

All the world's a stage, and we are merely tweeters

Wow ... did you see the Pope use an iPad? Did you hear about how, using Twitter, he sent a burst of information using 140 characters or less (what they call a "tweet")?

I noticed that all over the place this seemed to be a big news story. The story was this: The Pope used an iPad. The Pope tweeted over Twitter.

Isn't it strange how that alone was pretty much all there was to the story?

It seems people thought that what the Pope said was less important than the way he said it. The content of what he said was not as important as the new way in which it was being transmitted.

Perhaps it really is true what that famous Canadian intellectual, an English professor named Marshall McLuhan, used to say: "The medium is the message."

Twitter is the message; Twitter is the story. (What the Pope actually said using Twitter? Not so much.)

Twitter is an online social networking medium. A medium is a technology that comes in-between two people. It mediates information. The mediation is intended to facilitate communication.

For example, Twitter mediates with tweets. A tweet, like the little burst of bird-song from which it steals the name "tweet," is a little burst of communication that can be re-tweeted by the surrounding listeners. Bird-calls can be re-chirped. Information outbursts can be quickly circulated and re-circulated.

The medium of Twitter operates like this bird activity. "The latest gossip has people all atwitter." "A little birdie told me."

No doubt Twitter chose its very name because it hopes to be a medium that is all atwitter with rapid communications and nervous excitement.

So why is the Pope on Twitter? Twitter is not the only technological medium for communication. Facebook is another medium. Email is a medium. Telephone calls are another medium. Texting is a medium.

The Pope uses some of



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these; but not all.

Television is a medium. Movies are another medium. YouTube is a medium. Jet travel is another medium. The light bulb is a medium. And so on...

The plural form of the Latin word "medium" (translation: "the middle") is "media" (literally: "the middles"). And we are surrounded by technological media.

We relate to one another through these media. They form us. They shape all our social interactions.

Can you think of any aspect of your social life that is untouched by media?

Marshall McLuhan, who converted to Catholicism in 1937, and died in 1980, noticed that we had reached a point in human history where the impact of technological media on human beings was now so great that a fundamental shift had occurred.

It now mattered more whether or not you were using the media. It mattered



Paul Haring / CNS

Pope Benedict XVI sends his first Twitter message during his general audience in Paul VI Hall at the Vatican Dec. 12.

less what you did with this medium or that medium. Because of this shift, "the medium is the message."

Another one of McLuhan's famous phrases was "the global village." It was meant to describe how to-

day's newest technological media have shrunk the globe, and can enable us to be more and more connected.

We can be closer to one another than ever before. It's like living in a small village, where everybody knows everybody's business: "the global village."

But it is less well known that McLuhan eventually came to prefer another phrase to "the global village." He came to think that the phrase "global theatre" was even more accurate.

He wrote in 1970 about how media saturation clouds our vision of what is natural: "Since Sputnik and the satellites, the planet is enclosed in a man-made environment that ends 'Nature' and turns the globe into a repertory theater to be programmed," and as an English professor McLuhan obviously was alluding here to Shakespeare's own famous Globe Theatre.

Shakespeare himself said, "All the world's a stage." McLuhan's metaphor was that, thanks to the latest technological media, it is now suddenly true that we are living in a global Globe Theatre.

More to the point, we are all actors in this technological drama, whether we like

it or not. "The results of living inside a proscenium arch of satellites is that the young now accept the public spaces of the earth as role-playing areas. Sensing this, they adopt costumes and roles," wrote McLuhan. And they quickly adopt new media – whatever holds their Pinterest.

Perhaps some players will Google. Sometimes they will Facebook. Or sometimes they will tweet.

Such is their costume for the moment, useful for playing their role.

Some will even write a newspaper column. The Pope himself used that medium on December 20, 2012, inscribing this in the *Financial Times*: "Christians should not shun the world; they should engage with it."

But he also added an important qualification, which I would paraphrase this way:

For Christians, the medium is not the only message. Otherwise technological

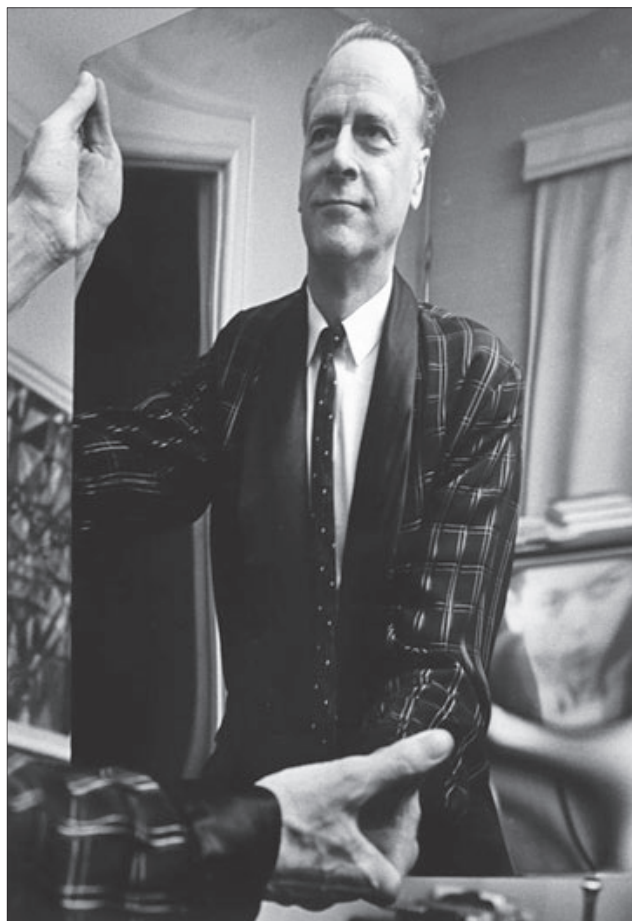
media will become the idols that we worship, instead of God. Otherwise technological media will become the tools of persecution enlisted by fanatics who, operating according to a plan of constraint and control – an ideology of enslavement – seek to replace God's message, replacing it with the medium itself as the counterfeit substitute message.

The Pope wrote: "When Christians refuse to bow down before the false gods proposed today, it is not because of an antiquated worldview. Rather, it is because they are free from the constraints of ideology and inspired by such a noble vision of human destiny that they cannot collude with anything that undermines it."

So, that's why I follow the Pope.

And not just on Twitter.

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John Reeves / Bibliothèque et Archives Canada

Marshall McLuhan holds up a mirror to himself in this photo from 1980. C.S. Morrissey writes that McLuhan's old saying, "the medium is the message," might be ringing true today in society.