

Bugeja, Michael

Interpersonal Divide: The Search for Community in a Technological Age

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We live in the swim of a “torrent” of images and sounds that are the media as Todd Gitlin describes it. In this time of swiftly rushing technological change, we find ourselves struggling to stay on top of it all. Have we the latest video ipod? The hippest picture/web cell phone? the sharpest digital plasma screen? The smallest laptop? Satellite radio? And if we don’t, we quickly feel marginalized by the advertising and long for the next hot item.

In *Interpersonal Divide: The Search for Community in a Technological Age*, Michael Bugeja asks what that torrent is doing to our relationships and our very character as human beings. Are we truly happy? At peace with ourselves and others? Bugeja argues that we pursue technology at the expense of meaningful communal living. As a result, our sense of time, our perception of others’ motives, and our connection to place are all disintegrating. The acceleration of technological development combined with the consumeristic mindset contribute to more than a technical or economic divide. It divides people from each other and even from themselves.

The book begins as a psychological diagnosis of the human psyche declaring the presupposition that “we are social creatures with a conscience” who crave acceptance (1). The search for acceptance argues Bugeja, is best satisfied in face-to-face contact where our values are formed and civic participation is meaningful. It’s not found in virtual reality.

Grounding his understanding of media technology in a value-driven model of the human enables Bugeja to argue as a moral philosopher. Other chapters show him to be a cultural forensic scientist. For example, in the chapter “Habits of a High-Tech Age,” Bugeja carefully gathers and catalogues the evidence of characteristics of thinking shaped by technology. He then informs that evidence with an historical overview that yields its own contribution--the consumeristic bent of the media. The case builds pointing toward degenerating interpersonal relationships due to excessive technological engagement.

Interpersonal Divide follows the trajectory of work by people like Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan (whom he both criticizes and praises), Walter Ong, and Neil Postman. Taking up Postman’s thesis that the medium shapes the content, Bugeja explores not just television, but also the computer, particularly the internet. Communication media bias their content in order to serve the particular medium.

Between problems of misidentified motives, physical and moral displacement, and divided identities, this book could degenerate to a litany of mediated woes and a diatribe against technology, but Bugeja, however, refuses to surrender to the problems and argues instead, for ethical living that reenters reflectively into community. To reinforce that reflection, he provides journal exercises, discussion points and suggested readings at the ends of every chapter. His thoughtful examples, use of scholarly literature, and concise writing contribute to a measured tone.

Ethicist, journalism professor, and author, Bugeja engages media technology, ethics, and human nature in critical dialogue. Drawing from an interdisciplinary range of examples, he argues his points with an even-handed reasonableness one might call common sense. Yet, he brings freshness to his media critique that yields insights.

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