

Electronic Media and the Indiscriminate Reception of Images and Information

Sister Marysia Weber, RSM, DO

“The essence of the Internet in fact is that it provides an almost unending flood of information, much of which passes in a moment. In a culture which feeds on the ephemeral there can easily be a risk of believing that it is facts that matter, rather than values. The Internet offers extensive knowledge, but it does not teach values; and when values are disregarded, our very humanity is demeaned and man easily loses sight of his transcendent dignity. Despite its enormous potential for good, some of the degrading and damaging ways in which the Internet can be used are already obvious to all...”ⁱ

While electronic media can provide useful information, media used solely for pleasure or the reception of information can foster a posture of passivity. Indiscriminant reception of images and data dulls the mind. Bits of information are passively received, but may be difficult to integrate as knowledge. If passive reception predominates, then emotions may overcome the capacity to reason and the imagination becomes ungoverned. Maryann Wolf, a developmental psychologist from Tuft’s University, wrote that the Internet’s reading style places efficiency and immediacy above all else “weakening the capacity for the kind of deep reading that emerged when the printing press first came out.” “When we read online,” she explained, “we tend to become mere decoders of information.” The Internet scatters our attention and diffuses our concentration. Maryann Wolf continues by warning us: “If we lose those quiet spaces or fill them up with ‘content’ we will sacrifice something important, not only something in ourselves but also in our culture.”ⁱⁱ

We can all relate to a tendency to “speed read” for information due to the magnitude of material that comes our way requiring a response. Do we find ourselves applying the same “reading tactic” to the Gospel during our time of prayer? If so, we can consider this as a “wake-up call” to being more attentive to how we approach “incoming communication.”

When indiscriminate passive reception of images involves Internet pornography, the problems increase. What psychiatrists and other mental health care providers did not anticipate was that whenever there is an opportunity for pleasurable human behavior that can be acquired without face-to-face contact there is greater potential for abuse. A possibility for addiction is introduced. Addiction was an unanticipated concern when Internet pornography became so readily available. What was unexpected is that it has become the most common and the most addictive addiction.ⁱⁱⁱ

Accurate statistics regarding the use of Internet pornography are difficult to obtain. However, statistics demonstrate staggering numbers of pornographic Internet sites and access to these sites. For example, “sex” continues to be the number one search topic on the Internet.^{iv} Boys ages 12-17 are one of the largest consumers of pornography. Pornographers target young boys for that reason. Ninety percent of these teenagers view online pornography while doing their homework.^v Pornographers try to reach younger children by using names like “Santa Claus” and “Disneyland” for their Website to lure them into their pornography sites. Once accessed, a youth is prevented from exiting such a Website by what is called “mousetrapping” so that clicks

at exiting instead lead to other pictures or other pornographic Websites. While there are many individuals who are younger and may be accessing the Internet, today, the cited average age of first exposure to Internet pornography is age 11.^{vi} Caution must also be taken in abandoning a personal or institute website. Persons or institutions that have done so have had their websites imported by pornographers for their use.

Cell phones are now being used for an alternative form of pornography referred to as “sexting.” Sexting is slang for sending sexually explicit or suggestive content between mobile devices. Sexting contains either text, images or video that is intended to be sexually arousing. This is a new and disturbing trend among teens. A 2009 survey by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found: 1 in 5 teenagers surveyed (22%) say they have electronically sent or posted on line nude or semi-nude images of themselves. Of those surveyed, 22% were girls, 18% boys. Sexually suggestive messages (text, email and instant messaging) were even more common than images with 39% of teens having sent or posted such messages and 50% of teens having received them. Sexting is also used to bully or ridicule persons.

Are there general concerns about electronic media?

Over time, the use of electronic media has increased exponentially. Each day people spend hours checking and writing e-mail messages, using the cell phone, ipads, ipods and game stations. Society conditions us to respond immediately to the hundreds of messages we receive daily. Society has also influenced persons to believe and imitate what they see and hear on television. Watching television, playing computer games, and Internet surfing often lead to dissipation rather than refreshment and relaxation.

I am sure you know of people who complain that they cannot stand the quiet and who need background noise to be able to work or be in their homes. Such persons do not filter background noise for content. Indiscriminant noise may hinder the capacity to become quiet enough to pray and reflect. Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J. supports this observation. “Accustomed to surfing, we lose our ability to focus on anything in particular. We switch from one perspective to another rather than consistently following up on any one point of view.”^{vii}

Indiscriminant reception of images also dulls the mind and moves the will by the stirring of the sensual appetite such as desire or pleasure. If passive reception predominates, emotions may overcome the capacity to reason and the imagination becomes uncontrolled. Spiritually, this is called “sloth.” Simply defined, sloth is a sluggishness of the mind that neglects to begin a good action. Saturation of the senses promotes an aversion for the things of the spiritual life. The person who suffers from sloth may no longer strive to live a life of virtue.

Saint Thomas identifies what he calls six “daughters” or effects of sloth.^{viii} The first is **lack of hope**, which results in discouragement and a lack of interest in things of God. If lack of hope and discouragement become extreme, it may become despair. Despair may also come from pride. For example, Judas despaired and killed himself. On a more moderate level, daily

challenges, lack of affirmation or appreciation may result in discouragement and may result in more self-focus. It can even lead persons to question their vocation.

The second daughter of sloth is **an uncontrolled imagination or the wandering of the mind after unlawful things**. When a person basks in false happiness through mental wanderings, then the person may end up giving free reign to the imagination. Persons caught in this pattern may gravitate toward people; especially “needy” ones who make them feel good. The danger of such relationships is that persons may become puffed up or prideful, including imagined sexual prowess which in time could result in unchaste sexual behavior.

Saint Thomas Aquinas distinguishes two forms of unchastity. The first he describes as the unchastity of *incontinence* or as a form of loss of self-control. This, he states, is less serious than the second form of unchastity because the sensual urge can be reintegrated into an order that is disposed to the truth of real things. Reason corresponds to the reality made evident through faith and knowledge. In short, such persons are motivated to repent and strive anew. The second form of unchastity Saint Thomas calls *intemperance*. He describes this as a deeply rooted attitude of unchastity in which individuals direct their will toward sin without much concern. These persons have become habituated in what is inordinate pleasure or excesses in food, drink, or sex. Desire for inordinate pleasure blinds such individuals from confronting objective reality with selfless detachment, which alone makes true knowledge of the supernatural or divine possible.

The third daughter of sloth is **mental torpor or sluggishness** with regard to the Ten Commandments. Here persons become lazy and indifferent to interior struggles. A slippery slope emerges when persons act on their passions because they no longer exercise self-discipline, neglect frequent examination of conscience, and stop praying for the grace of the Holy Spirit. Emotions may seduce reason and such persons can become less amenable to reordering sensual urges. This too is an example of intemperance.

The fourth daughter of sloth is **faintheartedness**. This is a culpable disposition in which persons refuse to face up to difficult situations which can be addressed and overcome. When persons are fainthearted, they refuse to make appropriate choices. Their souls give way to sins of omission and disregards graces offered by the Holy Spirit. Regular and thorough confession becomes less important or even avoided. Persons become indifferent to regular venial sins. They may justify self-soothing behavior as a benefit.

The fifth daughter of sloth includes **rancor, bitter resentment, spite and a critical spirit**. People who struggle for sanctity annoy the slothful person. This may be seen in the belittling of authority in the Church or toward Church’s teachings. When this occurs, faith becomes cool to cold.

The last daughter of sloth is **ill-tempered antagonism, ill-will and malice**. Slothful persons make a conscious, internal decision to commit evil for its own sake. These actions assault human dignity. Sloth is subtle but can be very destructive. By nature, sloth is contrary to charity and emerges as the source from which many sins flow.

Indiscriminant saturation with electronic media can isolate people, keep them from interacting face-to-face with one another, and hinders opportunities for developing human interpersonal relationships.

Some persons seek pornography out of loneliness and a low self-esteem. Internet pornography allows men and women to temporarily avoid their difficulties, provides the illusion of being well-liked or in love, and boosts self-esteem.^{ix} It is a tragic irony that their excessive use of pornography serves only to isolate them more from other people. Pornography treats another human being as an object to be used. It assaults human dignity and makes a commodity of people and human sexuality. Pornography leads people away from the truth.

Chastity helps people to grow in truth. We must transform our ways; we cannot remain timid or persistent in our bad habits. We must look squarely at our choices, our motivations, our intentions and purify them in order to strive for holiness and be enriched through mature intimacy.

May each of our intentions be purified that we may enjoy the fruits of the spiritual life promised us in our vocations which encompasses authentic intimate friendship with our Lord Jesus Christ, the Blessed Mother, the saints, and one another.

ⁱ Pope John Paul II, *Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel*, # 4 World Communications Day, 2002.

ⁱⁱ Nicholas Carr, *Is Google Making Us Stupid?*, Atlantic Monthly, September 2008, p. 63.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jane E. Brody, "Cybersex Gives Birth to a Psychological Disorder," in the *New York Times*, May 16, 2000, nytimes.com, [accessed May 1, 2011].

^{iv} *Top Ten Reviews*, <http://internet-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html>, [accessed May, 1 2013).

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., "Catholics in the World of Mass Media," in *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly*, summer 1997, p. 17.

^{viii} Saint Thomas Aquinas, O.P., *Summa Theologica*, trans. By the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. III (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1948), II-II, question 35, articles 2 and 4, pp. 1340-42.

^{ix} Kimberly S. Young, Ph.D., *Tangled in the Web: Understanding Cybersex from Fantasy to Addiction*, (1st Books Library, 2001), pp. 60-61. Stephen Arterburn, *Addicted to "Love", Understanding Dependencies of the Heart: Romance, Relationships, and Sex* (Regal Books, 2003), p. 187.