

Modern Media: Reflections on, and Guidelines for Using

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Why this?

Why did we write this document? We are not writing to be judgemental or legalistic. Nor do we at all claim to have "the answer" to what is right and wrong. In fact, we would much appreciate being corrected if we state things that are not accurate, or unclear, or poorly argued. But our motive is this: There have been many developments in media and communications technology that have **completely** changed the way of life in our Reformed communities. The computer was one such device, the mobile phone a second, and the internet a third... Twenty years ago few of us had, or needed them. Now most of us (including our pre-teen children) fully depend and cannot imagine life without them. These devices have become completely engrained in our lifestyles. We need to step back, therefore, and ask ourselves some hard questions. Not so much if we *should* accept these new technological developments--we already have--but to ask *what uses* of these technologies are acceptable and what uses are not, and how we can determine this.

Modern Media

What do we mean with "**modern media**"? If with a "medium" we understand a device and tool used to communicate with other people, or obtain information, then "old media" would include newspapers, magazines, books, and telephones. "Modern media" then includes both **physical devices** such as computers, tablets, and smart phones, but more importantly those technologies that make use of these physical devices--such as the internet and the many programs that are based on the internet.

Three Basic Principles

Before we go on we should state three basic principles

First, no media or communications technology is inherently wrong, or evil. They are simply tools used to communicate, obtain and share information, help us with our work, and build and maintain relationships. Some indeed *seem* more wrong than others, because they are rarely used for acceptable purposes, but the devices themselves are not evil. New developments in communications technology can be very useful, and like any other technology can be a great blessing for society. Missionaries in South Korea use the radio to spread the gospel into North Korea, for example, and the Bible has never been so easy to obtain, and Bible study has never been so easy as with today's technology. But any

technology can be abused and made into a snare, a curse. This is equally true for books and smart phones, stone tablets and electronic tablets. The internet is not inherently evil, but much of what it is used for is. The same is true for books and newspapers, although the content published in these is under some degree of censorship and government control, and therefore in general not nearly as extreme.

Second, some media is more appropriate for certain messages than others. Much has been written about this by thinkers such as Postman and McLuhan. To some extent the medium constrains and shapes the message delivered by it, simply because each medium is limited by what content it can deliver, and in what format it delivers this content. Different media also give different connotations to the message. The Bible on your iPhone appears as no more than an app beside many other, very different apps--in book form, on the shelf, it (hopefully) has a more distinguished presence. A sermon listened to on your iPod will not seem the same as one listened to in Church. On another note, our communications tools shape more than the message--they shape us. Our way of life has changed fundamentally with the advent of texting, gaming, virtual worlds, twitter, Craigslist, YouTube, Facebook, Snap Chat, Instagram and Pinterest.

Third, there has always been a battle between the world and the church. And in this battle the world has always encroached more and more into the church, and with it God's Spirit has been increasingly grieved and withdrawn itself. Modern media developments have, unquestionably, made this process much, much more rapid and pervasive. Evil influences that were always accessible via books and newspapers and movies are now very *much more* accessible. Monitoring what our kids (parents, spouses?) are up to is increasingly difficult. Put differently, you can say that the main use of many of these new technologies is not to foster a godly, separate life, but to conform and integrate us into the world. Our continual exposure to secular and anti-Christian lifestyles through the internet and social networking acclimatizes and desensitizes us to sinful practices that we increasingly being to accept as normal, or at least as tolerable and acceptable. This is a gradual, but continual process of threshold-lowering to what we realize is sinful and harmful to our souls.

Some Basic Guidelines and How They Relate to Media Use

The guidelines we state here are based on those adopted by the [2013 Classis meeting](#) of the RCNA. These guidelines are well known, apply to all aspects of our lives, and have always been the same. They are presented in no particular order, are by no means complete, and can be restated in various ways.

Accountability. All our actions are simple, free choices for which we remain fully responsible, and which inevitably have consequences. What we do online may seem to be anonymous and unknown to others, but we will be held accountable for them. And, of course, nothing we do on the internet is truly secure and private, and nothing we post is retrievable. This is a very good thing to keep in mind before sending a text, sharing a file, uploading personal information about yourself or others, or engaging in improper or other online activities you wouldn't want others to know about.

Whatever we do must be done out of love, for the glory and honour of God, and to the wellbeing of our neighbour. This is true for whoever we are, and whenever we do anything. God's word and revealed will (Ten Commandments) are to be our guide in life, and they call us to avoid the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and pride of life--three things that sum up what the world offers. We do well to remember that God is not mocked or deceived, that He requires that which is past, that He will reward each according to his work. There are very many online activities that do not meet this criteria.

Redeeming time. Many things that are not harmful to our neighbour (e.g. trolling for information on the web) are however harmful to ourselves, in that we are wasting our time needlessly. We are called to redeem the time, as the days are evil. We should ask ourselves periodically when we surf the web or text our friends if we are spending the precious time of grace appropriately? Most uses of social networking do not pass this test. Certain sites, such as LinkedIn, ResearchGate or Twitter, and to some extent even Facebook can be used for business purposes, and such uses are often justifiable, but using social networking for chatting with friends and sharing the latest gossip is sinful.

A major use of the internet and our digital devices is simple entertainment. It is important to relax and refresh ourselves, but surfing the web for simple, frivolous entertainment through Netflix, Vimeo, YouTube, Pinterest, sports sites, etc. is sinful. One should read the sermons of Edwards, McCheyne, and others on the danger of God's wrath which the unconverted are under at all times. Shall we then have mirth? (Ezekiel 21:10).

Conformity. We are admonished clearly in the Bible that we are not to be conformed to the world, but that we ought to live as strangers and pilgrims. Not that we ought to adopt a self-righteous, holier-than-thou mentality, but we need to realize the world is full of anti-Christian alluring influences and temptations, and these have strong appeal to our depraved hearts. We ought to actively avoid the influences of the world as much as we can. A question--are we willing to make sacrifices, and forego conveniences, to maintain our Reformed identity? The internet has made many things more convenient, but is that enough warrant to use it for everything we currently use it for. You see, if you pick up a book, you can usually tell by the cover of what genre it is; you'd be surprised to encounter unacceptable material in a 'good book'. But on the internet, even if well-filtered, unacceptable material often is accessed unexpectedly.

Most of the content delivered via the internet has a decided anti-Christian, secular, bias. The design and purpose of the media is to integrate us with the world, to homogenize, spread ideas and values. Continual exposure tends to erode the borders of what we find acceptable and lower the thresholds of what we consider morally right. It is virtually impossible to look at Google News on any given day and not hear about gay rights, or see an article that presupposes evolution, or hear of social unrest and miscarriage of justice? What does this constant exposure to these issues, always presented from a perspective hostile to the Bible, have on us? As mentioned at the 2013 Classis and Synod meetings, when we utilize media and communications (or any other) technologies, we should strive to keep "far from all things whereby [God's] Name is blasphemed and His commandments transgressed."

Temptation. The Bible expressly tells us to flee all sin and temptation, to watch and be 'instant' in prayer, to depart from evil, and to be aware of the wiles of Satan. We are to follow the Psalmist, who vowed: "I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes" (Psalm 101:3), and Job, who made a covenant with his eyes that he would not look at things that would lead to sin (Job 31:1). We cannot do so while using a medium in which God's name, word, and precepts are mocked and abused. Read the comments many users make about the Christian faith on news websites, and it becomes apparent what spirit motivates them. By participating in, or tolerating such things, we can only expect to grieve and quench God's Spirit, stifle the workings of our conscience, and hinder our prayers.

Sabbath. The sanctity of the Lord's Day is increasingly undermined as a result. Whereas 20 years ago most of us would shun using the telephone on the Sunday, today people use their mobile devices while in church and feel the need to send meaningless texts to each other during a sermon.

Parenting. We are to nurture and raise our children in the fear and admonition of the Lord, instruct them in His ways and precepts, and model a proper Christian life. Clearly every parent falls short in this. But surely one duty implied in this is to inform ourselves of what our children are doing, also what they are doing online, what they listen to and watch on their digital devices. This task is made easier by software that allows accountability reporting. Another duty is to restrict their access to the internet, both as to content and when they can watch.

Restraint. As mentioned at the 2013 classis and synod meetings, "The use of **modern media and related technologies** can only be considered acceptable when ... it serves a useful purpose, [and is with] restraint, and ... the maximum possible protection from undesirable content, developments and opportunities." This also runs counter to the temptation is to buy into the trend to buy the latest media gadgets and follow the latest fad and trend on the web. This is far removed from the injunction to live temperately and soberly in the world, to use but not abusing it. Rather it incites covetousness.

Conclusion

What can be said in conclusion? We can hope to do no more than raise awareness--the effects of these new developments on our families cannot be reversed or stopped. Media technology will continue to develop at an increasing pace, making us ever more vulnerable as a society and detached as individuals, and presenting temptations and opportunities for sin and vice in unprecedented, unimaginable ways. We have no might against this great company, against this flood cast out by the serpent, and may well ask, "What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power?" Though the gates of hell will not prevail against God's Church, we must be vigilant. "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak." (Matthew 26:41). "For as a snare shall [the last temptations] come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man." (Luke 21:35-36).