always
on

practicing faith
in a new media landscape

ANGELA WILLIAMS GORRELL

"Our increasingly digitized lives provide both profound brokenness and opportunities for our shared humanity to be diminished. However, they also provide glorious possibilities to be more present with those who suffer from the ills and injustices of the world. In this inspiring new work, Angela Gorrell offers a compelling Christian vision of the good life within the landscape of new media. Incisively attentive to malformed visions of the good life offered by various kinds of new media, Gorrell contrasts those visions with the life and ministry of Jesus in ways that equip and empower Christians to engage in intentional practices that align with Christ's transformative and healing vision for a new social order. Gorrell demonstrates that the new media landscape is neither simply life-negating nor simply life-affirming and that it's possible to nurture a Christian hybrid existence that reflects God's nonviolent and compassionate love for creation today and into the future."

—**Deanna Thompson**, author of *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World*

"In *Always On*, Angela Gorrell takes us straight into the new media abyss that we all face every day. Using her background as a pastor, theologian, and new media researcher, Gorrell invites us to consider how new media affects every aspect of our lives and how easily we can find ourselves lost in the process. She doesn't give in to the temptation to blame social media but rather helps us recognize how little attention we give to the ways we allow it to consume us. This is a helpful, practical book on one of the most pressing and real-life struggles we experience today."

—**Chap Clark**, pastor of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Newport Beach, California; author of *Hurt 2.0* and *Adoptive Church*

"*Always On* considers how technology and social media impact identity and community formation. Exhibiting theological reflection for our sound-bite culture, Gorrell perceptively explains new media's ability to malign and abet both hope and harm. More than a simple description of the new landscape, this book examines the narratives that shape us in a way that both acknowledges harmful assumptions and invites interested conversations with those in the widest sphere of influence—virtual and visible conversation partners. Critical of how easily we yield to deficient interactions through new media, Gorrell argues for practices of righteousness, peace, and joy that exist online and in person. Fresh, contemporary, and practical: the language of this book is twenty-first century; the Christian call is first century; the promise of recovering humanity's capacity to bear the image of God in the world is eternal."

—**Joy J. Moore**, ecclesial storyteller and lead pastor, Bethel United Methodist Church, Flint, Michigan

Theology for the **Life** of the **World**

Jesus Christ is God come to dwell among humans, to be, to speak, and to act "for the life of the world" (John 6:51). Taking its mandate from the character and mission of God, Christian theology's task is to discern, articulate, and commend visions of flourishing life in light of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The Theology for the Life of the World series features texts that do just that.

Human life is diverse and multifaceted, and so will be the books in this series. Some will focus on one specific aspect of life. Others will elaborate expansive visions of human persons, social life, or the world in relation to God. All will share the conviction that theology is vital to exploring the character of true life in diverse settings and orienting us toward it. No task is greater than for each of us and all of us together to discern and pursue the flourishing of all in God's creation. These books are meant as a contribution to that task.

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For my mom,
Virginia (Jenny) Grace Douglas

In third grade, I told you I would write a book someday.
And you believed me.

contents

introduction

"Alexa, turn up the lights." The lights change from a dim glow to a bright light that illuminates the entire room. "Alexa, turn on Frank Sinatra." Sinatra's voice is suddenly booming throughout the house. "Alexa, turn the music down a little." The song is quieted. I suddenly realize that my friend Chloe and I have barely entered the front door and without moving or touching anything or exerting much effort, the ambiance of the house has been changed.

My husband, Paul, and I are using streaming software to watch a film on our smart TV. I check my mobile phone and notice a text from my mom. She wants to know if I have received her card, the one with the comic strip from my stepdad, Don, that mentions Yale (where I am a researcher and lecturer). I text back that the comic strip was funny and is now on my refrigerator, and then I go back to watching the film. A few minutes later, I remember that I need to update my phone, which requires deleting as many photos and videos as possible. I keep getting the maddening message that my storage is full. I plug my phone into my laptop to import the photos and videos that I want to keep. This process involves reviewing highlights of my experiences over the past year and a half: highs, lows, and everything in between. I spend most of the movie clicking through photos and reflecting on the joys and sorrows of recent months, while still being somewhat attuned to the film's plot. I've seen it before anyway.

"When we go out to eat, we put all of our phones in the middle of the table. The first person to pick up their phone has to pay the bill," Joe explained. I had read about this practice, but it was even more interesting to hear a senior in college tell me about it in person. I was eating dinner with Joe's family. He

went on to say, "It works! No one picks up their phone because no one wants to pay the bill."

These three vignettes demonstrate a few of the massive shifts that have taken place recently, and they invite multiple questions: Is Alexa a good technology? What makes technology *good*? Does daily access to multiple modes of communication shape and change human beings, and if so, how? Have mobile phones become so intrusive that we need mindful practices that help us be more attentive to our friends? And what do these vignettes have to do with Christian faith? Does God care about the sorts of technology we develop and engage with? Simply by reflecting on these illustrations, we can come up with many more questions.

There are several reasons I think we need to spend time reflecting on our current "new media landscape" (this term is examined at length in chap. 2). First, it is likely that you engage with new media more than you realize because "new media" encompasses many forms and devices, including blogs, the internet, podcasts, social networks, streaming services, e-books, computers, cell phones, e-readers, and so on.[1] The term "old media" includes print newspapers, television, radio, and traditional books. You use new media if you email or text; if you use a Kindle to read books, Google maps to navigate, a digital device for listening to music (e.g., mobile phone, iPod, etc.), or a service for watching television or movies (e.g., Netflix); or if you buy things online. New media is a large category that includes current forms of social media. So what qualifies as social media?

The term "social media" is commonly used to describe a variety of online sites, technologies, and activities. There are four main categories for social media platforms.[2]

1. Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn) are online platforms primarily designed for connecting with other people.
2. User-generated content sites (e.g., YouTube, Flickr, Wikipedia) are online platforms where people can upload content (e.g., videos, photos) they have created, curated, or remixed and share it with other people.
3. Trading and marketing sites (e.g., Amazon, Groupon, Craigslist) are online platforms where people buy, sell, and/or trade material goods.

1. For more on the term "new media" and a description of its main characteristics (e.g., numerical representation, modularity, automation), see Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 40–48.
2. Van Dijck, *Culture of Connectivity*, 8.

4. Play and game sites (e.g., Angry Birds, Farmville, The Sims Social) are online platforms for playing internet games with other people.

However, social networking sites are rarely clearly defined by these platform categories. This is because each platform is in unending competition with others of its type and is constantly reaching into the niche industry of others. The market more or less guarantees that this will always be the case.[3] For example, Facebook connects people, allows people to upload created content and invite others to play games, and has created ways for people to buy, sell, and trade items through the site.

Even if most of what I described does not apply to your daily life, it most likely applies to the lives of many of the people in your community. This is the second reason I hope you will read this book and spend time reflecting on our current new media landscape. If you want to be attentive to what is impacting people's lives, critical and theological reflection on new media development and engagement is essential. Donna Freitas surveyed and interviewed college students at thirteen campuses about their concerns regarding new media. In her fascinating book *The Happiness Effect*, she writes, "Students want to know what their peers think about social media and whether they experience the same struggles. They want, in other words, information about how their generation is handling one of the most significant and dramatic cultural shifts of our time. Most of all, they want to know that they are not alone in feeling the way they do."[4] Young people want space to discuss their new media experiences and their struggles with it, and they desire guidance.[5] From leading seminars and courses on new media, I have discovered that older generations deeply appreciate the opportunity to discern the implications of new media development and engagement for their lives and their Christian faith. When I lead conversations about new media, people often tell me they are relieved to have an opportunity to discuss their experiences. I have found that conversation and reflection on new media development and engagement create opportunities to explore some of the most beautiful and painful realities in people's lives.

Third, new media extends suffering that occurs in physical spaces into digital spaces, and issues of suffering are increasingly integrated across people's online and in-person lives. If you care about issues like poverty, sexism, depression, anxiety, and racism, you may want to know more about how

3. Van Dijck, *Culture of Connectivity*, 8.
4. Freitas, *Happiness Effect*, 10.
5. Freitas, *Happiness Effect*, 245–46.

new media is being developed and how people are engaging with it. Finally, artificial intelligence (AI; e.g., Alexa) and robotics (e.g., Sophia[6]) already exist, but new technologies are continuously being developed using AI; and robotics will have significant implications for work, health care, travel, and many other categories of human existence. New media is always changing, and Christian communities need lasting Christian visions of true life that will guide them well into the future.

What This Book Is About

This book begins by proposing that new media has both glorious possibilities and profound brokenness.[7] Glorious possibilities arise when new media is designed and used in view of Christian visions of the flourishing life.[8] New media spaces and devices *can* be sites and instruments of God's unconditional love. However, in view of malformed visions of what the good life is, new media is developed and used for damaging purposes, which only deepens the conditions of the false life: malign circumstances, harmful practices, and destructive feelings. This is why new media is often a source of profound brokenness.

New media *can* be a site and instrument of the home of God if Christian communities discern, articulate, and live Christian visions of the good life for this new landscape. Therefore, articulating such visions must be the central focus of conversation about new media in Christian communities. Regrettably, communities mainly engage in fruitless conversation about new media. In chapter 1, I support this point by outlining the content of four common types of fruitless conversation about new media, encouraging readers to assess their own communities. The chapter ends by offering a way forward: interested conversation.

6. Sophia is a robot. The website Hanson Robotics explains:
  Designed to look like Audrey Hepburn, Sophia embodies Hepburn's classic beauty: porcelain skin, a slender nose, high cheekbones, an intriguing smile, and deeply expressive eyes that seem to change color with the light. . . . Her creator is Dr. David Hanson, founder of Hanson Robotics and a modern-day renaissance man who has built a worldwide reputation for creating robots that look and act amazingly human. After working at Disney as one of its "Imagineers," Dr. Hanson aspired to create genius machines that are smarter than humans and can learn creativity, empathy, and compassion—three distinctly human traits Hanson believes must be developed alongside and integrated with artificial intelligence for robots to solve world problems too complex for humans to solve themselves. ("Sophia," Hanson Robotics Ltd., http://www.hansonrobotics.com/robot/sophia/)
  7. I was inspired by Graham Ward's use of "glorious possibility" in his book *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 57.
  8. Throughout the book I will use the terms "flourishing life," "true life," and "the good life" interchangeably.

Interested conversation is meaningful, imaginative, critically and theologically reflective, Spirit-guided, and fruitful dialogue. This is conversation that is *interested* in what God is up to in this new media landscape and *interested* in reasons why new media has glorious possibilities and profound brokenness. Interested conversation is also invested in discerning and articulating visions that Christian communities can live toward in a new media–saturated culture. Christian visions of true, flourishing life that guide new media design and use aim, by God's grace, to nurture a healing Christian community in a new media landscape. Interested conversation is not just dialogue; rather, it inspires action. Genuine Christian visions transform the trajectory and content of people's beliefs, desires, and practices. By doing so, as in the case of new media, such visions nurture hybrid faithful living. "Hybrid" is a term I use throughout the book to describe the integrated nature of both physical and digital spaces and in-person and mediated practices; I discuss the idea of "hybridity" in chapter 2. Hybrid faithful living encompasses the true life of righteousness, peace, and joy—online and in person—even while living under the conditions of the false life, until the new world is established.

Chapter 2 explores the new media terrain and provides insight into why new media is connected to Christian faith and is meaningful to people and Christian communities. Chapter 3 describes cultural narratives that shape the social contexts that designers and developers of new media live within. By describing these narratives, we begin to get a sense of the conditions of the false life we are all living within. I argue that the communication techniques and priorities of these social contexts form the structure—the practices and values—of new media. Additionally, I propose that new media not only deepens these narratives but also contributes to them.

Chapter 4 takes a turn toward imagining Jesus's life and ministry as a methodology for articulating Christian visions of the true life. This chapter discusses Luke 4 and 7 to help us imagine how a person formed in the image of God, which is Jesus Christ, would act and feel when using new media, and what kinds of new media circumstances Jesus would seek to create. In chapters 5 and 6, I discuss the nature of hybrid faithful living. Since various visions converge in a new media landscape, living a life of righteousness, peace, and joy—a Christian vision of true life—can be difficult. I argue that hybrid faithful living requires a commitment to regularly practicing discernment and nurturing a hybrid, healing community. Chapter 5 offers methods for practicing discernment about new media. And chapter 6 describes ways to develop hybrid Christian practices and design a rule for life in a new media landscape.

Whom This Book Is For

If you are interested in new media, this book is for you. If you want to learn more about new media and its glorious possibilities and profound broken-ness and more about discerning, articulating, and living the true life in a new media landscape, this book was written with you in mind.

That being said, this book was specifically written for Christian com-munities—with implications for leaders of those communities, for the com-munities as a whole (i.e., organizations, institutions), and for individual community members. I use the term "Christian community" in this book as a way of talking about groups (e.g., congregations, parishes, classrooms, small groups, youth groups, parachurch groups, Christian nonprofit orga-nizations) that are committed to following Jesus and doing life together by teaching, practicing, and reflecting on Christian faith. I wrote this book to prepare pastors, lay leaders, and other types of Christian religious educators (in the academy, parachurch organizations, Christian secondary schools, etc.) to facilitate interested conversation about new media and therefore to guide Christian communities in articulating, discerning, and living Christian visions of the good life while traversing the new media terrain.

How to Use This Book

I hope you will read this book with other people. This book provides discus-sion questions, frameworks, and other pedagogical aids along the way that will help your Christian community reflect on contextual faith for a way of life in our new media landscape. Once your community has talked about a chapter's themes, the discussion questions can be used to practice interested conversation.

In chapter 1, the questions will help your community begin to reflect on new media's glorious possibilities and profound brokenness, as well as the community's feelings and typical conversation regarding technology. Chapter 2's questions will nurture dialogue about the new media terrain. And the questions at the end of chapter 3 will help your community criti-cally reflect on cultural stories. Chapter 4 is an invitation for your com-munity to imagine Jesus's life and ministry, in order to articulate how a representative of Christ's kingdom would act and feel online and what sorts of conditions they would seek. The chapter itself is an example of this sort of imagining. At the end of chapter 4, there are two exercises that your community can use to reflect on Jesus's life and ministry and articu-late a Christian vision of true life. Chapter 5 describes several processes

of discernment and provides three sets of discussion questions. Finally, chapter 6 offers numerous ways to develop hybrid Christian practices and has an outline for designing a rule for life in a new media landscape. At the end of chapter 6, you will find an example of a method of prayer called the Examen (or the Daily Examen), a spiritual discipline that is helpful for assessing hybrid living. I hope your community will use these resources to practice interested conversation.

New Media Is Daunting, but You Are Better Than Google

When I recall the first time I preached or led a seminar or walked into a classroom to teach, I remember one primary feeling: vulnerability. I preached my first sermon in seventh grade. The sermon was for my youth group and was called, "The Masks We Wear." What I didn't know then was that the vulnerable feeling would stick around and reappear many times when I have felt inadequate, like an imposter with weaknesses that disqualify me as an educator. I was sure that when I opened my mouth to give my first lecture, people would wonder why I had been chosen to speak. Perhaps they might even believe that their time would have been better spent elsewhere. I am naturally very much myself when I preach, speak, and teach, which I hope people find distinctive and humanizing, but I often worry that it makes me appear naive, less "academic," or worse: incompetent. That seventh-grade feeling followed me around and was there the first time I walked into a seminary classroom as an "instructor-in-training"—a title that assures students will not respect you. I was terrified. Every time I went to the whiteboard, I was afraid students would discover how much I need spell-check.

I felt exposed and vulnerable when I started leading, preaching, speaking, and teaching. I bet most of you did too. Now, with the internet, and with new online platforms and phone apps (it's alright if you need to google "app" right now) and websites appearing daily, many of you may be feeling vulnerable. Some of you may be counting the days until you can retire so you do not have to use social media in ministry, or teach online, or even get a social media account. New media is a daunting topic for everyone, especially for people who feel responsible for helping other people reflect on new media. If you are feeling unnecessary or inadequate in this digital age, I have some good news: *you are better than Google*.

While new media has some incredible benefits, you are better. For example, Google is primarily invested in making money. Google treats people like objects of strategy, rather than human beings made in the image of God. But you

are better. When engaging with them, you take into consideration who your community members are, where they have been, and who they are becoming. The lives of the people in your Christian community matter deeply. Google doesn't realize this, but you do.

If you were to ask Google, "What do you think of me?" it would not be much help. I know, because I googled this question. It will give you articles and books related to reputation management. Obviously, Google cannot actually tell anyone what it thinks about them. But you can. You can provide meaningful feedback. You can watch your community members act and think in various contexts, across time, and tell them what you see. You can affirm them and help them in ways that Google cannot.

Have you ever used Google to figure out how to do something? Sometimes it works; other times, not so much. For example, I googled the question, "How do I do a back handspring?" and discovered that WikiHow provides eleven steps with pictures. Unfortunately, for most of us, these steps are not enough to help us actually perform a back handspring. But you are better than Google. You do not assume that the people in your Christian community will learn something on their own and do it correctly the first time or that people will practice alone. You curate educational settings (whether in person or online) where community members can practice, experiment, and fail, and where you will be there to mentor them.

Also, Google does not even know if the information it provides is what people need. The information it offers can be inaccurate and meaningless. This is why *you* are needed more than ever. You can teach critical reflection. You can help members of your Christian community understand that they use the internet *and* that the internet uses them. And even better, you have the Holy Spirit as your companion and guide as you are a companion to others in your Christian community.

Finally, Google automatically produces an answer to every question. But you are different. You understand that the point of being a pastor or Christian leader is *not* having all the answers. Richard Rohr in *Things Hidden* writes, "What I've learned is that not-knowing and often not even needing to know is a deeper way of knowing and a deeper form of compassion."[9] This type of educating nurtures people who will do the same things within the groups they lead. Sure, Google can provide an "answer" to almost every question. And yes, it usually finds the right TED talk or a great YouTube video. But Google cannot do what the best leaders do. And that is why *you are better*.

9. Rohr, *Things Hidden*, 39.

About the Author

My Twitter account (@AngelaGorrell) describes me this way: "research. teach. write. repeat. fascinations: people, asking why, examining life, media, practical theology, education and formation, contemporary culture."

My Instagram page provides this summary: "Wife. Sister. Daughter. Aunt. Friend. Professor. Researcher. Writer. Lover of God and people."

My Facebook profile describes my work, education, places I have lived, my birthday, relationship status, and even several life events. By reading it, you would learn that I work at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture and teach at Yale University. You would also discover that I obtained a degree from Azusa Pacific University and two degrees from Fuller Theological Seminary. You would see that I have lived in Kentucky, California, and Connecticut. You would also find out that I am married to Paul Gorrell. You would even learn from my timeline of life events (curated for me by Facebook) when I met Paul Gorrell and when we were married.

My LinkedIn profile says, "Associate Research Scholar and Lecturer at Yale." The summary below this title says,

> I am passionate about investing in people's lives, building and nurturing teams, and cultivating learning communities where people are invited to hunt their assumptions and think critically while feeling connected to others, heard, free to be creative, and safe to ask questions and tell their stories. I especially enjoy teaching; mentoring and coaching; learning, distilling, and examining ideas; asking compelling, capacious questions; problem-solving; activating; innovating; and leading (and helping groups to navigate) change. One of my greatest research interests is discerning ways new media can be designed, developed, and engaged to nurture relationships, explore the world and the fundamental questions of human existence, extend education, and contribute to the common good.

My website (https://www.angelagorrell.com) provides a way to contact me for speaking, teaching, consulting, and research. It shows photos of the people I have partnered with and learned from.

You would learn quite a bit about me by reviewing my social media profiles and website. However, I would like you to know a few other things about me. I pursued ordination in the Mennonite Church USA because of my Christian commitments to peacemaking, preventing violence, seeking justice, and engaging in radical hospitality. I felt called to youth ministry in seventh grade, and I have dedicated the majority of my work life to church and parachurch ministry. I began teaching in the academy in 2014. I teach courses related to

theology, ecclesiology, philosophy, contemporary culture, and education and formation. I am energized by teaching and care deeply about investing in the lives of students. As a wife, family and community member, friend, pastor, and professor, I try to continually choose true life by listening to God's voice, holding fast to God, and recognizing that the Lord is my life (Deut. 30:19–20).

one

interested conversation

Occupants of the unsaid sides of silence move
single-file by force through paths of grief and grace,
variegated planks for feet rough cut and worn
smooth with the friction-chatter of naked toes and heels.

Words worth saying often go unsaid—
worthwhile,
quieted,
words.

> *If you bring forth what is within you what you bring*
>   *forth will save you.*
> *If you do not bring forth what is within you what you*
>   *do not bring forth will destroy you.*

Paul Gorrell,[1] "Words Worth Saying"

This past year, a high school friend of mine, Aaron Jackson, was dying. Hundreds of people used social media to stay updated on his cancer treatment, hoping that he would be healed. Each week his Facebook page was flooded with encouragement. People reminded Aaron often that they

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1. Paul Gorrell is a poet and the founder and director of Peace Right Here, which "works to recover and reshape imaginations to embrace, practice, and champion alternatives to violence." See "About," Peace Right Here. Paul is also my husband and partner in life. This poem is from an unpublished collection of his poetry.

loved him and were praying for him. He spent the last months of his life sharing his cancer journey with us: the joyful, the ugly, and the mundane. In the midst of it all he continued to use the phrases, "God is in control," "Stay strong," and "Never give up." In November, he posted his last two Facebook status updates: one, an enthusiastic post dedicated to his favorite basketball team, and the other, a sobering post promising to watch over everyone and asking friends to let him know who to say "hey" to on the other side. Like so many others, I will be forever grateful for Aaron's online vulnerability and positivity, and his insights into the experiences of those trying to survive cancer. For most of the last months of his life, Aaron was unable to leave his hospital room and could only have a few visitors because his medical team was trying to get him into remission. Social media was his connection to his friends and to the world.

Glorious Possibilities

God is online. God is active in every place and at every point of our lives. God's investment in creation extends to the various developments of human culture, including internet spaces like social media sites.[2] The Holy Spirit can be our companion in online spaces, as in all other aspects of life—teaching us; reminding us; empowering us; encouraging us; revealing truth to us; bringing us grace, joy, hope, and peace; praying on our behalf; telling us what to say; setting us free; making us holy; and, thus, inviting human beings to be receptive to and share in God's loving, reconciling ministry in our hearts and in the world (Luke 2:26; 10:21; 12:12; John 14:26; Acts 1:8; 9:31; 13:9; Rom. 8; 14:17; 15:13; 2 Cor. 5:14–21; 1 Pet. 1:2). God is with us during our engagement with new media just as God is with us when we engage in physical spaces and activities and use other tools. Given God's dynamic participation in people's lives and the entire world, new media has glorious possibilities. In other words, incredible, meaningful things can happen as people use new media—because of God's guidance, love, and active presence in our new media landscape.

Reflecting on Aaron's story, I can see that he demonstrated God's love, strength, and hope toward his family, girlfriend, coworkers, and friends online, and an extraordinary number of people mirrored that love, strength, and hope back to him through social media. Each week I witnessed people

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2. God is missional in the sense that God is actively engaged in the world and the Spirit is consistently inviting human beings to participate in God's activities. Consequently, "God is at work in the world beyond the church." Van Gelder, *Ministry of the Missional Church*, 59. See also Gorrell, "Social Media, Churches," 11, 215.

online rejoicing with Aaron when he rejoiced. When he posted about being able to spend time with people he loved in person, when he shared videos and photos of himself walking the halls of the treatment center (his will to survive and remain hopeful never wavered), and when the treatment he received was working and helping him feel more like himself, people wrote joyful, compassionate replies.

I also observed people mourning when Aaron mourned. They expressed sadness when he displayed a photo of the effects of chemotherapy on his mouth and explained that he was unable to eat even though he was starving; they communicated grief when he shared his sadness about missing events that were important to him; and they conveyed pain when he posted that doctors were struggling to find other remedies for curing him.

When Aaron posted his last status updates, the rejoicing and mourning were intermingled, as often joy and sorrow are. People wrote things like, "You have brought laughter and humor to such a heartbreaking time. You have had every right to complain and instead, you chose love." And, "With tear-filled eyes all I can do is look at the sun rising over the clouds and imagine the beauty you are entering. Well done my friend, what a wonderful life you have led here. You are so loved." And, "Your strength, faith in God, and determination have changed so many lives."

Social media was used to keep people updated about Aaron's treatment plans, support him with practical resources, shower him with love, and invite people to pray for his healing. For example, a sock campaign was started in his honor. He loved to wear crazy, colorful, decorative knee-high socks. Everyone who knew him, knew he loved wild socks, a beautiful idiosyncrasy that people used to share his story and let him know that he was seen and heard. His family, friends, and coworkers wore crazy socks and posted photos on social media of them wearing the socks with special hashtags dedicated to him and with loving words of support. One friend made an image in his honor of a cancer awareness ribbon in blue and white (the colors of his favorite Kentucky basketball team: University of Kentucky), and many of his Facebook friends replaced their profile picture with it.

People held events on his behalf—a softball tournament and social events at a local restaurant—to raise money for whatever he needed, and they posted about the events on social media to acquire additional funds. Then, three months before he passed away, friends used technology (in fewer than forty-eight hours) to gather a large group of over one hundred people outside the cancer center where Aaron was being treated. He had been at the center for ninety-two days and was about to be moved from Kentucky to a new cancer center in Texas. The purpose of gathering people was twofold: (1) to

encourage him to stay strong by bringing him to the balcony of the cancer center to look down on the crowd and see how loved he was and (2) to raise more money for the new type of treatment he was about to receive. To raise the money, someone filmed the gathering and posted it on Facebook so people could find the website to donate money for the treatment that everyone was hoping would save his life. In the video, you can see the crowd cheering and holding up handmade signs with loving words like "Stay Strong," "You are our Superhero," and "We love you."

Connection

The major possibility that new media use affords is *connection*. In the early days of AOL, message boards allowed people to discuss, among other things, their hobbies. My aunt Teri told me that one day she was messaging a group that discussed favorite childhood books. She mentioned that hers was a book about a girl visiting the circus and seeing female riders and horses with plumes on their heads, but she could not remember the name of the book. Instantly a man in the group recognized the book and provided the title; he even asked for an address where he could mail her a vintage copy for free. Teri said this was when she was first awakened to new media's possibilities and reawakened to the kindness of strangers.

Most online activity comes from a desire to connect. In *It's Complicated*, danah boyd explores the important reasons young people stay online, arguing that "most teens are not compelled by gadgetry as such—they are compelled by friendship. The gadgets are interesting to them primarily as a means to a social end."[3] Basically, if young people can find a way to hang out with their friends, they will. Youth have a way of "socializing" technology—that is, always finding a way of using technology to nurture relationships with their friends.[4] When cars became popular, youth went cruising with their friends and drove to parking lots to sit around and talk to each other. For teens today, having a cell phone means having access to friends. And teens love to talk to their friends.

3. Danah boyd, *It's Complicated*, 18. As a Microsoft researcher, danah boyd talked with teens in eighteen states from a wide array of socioeconomic and ethnic communities between 2006 and 2010, conducted 166 formal, semistructured interviews with teens, and observed teens online and offline (see boyd, *It's Complicated*, 27, 215–20). Sometimes media scholars, such as boyd, and media platforms do not capitalize words that are normally capitalized and, likewise, may use capitalization when convention would suggest otherwise. I will follow norms concerning trademarks and allow authors' preferred nonstandard usage in book titles, chapter titles, names, and digital vocabulary (e.g., website names and internet terminology).

4. Zirschky, "Technology, Education." In his book *Beyond the Screen*, Zirschky explores why young people frequently use technology and provides guidance for people who care about and work with young people.

New media is not just being used to connect with friends though; it is also being used to help young people have healthier experiences with their peers and to feel empowered. "Connected Camps" offers a weeklong program that allows kids to have a camp experience by playing games and engaging in various activities online. There are even counselors who monitor and lead the experiences. Paul Darvasi tells the story of Karen Gilbo's daughter. She is twelve years old, loves LEGO and playing Minecraft and also happens to have a form of autism (Asperger's syndrome), which causes her to struggle to read social cues in person.[5] In the past, Gilbo sent her daughter to in-person camps (the type most people are familiar with), but her daughter needed an aide with her at all times, and this made her feel different. However, at online camp, she did not see herself as different, and she had positive social interactions with other campers while enjoying some of her favorite activities.

There are also adults who find that the internet helps them relate to others and embrace and participate in God's love when it would otherwise be difficult or even impossible. Numerous online support groups have been created for people who are facing similar things in life: the challenges of parenting, specific diseases like migraines, various addictions, and so on. Social media use can be deeply encouraging to people who feel alone or marginalized in the community they live in or in the organizations they are a part of.

Internet spaces can also be inspiring and motivating, spaces that nurture learning. Tori McGraw-Rowe, a friend and research assistant for this book, described the importance in her life of the Vineyard Women website, a hub for women's pastoral voices in the Association of Vineyard Churches.[6] It aggregates sermons preached by women in Vineyard churches in North America. For Tori, a young seminarian, recently ordained in the Vineyard church, the sermons have been encouraging and empowering examples of preaching. She is also part of a monthly coaching group, composed of women Vineyard pastors in Pennsylvania, Colorado, and Tennessee. Without the social media site that hosts their monthly meeting, the women would probably not know each other, and each would likely be on her own.

The internet has also become an important space for people to relate with those they would otherwise not know. I met Jedidiah Haas while working at an in-person summer camp in high school, approximately eighteen years ago. I have kept up with him somewhat through social media. Jed has cystic fibrosis, and during the last few years this has made working as an in-person pastor unmanageable. His doctors did not want him to interact with many

5. Darvasi, "Online Communities Lower Social Barriers."
6. "Homepage," Vineyard Women.

> **Jedidiah Haas**
> May 5, 2017
>
> A quick update for my friends—I spend a lot of time on Facebook these days (it is easy to scroll and see people I love). I am either in the hospital in an isolation room or home bound these days. My health takes up about 90% of my focus (lots of time for Kendra and other family too) so I can stay healthy enough for a potential double lung transplant. I have about 10% to spend on my other priorities. As you can see my time is limited and visitors are super limited. I am a people guy so naturally this drives me crazy, yet, I am cherishing the time I have in person with my family and extended family (in other words my "oikos," which includes family and some friends). Texting is my new way of life because I don't have to use breath. I am moving to primarily virtual communication, and I am super thankful to be part of the ministry of virtualdisciplemaker.com. I want to thank everyone for your contin-ued prayer and support. We feel at peace and loved big time. I weep at times thinking of the amazing relationships I have been blessed with, and I continue to see love in action through each one of you. My heart is for as many people as possible to know the love of Jesus. Keep spreading the joy! Keep focusing your eyes on Jesus.
>
> 👍 Like   💬 Comment   ↪ Share

people in person for fear of them making him sicker. In 2017, I watched Jed use the power of the internet to disciple other people while awaiting a lung transplant.[7] Jed explains in a Facebook post (above).

Jed mentors and coaches other people by using an online platform called Zoom. His website and Zoom help him continue to invest in people's lives, despite being in a hospital room.[8]

One of my best friends, Lyndsey Deane Ratchford, has dedicated her life to helping people have access to clean water. She uses social media to post status updates and live videos that encourage responsiveness to the needs of some of the world's most vulnerable communities. Her posts urge viewers to understand the far-reaching implications of this issue (e.g., education, health) and to learn the stories of people whose lives have been saved by clean water

7. Jed received new lungs in late 2017 and is doing really well!
8. virtual DISCIPLEMAKER, http://www.virtualdisciplemaker.com/about.html.

as well as those working to solve this problem.[9] She uses both her in-person ministry (preaching and speaking) and social media to invite members of Christian communities to partner with her and World Vision by running half and full marathons, donating money, and sponsoring children. Her goal is to help provide clean water to every person on the planet during her lifetime; social media has assisted her in making headway toward this goal.

Online platforms can provide nonthreatening space for people's imagination and feelings to be engaged so that they can participate in God's work and be transformed. Social media use can even cause people to feel empathy and compassion for people they have never met.[10] One of the most powerful displays of internet-nurtured compassion occurred in 2015 when an online photo of three-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi lying dead on a beach instantly went viral. Bryan Walsh writes in a *Time* article about the photo, "A few minutes into the journey to Greece, the dinghy capsized. Alan, his older brother Ghalib and his mother Rihanna all drowned, joining the more than 3,600 other refugees who died in the eastern Mediterranean. . . . In death, Alan became a symbol of all the children who lost their lives trying to reach safety in Europe and the West."[11] A digital photo shared on multiple online platforms awakened the world to what was happening in Syria. The photo of Alan humanized the horrifying war zone in Syria and caused many people across the globe to give money toward aiding refugees.[12] (The refugee crisis remains, and we need to keep responding.)[13] These are a few examples of possibilities related to connection that new media use affords.

New media spaces and devices *can* be sites and instruments of God's home among mortals (Rev. 21:3) where new media development and engagement is determined by Christian visions of the good life.[14] You *can* live a true life of

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9. "Clean Water." See also World Vision International at https://www.wvi.org.
10. Mary Hess, in her article "Mirror Neurons," explores the effectiveness of digital storytelling for faith formation due to possible connections between digital storytelling and the development of empathy.
11. B. Walsh, "Alan Kurdi's Story."
12. Deutsche Welle, "Refugee Donations Surge."
13. For information on the refugee crisis, including ways to help, see "Refugee Crisis."
14. Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun refer to the kingdom of God as "God's home among mortals" in their book *For the Life of the World*. As they explain, this home of God that "Jesus proclaimed and enacted is a particular kind of *dynamic relation* between God and the world: it is 'the world-with-God' and 'God-with-the world'" (68). They quote Revelation 21:3, which says, "I heard a loud voice from the throne say, 'Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God.'" Volf and Croasmun invite serious discussion "about how doing theology fits into the grand goal of God: fashioning each human and the entire world into God's home and our true home as well" (8).

righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17) and practice faith in this new media landscape, although it will be lived under the conditions of the false life, until the new world is established (Rev. 21:1–22:5).[15] God has not yet fully made this new media landscape God's home; rather, it is still on its way to becoming God's home. Online and in person, we experience glimpses of God's activity and loving embrace, but we experience these glimpses in the midst of a world that is broken—marred by sin and its consequence: suffering.

Profound Brokenness

While the stories I have shared display some of the most glorious things that can happen through social media, embedded in other stories are the ways social media use contributes to malign circumstances, harmful practices, and destructive feelings. I am not quite a digital immigrant, nor am I a digital native.[16] One might call me a first-generation internet citizen.[17] I did not have a mobile phone until college, and I have never taken a keyboarding class. However, my mother bought a desktop computer for my bedroom when I was sixteen years old. Looking back, I realize this was a significant privilege. After receiving this computer and learning how to connect to AOL through a dial-up connection, I often visited various chat rooms first thing after arriving home from school. If you were around at the beginning of AOL and had access to a desktop computer, you probably recall both the familiar noise the modem made when it was connecting to the internet and your own excitement about talking to your friends through a computer. It was incredible.

I was an early adopter of MySpace, the first social media site that helped me create a social network online. However, MySpace was also how I found out that my college boyfriend of two-and-a-half years was simultaneously

15. There are two forms of flourishing life: ultimate and secondary. Volf and Croasmun explain, "Then and there, in the new world that comes from God, all God's creatures will flourish in God's presence; the flourishing of each will aid the flourishing of all and the flourishing of all will in fact be an aspect of the flourishing of each. This is the flourishing life in its ultimate form. . . . Flourishing life in the secondary and penultimate sense is *the mode of the true life under the conditions of the false life*." *Life of the World*, 76, 79.

16. "A digital immigrant is an individual who was born before the widespread adoption of digital technology. The term digital immigrant may also apply to individuals who were born after the spread of digital technology and who were not exposed to it at an early age. Digital immigrants are the opposite of digital natives, who have been interacting with technology from childhood." "Digital Immigrant."

17. "Born between 1977 and 1997, Net-generation [is] the first generation to grow up surrounded by home computers, video games, and the Internet." Leung, "Net-Generation Attributes," 333.

in a relationship with someone else. Obviously, this was painful. While new media has expanded my understanding of the world in meaningful ways, kept me connected with friends and family, and provided rich resources for teaching (among many other things I could name), it has also been a source of pain, anxiety, frustration, and sadness on many occasions. I know what it feels like to post something and then regularly check to see if people have responded or liked what I have said. And more than this, I know what it feels like to have a post "fall flat," the kind of post that so few people respond to that you want to delete it. I *have* deleted those kinds of posts.

I understand how social media can contribute to jealousy. I have several friends who seemingly, no matter what they post, get hundreds of likes each time. I look at their posts and sometimes compare myself to them and feel "less than"—less smart, less funny, less beautiful, less successful. And I understand why social media can extend worry. After posting something potentially controversial, I know what it feels like to try to work (or do school assignments) only to find myself wondering, "What are people thinking about what I just shared? If I glance at my page, will I find hateful remarks?" And then there was 2016, the year that I came to understand, like so many of you, how hurtful social media rants and posts about politics and religion can be. I began to recognize how angry I can get when using social media. I started to notice that when I read certain posts, tweets, or news stories, my stomach would tighten, and I would feel like my blood was boiling. Long after leaving my newsfeed, I obsessed over what I could say or do in response.

Too many days this year, I have read things online and thought, "I cannot believe this is the world we live in. I cannot believe people really think this way." You may resonate with these sentiments. My friends have reminded me that, unfortunately, the world *has* been this way (divided in many respects, violent, racist, misogynistic, etc.), and social media's exposure of recent events (and people's ability to constantly share their thoughts on the events) has simply surfaced these longtime realities in new ways that are forcing *everyone* to feel them and confront them.

Beyond all of this, there are the devastating stories—genocide, modern slavery, mass shootings, white supremacy demonstrations, starvation. Even though I realize that too much of history is filled with these kinds of violence, I also recognize that social media has given me access to this information in new ways. I often read, in rapid succession, stories of violence, sometimes even as they are occurring, from the very people who are living them. It is one thing to hear about violence and another thing to watch it in real time. During these online moments, I see the depth of need in the world and how far it reaches. I see the heartbreaking reality of too many people's lives; and

like so many of you, on too many days I am overwhelmed by what I encounter online. On top of this, I often realize (again) that these needs and these heartbreaks have something to do with how I live my life—what I buy, how I take care of the environment, who I vote for, how I spend my time, what I do with the information I encounter online. In the midst of this kind of new media engagement, I often find myself unsure of what to pray for and crushed by my seeming inability to do anything about, well, anything.

Diminished Humanness

The new media landscape definitely presents new challenges, chief among which is the risk for *diminished humanness*. Online, some dimensions of humanity become more prominent, like our sense of sight and hearing. However, some dimensions of humanity remain opaque, like smell and touch (other than touching keys on a keyboard or touching a mobile phone). And even though sight and hearing are engaged when using new media, we usually use them to see words and images and to hear music, podcasts, notifications, and videos, rather than seeing and hearing *the people* we are engaging with (with the exception of new media like video calling). Given that most forms of mediated communication do not engage all our senses or require that we actually see or hear the people we are interacting with, these forms of communication tend to make it easier to minimize the humanness of yourself and other people.
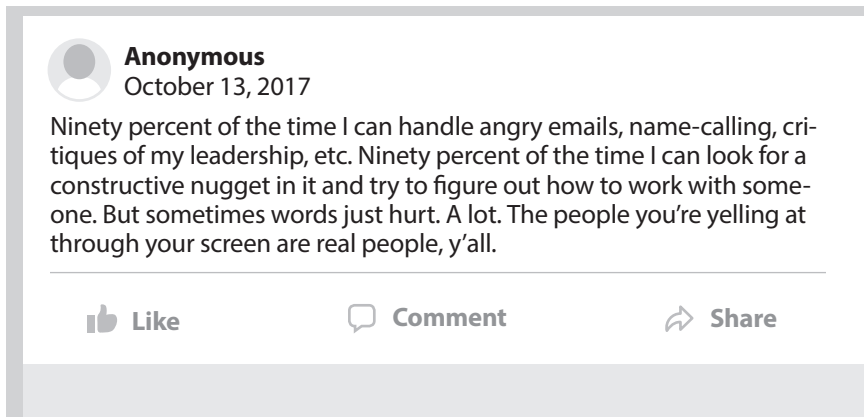
Diminished humanness is the result of not seeing *yourself* or *other people* as full beings with minds, hearts, emotions, hopes, friends, families, reputations, struggles. With respect to yourself, you can believe that what you do and say online or through a device is not the "real" you. New media "freezes" what you do in time so that, normally, you can go back to things you have said or done and review them. Perhaps this fact creates an actual separation between the person and their words and actions, which gives them the sense that their words and actions can be distanced from who they understand their "self" to be. In general, humans have a hard time believing that certain things they have said or done represent aspects of their personality or character. Nietzsche explains it best: "'I did that' says my memory. 'I couldn't have done that'—says my pride, and stands its ground. Finally, memory gives in."[18] Social media only exacerbates this issue.

Social media sites can also give you the impression that what you are doing and saying online is a performance, and so you are not really being you; rather,

18. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §68, p. 59.

you are merely acting for an imagined audience. Game sites, for example, encourage people to try on different personas by creating an online identity. In this way, you might believe that there is both a gamer version of you and an "actual" you. You might think of new media as enhancing or exaggerating aspects of who you are or allowing you to exhibit characteristics or personality traits that you wish you had, and so you might consider the online version of you as either amplified (for better or for worse) or fake. All of this could be true. However, the real (pun intended) issue at hand is that these lines of thinking can change what you believe is humane and permissible online, make you ignorant of the fact that new media engagement both reveals and shapes aspects of who you are, and cause you to believe that what you do and say online is somehow detached from who you are connected to and responsible to and who you are called to be.

Minimizing the humanity of *other people* online contributes (at the very least) to saying and doing hurtful things online that are normally more private—that is, things that are said or done between friends and family or acted out when alone (whether in your thoughts or through actions). For example, diminished humanness causes people to be less careful with their words when sending an email or posting online, which can be damaging to relationships. A Facebook friend recently shared the post you see below.

Anonymous
October 13, 2017

Ninety percent of the time I can handle angry emails, name-calling, critiques of my leadership, etc. Ninety percent of the time I can look for a constructive nugget in it and try to figure out how to work with someone. But sometimes words just hurt. A lot. The people you're yelling at through your screen are real people, y'all.

👍 Like   💬 Comment   ↪ Share

As this friend suggests, not only does minimizing humanness online damage relationships; it extends destructive ideologies, like racism, from physical spaces to digital spaces. At its very worst, it destroys people's lives.

Christian Rudder, in *Dataclysm*, describes a colleague's awful, racist tweet. Before boarding a plane for Cape Town, Justine Sacco tweeted, "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!" She then turned off

her phone for the eleven-hour flight.[19] In a single tweet, she dismissed the humanness of African people, of people living with HIV and AIDS, and of people of color. Her violent words were met by millions of people responding on Twitter with hate-filled words back to her. Social media users were morally outraged, and they wanted Sacco to be punished.

The hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet was seen by 62 million people in its first day.[20] People tweeted about anxiously awaiting her demise. Pictures of her family were circulated online; her nephew received numerous threatening phone calls; and BuzzFeed featured her face on its homepage with a large "LOL" scrawled across it.[21] Once she landed and discovered the firestorm, Sacco tweeted that she was having panic attacks because she worried that her family would be harmed. Both Sacco's racism and the crowd's shaming manifested themselves in horrific ways because it was difficult to associate tweets with actual human beings.

Like racism, moral outrage online can be easier and less costly than moral outrage in person. A person can express their outrage in a few clicks and then be anonymous in an angry crowd.[22] Normally, the "cost of outrage expression is empathic distress" because "punishing and shaming involves inflicting harm on other human beings, which for most of us is naturally unpleasant." However, "online settings reduce empathic distress by representing other people as two-dimensional icons whose suffering is not readily visible. It's a lot easier to shame an avatar than someone whose face you can see."[23] Diminishing and dismissing the humanity of yourself and other people online is what makes multiple forms of violence possible: vicious thoughts, cruel words, brutal actions.

It is one thing for social media users to label what Sacco did as racist, thoughtless, and wrong. What she did *was* wrong. However, it is quite another thing to shame her, to threaten and bully her and her family, and to express joy (*schadenfreude*[24]) over destroying her life. These sorts of responses to racism only mirror the sort of hatred that fuels racism in the first place. Martin Luther King Jr. explains:

> If I respond to hate with a reciprocal hate I do nothing but intensify the cleavage in broken community. I can only close the gap in broken community by

19. Rudder, *Dataclysm*, 141.
20. Rudder, *Dataclysm*, 143.
21. Rudder, *Dataclysm*, 142–43. LOL is an acronym for "laugh out loud."
22. Crockett, "Moral Outrage."
23. Crockett, "Moral Outrage," 770.
24. *Schadenfreude*, which literally means "harm-joy," is a German word for when people experience joy over another person's misfortune.

> meeting hate with love. If I meet hate with hate, I become depersonalized, because creation is so designed that my personality can only be fulfilled in the context of community. Booker T. Washington was right: "Let no man pull you so low as to make you hate him." When he pulls you that low he brings you to the point of working against community; he drags you to the point of defying creation, and thereby becoming depersonalized.[25]

Shaming, threatening, and bullying exacerbate destructive ideologies, like racism, and destroy community rather than provide responses that nurture justice and healing.

Exploitation in the physical world is also present in the digital realm. Sometimes exploiting others online is done maliciously, other times out of ignorance. For example, when people visit low-wealth communities during mission trips, social media users like to post photos of the trip, which often include photos of people they meet. However, taking photos of kids and adults who have illnesses or are malnourished and living in dire conditions can be dehumanizing and objectifying. Photos of people in low-wealth communities that are particularly problematic are those taken without consent (especially photos of children) or those showing people who appear helpless or sick rather than capable and dignified. Also problematic are photos that contribute to stereotyping. For example, photos of healthy, privileged Americans posing with or offering handouts to underprivileged people can suggest that people who lack access to adequate resources are incapable of acting for their own benefit; these photos can perpetuate the idea that wealthy people save people in low-wealth communities.[26]

Another form of online exploitation is human trafficking. It is modern slavery. Children and adults are being sold, confined, oppressed, and abused. Polaris has identified twenty-five job fields that involve human trafficking, including carnivals, hotels and hospitality, and agriculture. Their report explains that "each [field] has its own business model, trafficker profiles, recruitment strategies, victim profiles, and methods of control that facilitate human trafficking."[27] It is estimated that over twenty million people are enslaved today; the internet makes this possible, as it offers anonymity and efficient, discreet communication between traffickers.[28] Dehumanization not only contributes to horrific forms of abuse in person; it contributes to destructive abuse online.

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25. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 94. Both Washington and King use gendered language. It would have been good for both of them to use inclusive language instead, as their words apply to all human beings.

26. "Ethics and Photography"; Gharib, "Volunteering Abroad?"

27. "Typology of Modern Slavery."

28. "Human Trafficking."

If Christian communities care about new media use contributing to damaged relationships, destructive ideologies, and significant problems like modern slavery, they need to have constructive conversations about the new media landscape. Unfortunately, these important matters—the kinds of glorious possibilities and profound brokenness described thus far—are usually not the focus of conversations about new media in most Christian communities. There are significant reasons why.

Essential Questions

The emerging and rapidly changing new media landscape provokes *fear* of one kind or another in Christians who respond to it. And fear often leads Christian communities to neglect essential questions that motivate faithful living in a new media landscape.

- What is the new media landscape like and what does it have to do with Christian faith?
- Why is new media design and use profoundly broken?
- How would Jesus Christ—a person formed in the image of God—act and feel when using new media, and what kinds of new media circumstances would Jesus seek to create?
- What would it take and how would it look to live a life of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit in a new media landscape?

Neglecting critical questions like these, combined with inadequate resources for leading communities in critical and theological reflection on the new media landscape and limited time for Christian education about new media, means that those of us who lead churches, nonprofit ministries, classrooms, and other types of Christian learning communities often "major on the minors." For example, a community might focus on debating whether its members are texting too much rather than focusing on trying to understand the experiences and feelings of those doing the texting and discerning whether texting might have something to do with living a righteous and joyful life in a new media landscape. Additionally, the glorious possibilities and profound brokenness of new media are not merely linked to new media tools (e.g., social media sites). Rather, multiple factors matter—the people using new media, its context and aims, the developers of new media, and its embedded values—and thus new media and people's engagement with it must include attention to multiple factors.[29]

29. These convictions are connected to the perspective on technology, "media as social institutions," which takes seriously the people (individuals and groups) that are both designing