**TECHNOLOGY**

**How it affects our spirituality**

**Part Two**

Norbert PittorinoOFM

Much of my material has come from an article written by Friar Jason Welle OFM, which was published in *The Cord* magazine.

In discussions of technology and our changing habits, one inevitably hears the objection that there’s nothing intrinsically wrong with technology. It’s just a matter of how you use it! At first glance, this statement is true enough. However, this blasé objection **overlooks the potential of modern communications technology to form habits.** Joshua Cohen’s recent collection of short stories expresses these dangers clearly. The computer can’t hate me. It’s non-judgemental. But yet…I experience it encroaching on my life somehow…and this reality strikes me as unfair. Is there…could there be…must there be something else going on?

This “something else” finds expression in the writing of Nicholas Carr. To this point, I have suggested that many of our habits in the use of technology derive from the expectation that it will make our lives more efficient and fulfilled. Examples from the business world both confirm and refute this. It certainly makes our work more efficient, but in the oft-seen extremes of non-stop connectivity and the assumption that my minutes are so uniquely valuable that I must multi-task, the argument from efficiency runs aground. Studies from contemporary psychology both confirm and refute that social media make our lives more fulfilling. **Those who use *Facebook* as a means to facilitate real face-to-face interaction with friends find it a wonderful boon; those who cultivate shallow connections often find it a path to loneliness.** Carr focuses on the effect of the internet on the brain itself, challenging the assumption that all of this technology is certainly a blessing. He exploded on the blogosphere in 2008 with his cover story for *The Atlantic*: ***What the Internet is doing to Our Brains****.* In a nutshell, Carr urges us to take seriously the plasticity of the human brain. The brain is malleable, changeable, adaptable to whatever tasks users present to it.

This seems like a great blessing: my brain will mould itself to grapple best with the challenges I set before it. But the reality masks a problem: scientists haven’t really accounted for what the Internet is doing to our brains. How does one typically use the Internet? A screen pops up – scan, point, click – another screen – scan, point, click – another screen – scan, point, click – and take in very little of what is on those pages. Frequent use of the Internet encourages our brain to become a machine that jumps from hyperlink to hyperlink, dealing with material only at the level of phrases and sound bytes. Now, let me explain this to those who don’t know much about the computer. When I want to pursue a topic on the Internet, I open the search engine (e.g. Google or Yahoo) and ask for my topic e.g. Saint Francis of Assisi. Immediately the screen shows a list of possible sites where you will find more information on the Saint. I choose one and click with the mouse. This opens up the site. I glance through it, scan it (copy it) if I want it, and move on to another site about the Saint. I repeat the process as many times as I may need to until I conclude. This repetitive process, says Carr, makes our brain into a machine. Carr then gives an example. He recounts his lifelong love for reading, when as a young man he would knock off entire novels in a single sitting. Now, because of the amount of time he spends on the Internet, he can’t do that anymore. He finds his mental circuitry too scattered and jittery to engage in deep reading. **The way his brain works has changed. Use of the Internet has rewired his brain. It can’t do the tasks it once could and he’s not sure if he can train it to shift back. The change is a fundamental change in the way his mental machine works, and persons invested in helping others develop their spiritual lives must seriously consider the consequences of this possibility.**

I am not suggesting that Franciscans should oppose technological change as a matter of principle, nor am I trying to sound apocalyptic, that is, seeking a secret revolution against technology. But **Franciscans should be aware of these trends. Grace builds on nature, and it often feels that our nature is changing.** Particularly in the case of digital natives, young people who have never known a life without a device in their hands. Are we entering a time when our brains are physically unable to concentrate? Where one’s mind can’t sit still? How do we, as Franciscans, talk about deep prayer to someone who can’t focus attention long enough to read a meaty paragraph? How do we talk about meditation to someone so obsessed with connection that two minutes without looking at one’s mobile phone is an impossible challenge? How do we speak about making God the centre of our lives if on waking in the morning, instead of making an act of thanksgiving, email has to be checked before rolling out of bed? How has my ability to be present to people changed?

To be sure, there are prominent authors who contest the image of the shallows described above. Clive Thompson, for example, argues that good neurological studies have not sufficiently supported theses like Carr’s, but that even if our brains were changing in this way, we should look at the bright side. In 2010, a community of online puzzle gamers was able to unravel the protein folding of the virus that gives AIDS to monkeys. The solution to the problem had eluded professional biologists for a decade; online volunteers solved it in three weeks. Modern technology enables this. The internet enables me to work on my studies so that visits to the library become fewer. Thompson insists, this is a victory for our world.

As I come to a conclusion, let me quote the ex- Minister General of the OFM when he addressed the young friars’ meeting in 2012:

“We are surrounded and immersed in noise. Noises of every kind have become the sound barriers of the spirit in this society, preventing us from listening to ourselves, to God, and to others. And the worst is that we are afraid of silence, because it puts us face to face with ourselves; it shows what we must be and how much is missing in us in order to be that. And in this sense it is dangerous: it reminds us of what we still have not resolved within us. It shows us the other face of ourselves, that from which we cannot escape, that which we cannot camouflage with ‘cosmetics’. Silence leaves us alone with ourselves. And this terrifies us, so we flee from silence. Because of what I have just said, and because I consider silence as the greatest teacher of life, I am convinced that we must find spaces of real silence if we wish to be accompanied and, at the same time, if we wish to reach a ‘holistic’ growth, that is, the growth of the full person. My dear brothers, it is urgent for us to educate ourselves to discover the value of silence.”

**As Franciscans, we are in the business of helping people commune with God who created them and of stirring up their compassion for each other. We must face honestly whether all our gadgets and connectivity make that task harder.** Were Francis of Assisi with us today, I have little doubt that one would find him on *Facebook* or *Twitter* and several other platforms that would enable him to connect to the joys and hopes of those longing for the Gospel. However, I have even less doubt that he would unplug far more often than his contemporaries, and that a significant part of his witness would be precisely this.