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Intro to Mass Media
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Personal Media History

“Those who make them become like them” says the biblical psalmist in Psalm 115. Though the author of the psalm refers to idolatrous worship of tangible objects, a parallel result can be seen in the impact of various media technologies on an individual’s thought process and that of society as a whole. In media studies, technological determinism suggests the medium one uses to communicate influences the content of messages and the thought process of the user. In other words: “those who *use* them become *like* them.” This concept was suggested by media philosopher Marshall McLuhan, and was also argued by both Neil Postman in his book “Amusing Ourselves to Death,” and Nicholas Carr in the *Atlantic* magazine “Is Google Making us Stupid?” With awareness of how the “medium shapes the message,” it is useful to inventory one’s own personal media history for it can often be helpful to review the past in order to better understand the present. This paper will describe my history of media use in four chronological stages to show the overall evolution to the present day. I will then apply the concepts of McLuhan’s theory by analyzing how these media have shaped me, changed my communication in interpersonal relationships, and informed my knowledge of the world.

The first stage of media use I will describe occurred when I was between the ages of five and eleven. I often wrote letters and used a landline phone to communicate with friends. At this time I also read books, played computer games that had an anonymous chat function, listened to the radio in the car, and watched television with family for entertainment. All of these media were used daily. I do not remember specifically when I began to use each medium, but overall these were the repeated media of use during this time.

Between the ages of 11 and 13, I no longer wrote letters because I got bored with the medium and it was hit-or-miss with either myself or the other person responding. I continued to read books for entertainment and those required for schoolwork. When I was 12, I received my first cell phone that could call and text. I began to use that more than the landline phone and would typically only text people. At 13 my middle school issued all students iPads for use in the classroom and at home so I was able to use that device to communicate with friends via text message, surf the internet, and complete schoolwork. I also began to watch TV on my own more each night for several hours.

Between the ages of 14 and 18, I attended high school. My freshman year I received my first smartphone which I used to text message friends, but I did not use my phone to call anyone. Rather, I used the device to connect with peers on various social media apps including Instagram, Facebook, Facebook messenger, Snapchat, and WhatsApp to stay in the loop on everyone's life and be entertained. My high school also issued every student a Chromebook for class use and homework purposes that same year. I used that device every day to complete assignments, surf the internet, email teachers, and use a virtual management system for documents and exams. At 14, I created my first email for the above social media accounts and other blog-type subscriptions. I often used my family's computer and my school-issued one to access the internet to read and watch topics of interest. My freshman year my family started subscribing to Netflix. As a result, I watched TV with family and individually. At this time, I grew a habit of watching TV alone when unhealthy arguments or serious discussions would occur at home. My senior year of high school I would often watch TV from the time I got home from school to the time I went to bed, typically 4pm-10pm. I would have the TV running while I completed my homework and while I ate dinner. Though I didn't realize it at the time, I was

using the entertainment of TV to numb my emotions and escape the pain I had felt from the loneliness and disconnection I had from peers, parents, myself, and God.

Before I left for college, I deleted Snapchat. I did so because I didn't like the content I was watching and it was a good time to do so because it prevented me from adding new contacts at a new school. I found the relationships maintained on the app were shallow and I wanted to reduce the unfulfilling connections I made so that I would search for more in-person interactions. My freshman year of college, I bought my first laptop and used it for completing school assignments, accessing the internet to read articles, and occasionally watching movies. That same year I began to write letters to friends to update them about my own life. I have since continued to write letters, especially with those who have conflicting schedules. In essence, this form is more convenient, personal, and allows the freedom to write lengthy and truer to life information than texting allows. When the Coronavirus pandemic reached Iowa, and in-person classes were canceled, I went to live with my parents in Wisconsin. The format that my first college used to attend virtual classes was Google Meet. During this time I began listening to podcasts to have "food for thought" to mull over while doing a trivial task. Because of the isolation from peers at the same time, I began using my smartphone to call people regularly. The phone allowed me to spend time with friends and also to have short conversations to exchange information. Some of these conversations ranged from five minutes to two hours. I have continued to do so this past school year with those I cannot see daily or don't live in the same town as I do. At some point during my time in college, unfortunately I don't remember when, I acknowledged that my use of some forms of social media had negative influences on my mind. I recognized that they offered too many temptations to my self-control, time management, and practice of comparing myself to others that I identified as being unhealthy. As a result of this

decision, I blocked Instagram and Facebook on my phone for a short period of time. I now frequent them once a week or once every two weeks. It isn't on a schedule but whenever it's been a while I allow myself to look. I currently use these media to see photos of my sister's children or update myself on what others are seeing if something is big in the news. I currently use Facebook Messenger daily to communicate with my dorm hall about any information regarding fire drills, safety info, meetings, and other important school information. I also use email daily to connect with professors, companies for internship opportunities, and other volunteer commitments. I frequent YouTube and the car radio inconsistently to listen to music while working or while on a road trip.

Upon reflection, the media I have used throughout my life have shaped how I communicate and learn. This process is especially recognizable in my use of writing letters and text messaging on my phone. I often find myself writing letters in a way that I would text someone. In other words, I choose to write a letter instead of a text message because it allows and encourages more lengthy, explanatory, and emotionally descriptive messages. However, I find that when I sit down to write a letter, I still write more abbreviated messages or have difficulty coming up with the choice of words I intend. I blame my more frequent use of text messaging which requires shorter messages and less complex word choices to be responsible for this difficulty. Thus, the effect that the technology of text messaging is having is channeling my thoughts to be abbreviated and less thought-provoking. Another example of my use of text messaging is evident in how I think while calling friends. I find that I now have more difficulty remembering what people say and am more impatient when someone goes into depth about a topic. I think the difficulty remembering stems from the characteristic of texting that is written and semi-temporary. These characteristics allow me to look back at the message and the

impatience is stirred up from the abbreviated and instant nature of the messages that are not allowed in a phone conversation where someone is thinking.

My media use has also affected my reading habits. I now read books using the same methods I use while watching television. Sometimes when I read a book I find myself several pages in and find I do not remember what I have read because my mind has been elsewhere. In some cases this happens because I have been using the reading of the book to numb my emotions and thoughts and not to really take in information. I view this as a passive activity and am sometimes unwilling to pause to think about what I have read or make an observation about what is happening. This comes from my watching of television which is a more passive medium and just continues to tell a story even if I am not paying attention. I can relate to Nicholas Carr's experience he shares in his article because sometimes while reading I face constant distraction and am unable to engage fully for a long period of time. I have also found that in a classroom setting I find myself asking many questions to be sure I understand, but doing so in a way that does not give me the time to contemplate on my own to see if I can figure it out. Instead, I immediately ask a professor or resolve to look it up on the internet for a quick answer.

Overall, text-messaging and social media have changed my communication habits in all of my interpersonal relationships. In my friendships, I find I am more impatient while listening and often look for a distraction when not entertained. In all personal relationships, I find I am both more and less connected. I have identified that there are two forms of connection. There is a definite increase in connection as a result of using more social media and this connection can be described as constantly being available to others and at their beck and call. However, the connection of intimacy and vulnerability I find much more difficult to achieve when using these platforms. This is because the second type of connection is more relational and on a deeper level

that shorter messages are limited in encouraging. Social media and text-messaging allow for asynchronous and shallow messages that can hinder personal conversation. Thus, I feel connected in the sense of “always available” and disconnected in the sense of “true relationships.” As a result of these different forms of connection, I find I am unsatisfied with the results of my communication habits. This is because my use encourages my impatience, devalues the time I spend with others in person, and makes it a challenge to sit and think critically without just looking something up or asking someone.

Unfortunately, my knowledge about the world has not increased significantly since I adopted new technologies of communication. I am relatively uninformed not only of what goes on in the United States but also events occurring globally. Though my knowledge about traditions in other countries has increased, it is more a knowledge of familiarity that relies on the ability to look something up on the internet. Thus, I do not consider this an actual increase in knowledge. Instead of trying to remember and think through knowledge about the world, I have taken on a mindset that it is available to look up information so remembering is unnecessary. As a result, my knowledge of the world is less than before.

To summarize, I have found that my use of text-messaging has decreased my ability to write lengthy and deep exchanges in letters. My use of television has shifted my mindset to be more passive and hindered my ability to concentrate while reading for long periods of time. In my personal relationships, I have found that social media and text-messaging has created greater connection in availability and greater disconnection in intimacy. Lastly, my analysis has demonstrated that my knowledge of the world and current events has not increased significantly but instead has become more reliant on the internet. These analyses have been put through the lens of technological determinism to demonstrate how media changes not only the message it

sends but the user as well. This is a win for McLuhan's theory and yet, though Postman and Carr predicted and explained this impact, their sad outlook would make my experience a loss.