. In fact, after a while the written manuscript got in the way, because I wondered whether what I preached orally on Sundays remained faithful to the manuscript written at an earlier date. My concern would remain with what I had written or outlined rather than what I was currently saying, as if the media in which the sermon had been "trapped" was more important than the living voice of the gospel in the moment of oral proclamation.

By the end of my internship, I had even greatly modified the outlines themselves. Instead of a five-point outline with subpoints, I would have just

a few words written down in order, brief pointers for remembering the way, signposts on the road.[2] Eventually, even the outline got in the way of sermon delivery because my mind was tied to the outline, and I would worry if I had forgotten a section, not to mention worry about what to do if a new direction came to mind in the process of preaching the sermon—what does one do with that? Over the next couple of years, I stopped writing out the outlines but still developed and memorized some kind of outline sans notes for a few more years.[3] More recently I simply stand up to preach without any kind of outline or order in mind at all. The form simply "arrives" in my mind, fully formed, strands woven together from the reading and contemplation I have engaged in over the course of the week.

This is not to say that I do not prepare a sermon. I still study, read, sift, reflect, pray, and meditate. Instead, all these activities coalesce around the preaching moment as available resources to weave in. They are not required. In a pinch, I can preach a sermon on any text at any time. It is my hypothesis that I can do this because the formative work of preparing those sermons, year in and year out, and specifically in the manner I have been preparing them, has changed the structure of my brain. I have neural pathways, open connections and deep patterns established, that facilitate the form my preaching now typically takes. In other words, I could not have prepared for that first sermon in the way I prepare now, precisely because it has been past repeated preparations that have shaped my brain in specific ways.[4]

The anxiety and feelings I felt in those early experiences were the growing pains of a brain that had not yet been formed to do what it now does. The

2. I am reminded of something I read years ago while studying Jonathan Edwards, that "nearly twenty years after he first began to preach (i.e., approximately 1742), Edwards stopped writing his sermons in full; so one of the most famous 'manuscript preachers' in American history shifted in the later half of his ministry to a different pattern." Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 190.

3. In fact, I created most of these memorized outlines while jogging, which probably also has important neuroscientific implications.

4. I was first alerted to the relationship between the neuroplasticity of my brain and the development of my preaching when I read this now-famous sentence from Nicholas Carr's book on neuroscience and Internet usage. "Over the last few years I've had the uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn't going—so far as I can tell—it's changing. I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I feel it most strongly when I'm reading. I used to find it easy to immerse myself in a book or lengthy article. My mind would get caught up in the twists of the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration drifts after a page or two. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do." Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 5.

"equipment" we make use of takes part in the forming of our thoughts. I have had similar feelings and experiences when learning to play an instrument or drive a new vehicle or acquire any new communication skill using a new medium. Each equipping requires the formation of new neural pathways. This phenomenon scientists now indicate is an outcome of the neuroplasticity of the adult brain. The consensus in much of the neuroscience community (and this is a relatively new discovery) is that the adult brain is very plastic, even, we might say, "massively plastic."[5] As Nicholas Carr writes, "The brain has the ability to reprogram itself on the fly, altering the way it functions."[6]

Furthermore, and this is central to what will be explored throughout this book, the media I used to prepare sermons, and the approaches I took to preaching, were technologies that affected the outcome. Different media and approaches to preaching would shape my brain in different ways. In fact, in some sense they function as extensions of my brain. If, for example, over the past ten years I had been in the habit of memorizing a manuscript word for word, my brain would be adapted for the quick memorization of written texts, a different and intriguingly powerful tool used by many in theater and the performing arts. Additionally, and equally important, not only has the media impacted the repeating media, the media has impacted the message itself. As Maryanne Wolf in *Proust and the Squid* notes, "The reading brain is part of a highly successful two-way dynamic. Reading can be learned only because of the brain's plastic design, and when reading takes place, that individual brain is forever changed, both physiologically and intellectually."[7] In my case, the living nature of the sermons I preach is intimately connected to the mode of their preparation and delivery, and the extemporaneous habits I have been cultivating over this long period of time better serve the nature of the homiletical task and its outcome in that they continue to change my brain through repeated practice.

Finally, according to Christian faith, all of what I have described above is a happy outcome of the cooperation of the Holy Spirit and neurology. The Holy Spirit works through means, and in this case the Holy Spirit works on the brain of the pastor, preparing it like fertile soil to be a carrier of the Word. The Holy Spirit works through means, including creation itself, and so it is no surprise that the Holy Spirit also works in and through the neurological pathways forged through repeated and rehearsed practices.[8] The surprise in all of this is that such

5. Ibid., 26.

6. Ibid., 27.

7. Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2007), 5.

repeated practices, inspired by the Holy Spirit, do not simply train the brain for more of the same—they are in fact generative. As Wolf notes later in her book, "Proust's understanding of the generative nature of reading contains a paradox: the goal of reading is to go beyond the author's ideas to thoughts that are increasingly autonomous, transformative, and ultimately independent of the written text."[9] What Wolf says next is how I have felt as an adult learning to preach, although she is describing a child learning to read: "From the child's first, halting attempts to decipher letters, the experience of reading is not so much an end in itself as it is our best vehicle to a transformed mind, and, literally, and figuratively, to a changed brain."[10]

The Rise of Bookishness

Ivan Illich, a philosopher and social critic (unfortunately little known outside the education community), has noted the formative aspects of the shift to "bookishness" during the early scholastic period, a period situated approximately right in the middle between the early church context and the contemporary social media era. His commentary on Hugh's *Didascalion*, titled *In the Vineyard of the Text*, examines the early scholastic period for insights into the relationship between the book as medium and faith formation. At the dawn of scholastic reading, writes Illich, an approach to letters helped form the scholastic institutions we have now for centuries taken for granted. He explains, "Universal bookishness became the core of western secular religion, and schooling its church."[11] This is the pattern for formation with which the majority of people in Western culture are still familiar, and it is a pattern for formation the church emulates in its ministries in faith formation programs. However, writes Illich, "Western social reality has now put aside faith in bookishness as it has put aside Christianity. Since the book has ceased to be the ultimate reason for their existence, educational institutions have proliferated. The screen, the medium, and 'communication' have surreptitiously replaced the page, letters, and reading."[12] Illich's intriguing hypothesis is that in a post–book era, educational institutions actually proliferate rather than die off, and this because the new media allow for greater diversity of forms than in educational systems where the root metaphor of the book is the only or overly dominant

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8. Chapter 6 supports these assertions in greater detail.

9. Wolf, *Proust and the Squid*, 18.

10. Ibid., 18.

11. Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1.

12. Ibid.

metaphor. Greater diversity of media offers an opportunity for greater diversity of patterns of formation.

The value of Illich's approach lies in his passion for the bookish culture he now sees coming to an end, as well as the new media he witnesses arising to take the place of it. Without saying as much, Illich recognizes and affirms a shift to a trans-media culture. For Illich, this is "the appropriate moment [in history] to cultivate a variety of approaches to the page that have not been able to flourish under the monopoly of scholastic reading."[13] He is not interested in denigrating the rise of the screen as the dominant root metaphor for media in the present era, nor is he interested in waxing nostalgic for a bookish culture that is dying and that he wishes to resurrect. Instead, his goal is "to increase the distance between [his] reader, whom [he] expects to be a bookish person, and the activity in which he engages while reading [Illich]."[14] In order to function well in a trans-media era, people need to be equipped with the critical tools necessary to recognize the impact of the "extensions" media encumbers them with and liberates them for, even while they realize that the extensions will subsume themselves the more regularly and naturally they use them.

One of Illich's more intriguing wishes in his book is this:

> I dream that outside the educational system . . . there might be something like *houses of reading*, not unlike the Jewish *shul*, the Islamic *medersa*, or the monastery, where the few who discover their passion for a life centered on reading would find the necessary guidance, silence, and complicity of disciplined companionship needed for the long initiation into one or the other of several "spiritualities" or styles of celebrating the book.[15]

Illich helps readers imagine one such house of reading through his commentary on Hugh's *Didascalion*. Students trained according to Hugh's vision would "read their way toward wisdom in an age in which new collections [of books and information] could only too easily have scattered their brains and overwhelmed them. He offers them a radically intimate technique of ordering this huge heritage in a personally created, inner spime."[16]

Perhaps it is this word "spime" that captures as well as anything what this book is seeking to identify. *Spime* is a word borrowed from Einstein, a mash-up

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13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 2.
15. Ibid., 3.
16. Ibid., 45.

of space and time, space–time, *spime*. By placing two quite different formative contexts in juxtaposition one to the other, one is teasing out precisely what the space and time dimensions of the catechumenate or online virtual environments are and signify. Illich invites his readers to attend to where they are when they are being formed, how they spend time there, what media is at play in the context, and what that time and space does to them. Furthermore, Illich brings to conscious attention what is most often lost, that there is circularity to this spime, in that one creates a spime to order one's world and learn in it, but one is at the same time formed by the use of the very form one utilizes. In this sense, the communicative medium functions much like a culture. Harold Innis, in his book *The Bias of Communication*, writes, "Culture . . . is designed to train the individual how much information he needs, to give him a sense of balance and proportion. . . . Culture is concerned with the capacity of the individual to appraise problems in terms of space and time and with enabling him to take the proper steps at the right time."[17]

Illich believes that the book functioned in this capacity for a very long time, essentially the epoch that extends from the scholastic period up to the modern period, but that we are now in another transition, after the book, into what is being called a trans-media era. He writes:

> The materialization of abstraction in the form of the bookish text can be taken as the hidden root metaphor giving unity to the mental space of this long period, which we might also call the "Epoch of the University," or the "Epoch of Bookish Reading." [This interpretation] enables us to speak in a new way about another epochal turn in the social history of the alphabet that is happening within our lifetime: the dissolution of alphabetic technique into the miasma of communication.[18]

We turn to one example of this "miasma" of communication in conclusion, as one additional metaphor for how media function both with and after the book.

One Other Media Effect: Photography

Recently, Facebook (and even the entire social media world) became picture heavy. Facebook acquired Instagram for $1 billion. People have always been able to post photos as a part of their status updates, but the new ease with

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17. Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951), 85.
18. Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 116–17.

which this can be accomplished and the relative ease with which people can edit images to include text overlay have resulted in many more status updates published as images rather than plain text. Interestingly, if one posts the right kind of picture and topic, one gets more "likes" than a plain text status update, even if the update is not original to the one posting. In other words, although the shift to an image rather than text increases overall responsiveness patterns (which are one measure of community in social networks), it is interaction around canned graphics and texts rather than original content. This represents greater sociality but in another way is derivative and less beautiful and so stands as a simulacrum of the creativity of vibrant community.

This is a second and equally important analogue of the changes being seen in the trans-media culture. Susan Sontag, in *On Photography*, writes, "Feuerbach observes about 'our era' that it 'prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality, appearance to being'—while being aware of doing just that."[19] This preference for the image over the thing is illustrated frequently in people's efforts to show how "real" their communities are by shining the patina of their publicity. Christian communities are more attractive, more inviting, and truer if the images they put on their publicity and marketing tools are of a high production value. This is related to the well-known phenomenon, where an incredibly "true" or meaningful experience elicits this response: "It was like a scene from a movie." The imaging of the event lends it credibility and authenticity.

So Sontag can, later in her book, argue:

> The problem with Feuerbach's contrast of "original" with "copy" is its static definitions of reality and image. It assumes that what is real persists, unchanged and intact, while only images have changed: shored up by the most tenuous claims to credibility, they have somehow become more seductive. But the notions of image and reality are complementary. When the notion of reality changes, so does that of the image, and vice versa. "Our era" does not prefer images to real things out of perversity but partly in response to the ways in which the notion of what is real has been progressively complicated and weakened, one of the early ways being the criticism of reality as façade.[20]

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19. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2001), 153.
20. Ibid., 160.

Sontag is exemplary, in a way similar to Illich, in that she is willing to identify and narrate the weaknesses of the shift to a new art form, the photograph (in fact, no one in contemporary literature has skewered and challenged photography more than Sontag), while simultaneously celebrating it enough to give it actual and sustained attention. Sontag, precisely as a philosopher and cultural critic, is unwilling to let the matter of photographs as a medium slip away from her, as if that were ancillary to the real matter of what images the photographs convey.

The insights of Illich and Sontag are bringing to light the diversity of considerations available as media ecology is brought into conversation with faith formation. They point ahead to later chapters in this book, which will even more intentionally consider the implications of media effects in manifestly formative media ecologies, like video games and the catechumenate. It is at this point in the book, though, that adequate space must be given to the constructive concerns of the critics. It is not enough just to admit there are a few minor problems and then get on with an optimistic wholesale appropriation of new media without taking the criticisms of the shift to these new media seriously. Chapter 2 engages these critics and adapts some of their critical tools for use in awareness building.