The Impact of Technology on Culture: Rant or Rave?

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Introduction

For many years, the CBS news magazine "60 Minutes" frequently would end its Sunday-evening broadcasts with an Andy Rooney rant. "Don't you just hate it when…" he would ask, completing the sentence with a commentary on the size of cereal boxes or the effectiveness of his hair dryer.

When I first considered a topic for this issue of the journal, I felt I may be channeling that icon of the inane. I felt compelled to write on the subject of "cultural homogenization." By that I simply mean the progressive, unrelenting and, in my opinion, tragic world-wide loss of rich cultural, language and national distinctives – often at the hand of technological advances." I could almost hear my own "Don't you just hate it when…" bubbling up from deep within my personal storehouse of long-repressed frustrations.

A few days reflection, however, convinced me that a cathartic rant would be personally satisfying but would not be a fair handling of the topic. Certainly technology has been a homogenizing agent, but one could also make the case that technology is helping to differentiate, preserve and strengthen cultural identity.

Communications and Educational Resources

Not long ago, for example, I was interviewing vendors for a new web-conferencing system for the seminary in which I work. At the advice of a distance education colleague, I contacted Avacast Inc., a smaller service provider located in Northern California. We

went through the formalities of program specifications and system requirements before I asked our representative a critical question, "Who else is using your system?"

I expected that he would provide an impressive list of business and educational institutions. Instead, he began by citing the fact that "Several Native American nations are using our web-conferencing tools for language training."

He explained that tribal leaders had approached Avacast concerned that as more community members left to pursue distant opportunities, tribal languages and traditions would be lost. Without immediate and substantive intervention, geographically-disconnected tribal members could easily be assimilated into their local cultures and would lose their long and proud cultural distinctives. They chose Avacast web-conferencing tools as one critical element of a much larger response to their dilemma. Today several Native American nations are successfully using technology-mediated instructional systems to teach distant tribal members the language and culture of their ancestors while helping to bring an increased sense of community regardless of location.

Since my discussions with Avacast, new open source resources have emerged to provide many of the same functions at little or no expense. At Western Seminary we have been using DimDim (dimdim.com), a free web-conferencing option with powerful tools for voice-over-IP, white boarding, slide presentations, and video streaming with great success. Another free open-source program, ooVoo (oovoo.com), allows up to six users with web cameras to meet online simultaneously. Creativity is truly the only limit to the effective use of these and other Internet-based resources.

Informational Resources

I was reminded, too, of the connection I have with my Canadian roots. By accident of birth I was born to Canadian military parents in Washington, D.C. Within a year I returned to Canada, spending the next 25 years there before attending college as a

foreign student in Virginia. With only a brief exception, I have remained in the United States (yes, legally) ever since.

Nevertheless, I am thoroughly Canadian at heart and deeply concerned about the future of my "home and native land." My family is in Canada; my oldest and best friends are in Canada. If you were to check any of my seven computers, you would find CBC.ca and CTV.ca, two of Canada's premier news networks, at the top of my browser's favorites group. Every day, without exception, I visit both sites, read almost every article, and participate when exorcised (which is often) in the online news blogs. I consider myself a native Canadian in temporary exile. The ability to remain connected, to be a part of a larger dialog with my countrymen, is an incredible gift. 21st century technologies help many millions like me who are in diaspora to maintain our cultural connections and identity. In a previous generation, I would have become increasingly estranged from my cultural roots. Today, thanks to technology, I feel as much a part of the Canadian experience as if I were still living north of the 49th parallel.

Social Networking

The role that information and communication resources play at the macro level, social networking resources perform at the micro level. Web sites such as myspace.com, linkedin.com, and facebook.com encourage individuals who share a language, culture, interests, passions, aspirations – the number of potential associative nodes is limitless – to create intensely personal, virtual communities. While some question the validity and value of these virtual connections, they are increasingly changing the historical concept of community from being location-based to being relationship-based. (As an aside, this reconsideration of community is confounding many in traditional educational leadership roles. If true and substantive community can be created without sharing a common location, what then is the future of the college or seminary campus? Is it necessary for educational institutions to develop and sustain hugely-expensive brick-and-mortar

facilities, and for students to carry the expense of relocating to a distant college or seminary, if both educational and relational outcomes can be achieved virtually? (No, there is no resolution yet, but stay tuned.)

Closing Remarks

That technology has been instrumental in the breaking down of cultural distinctives, what I have referred to as the homogenizing effect of technology, is beyond dispute. It is also true, however, that technology is helping to support and sustain cultural identity. Why not drop me a note at jstewart@westernseminary.edu and share your insights and perspectives? My purpose here is simply to prime the conversational pump; without you, what we hope will be a dialog becomes a monolog. What fun is that?