

**THE 2009 WEBBER LECTURE**  
**BY**  
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**Electronic communication in the new millennium: is it affecting our  
social intelligence?**

*This paper takes a look at the recent developments in electronic communication and asks whether widespread use of this medium, particularly by the younger generation, is affecting the capacity for abstract thought and the ability to form satisfying interpersonal relationships.*

Eleven years ago yesterday, 5<sup>th</sup> May, Dean Michael Webber gave the first of a series of annual lectures that bear his name. As Dean of the Cathedral, his duties included teaching religious education at the Hutchins School and Collegiate. Although I met the Reverend Michael Webber on several casual occasions I did not have the opportunity to really know him and regrettably, was never the beneficiary of his erudition and wisdom.

So, Mr Dean I was very honoured to receive your letter inviting me to deliver the 2009 Webber lecture and of course, accepted the invitation immediately. Later, I began to have second thoughts. Unlike the late Michael Webber's students I had a utilitarian, or "no frills" education delivered in the 1950s from the intellectually rather barren halls of what was then the Launceston State High School. Neither ethics nor philosophy appeared on the curriculum at the Launceston State High School. Although it was not stated, there was an almost palpable atmosphere that such subjects were not only taboo but dangerous. Fifty

years ago school students were taught not to question the teacher, to fear the advance of communism, or the “yellow peril” as it was sometimes called, to vote for Prime Minister Bob Menzies and fervently support the White Australia Policy. So I graduated from school to university without even a nodding acquaintance with ethics, or philosophy.

Alas, I had not long been at the University of Tasmania when Professor Orr, the Professor of Philosophy, was summarily dismissed from his Chair for alleged inappropriate conduct with a female student. The dismissal sparked great controversy in academic circles all around the world and led to philosophy teachers placing a black ban on the Chair of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania with the result that I sailed through to graduate in law without encountering the world of philosophy. Hence my second thoughts Mr Dean, after I had accepted your invitation to be here this evening. My doubts became even more profound after I had read the contributions made by some of my predecessors.

However, I decided to press on when I read that at the very first lecture Dean Michael Webber had said this:

“We shall find that guided discussion, and mental analysis will have an essential place in the consideration or examination of the ethical aspects of such things as advertising, business methods, the various controls which limit the freedoms we think we have, insurance, social welfare, "gaydom", citizens' rights and responsibilities - there seems to be no end to the list.

Nor is there, and that is what makes ethics so interesting. What's more, no-one can really be considered educated who takes no intelligent interest in such matters. School provides opportunities for developing a moral awareness which, for many, might never come again.”

So this evening I would like to guide thinking and perhaps a little discussion about some relevantly recent developments in the electronic world used principally by what is known as Generation Y, being young people who were born between about 1982 and 1995 – quite a number of whom are here tonight – and question whether those developments are having an adverse impact on the development of the social intelligence of Generation Y and their interpersonal relationships. I refer to developments such as email, blogs, internet sites like Facebook and YouTube and texting (which I note is an entirely new verb) via mobile telephones.

My interest in this area was sparked by some research that I did in order to prepare an address I had to deliver at a luncheon for retired politicians. This research soon disclosed that it now appears to have become socially acceptable for anybody to form an instant, adverse opinion, often without any factual basis at all, about the actions and conduct of politicians without any proper evidence or enquiry, and express that judgment publicly, more often than not anonymously, via electronic media. The cyber world is packed with sites that invite everyone and anyone to “have their two bob’s worth” without giving reasons and without disclosing identity. The medium is such that these views and opinions – the more extreme the better – can be reproduced in print or electronic form and spread around to thousands of people all in a nanosecond. The medium has corrupted the word “politics”, defined by the OED as “the science and art of government”, into an expression of abuse – “you are just playing politics.”

All of this caused me to look back to the sixties and the work of the great Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan. His time was of course, before the days of e-mail, blogs, texting and the like, but nonetheless

relevant to our discussion tonight for he said that the adoption of electronic means to communicate with others was an adoption of an extension of ourselves as human beings. McLuhan's fundamental point was that if we failed to understand this proposition and used that understanding to make sure we controlled the electronic environment we would lose control of ourselves. He wrote:<sup>1</sup>

"Today, in the electronic age of instantaneous communication, I believe that our survival and at the very least our comfort and happiness is predicated on understanding the nature of our new environment, because unlike previous environmental changes, the electronic media constitutes a total and near-instantaneous transformation of culture, values and attitudes. This upheaval generates great pain and identity loss, which can be ameliorated only through a conscious awareness of its dynamics. If we understand the revolutionary transformations caused by the new media, we can anticipate and control them; but if we continue in our self-induced subliminal trance, we will be their slaves."

Mr McLuhan argued that the connections in the brain are made by a series of electrical charges and thus electronic communication - also a series of electrical charges - was in fact an extension of the brain. This connection between the electronic communication and the brain has made it necessary for mankind to understand the former for it is in reality part of the latter. Although he was writing fifty or so years ago I respectfully suggest that McLuhan's views are just as relevant today as they were then.

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<sup>1</sup> "Marshall McLuhan, The Man and his Message" 1

Psychologist and author Daniel Goleman has recently written a book<sup>2</sup> about brain science in which he expresses the view that humans are wired to connect to each other and this need for one human being to connect to another satisfies a deep innate human yearning and has a profound influence on our lives. He explains things that most of us here this evening are aware of intuitively: the accuracy of first impressions, the basis of charisma, the complexity of sexual attraction, the significance of so called “body language” and the craving for sociability. His thesis is that human brains are wired to connect and conduct what he calls “a neural ballet” with those around us. Goleman calls this Social Intelligence and describes it as falling into two broad categories. Firstly, there is “social awareness [that] refers to a spectrum that runs from instantaneously sensing another’s inner state, to understanding her/his feelings and thoughts to “getting” [understanding] complicated social situations.” According to Goleman:<sup>3</sup>

Social intelligence includes:

- Primal empathy: feeling with others; sensing non-verbal emotional feelings.
- Attunement: listening with full receptivity; attuning to a person.
- Empathetic accuracy: understanding another person’s thoughts feelings and intentions.
- Social cognition: knowing how the social world works.”

However, Goleman goes on to point out that “simply sensing how another feels or knowing what they think or intend does not guarantee fruitful interactions” so he states that social intelligence includes social facility. He writes, “Social facility builds on social awareness to allow smooth effective interactions and includes:

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Goleman, “Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships” Hutchinson 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Supra at 84.

- Synchrony: interacting smoothly at the non-verbal level.
- Self-presentation: presenting ourselves effectively.
- Influence: shaping the outcome of social interactions.
- Concern: caring about others needs and acting accordingly.”

Now, I do not suppose that Goleman’s description of social intelligence will take any of you by surprise. Every one of us experiences it every day. Some have more social intelligence than others. But what is significant about Goleman’s thesis is his proposition that the brain is wired – the electrical circuitry in the brain is wired or designed – to interact with other brain circuitries so that we function best when we are interacting on a physical, face-to-face basis with other humans; we function best when we are interacting on a physical, face-to-face basis with other humans. It is only in these circumstances that we will properly experience primal empathy, attunement, empathetic accuracy and social cognition. And we will only be able to interact smoothly if we have these experiences, and present ourselves effectively, influence outcomes and show concern for fellow human beings.

Face to face contact operates in the three dimensional world but the electronic world is a two dimensional world and yet this electronic two dimensional world is daily used more and more frequently in the western world as a means of communication between brains. Coupled with the widespread use of electronic games which deliver instant, simple gratification, this development in the means by which we communicate with each other has created what Professor Greenfield<sup>4</sup>, Head of the Oxford Centre for the Science of the Mind, has labeled a “screen culture”; a new culture that is rapidly developing in our society, particularly, but

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<sup>4</sup> Baroness Professor Susan Greenfield heads a multidisciplinary Oxford team investigating neurodegenerative disorders and also the Oxford Centre for the Science of the mind, exploring the basis of consciousness.

by no means exclusively, amongst the younger generation. It is often the preferred means of communication. It is a means of communication that permits loss of identity. Although it is quick and easy to use, because it does not call for the exercise of any social intelligence, it carries with it a huge risk of misinterpretation that is so easily avoided in face to face contact. Witness my sister-in-law who received an e-mail from her married son who lives in another State. He wrote, "Sarah [his wife] and I would like to come and see you at Easter". The delighted mother replied, "That's really good. Where will you stay?" The son and his wife were outraged. Their understanding was that their message, communicated electronically, carried the implication that they would of course, stay with his mother. So, they interpreted her reply, also communicated electronically, as carrying the implication that they would have to stay somewhere other than with her. But the mother's understanding of her electronic communication was that she hoped that they would indeed, stay with her. The e-mail was incapable of carrying either social awareness or social facility. The medium did not permit the correspondents to be attuned to each other. The means of communication and its misunderstandings affected the familial relationship. The only remedy was social intelligence which meant a face to face contact. Fortunately they ultimately did just that and the rift was healed, but what would have happened to that relationship if those involved had continued to communicate with each other only by electronic means? This made me think that perhaps McLuhan was right to stress that we need to understand the medium or we would lose control of ourselves in the sense that without understanding the medium we will lose the ability to control or properly direct our relationships with others.

Well, e-mail is clearly here to stay and that is no bad thing. It is indeed, a useful tool that we all use in everyday life. It might be described as an extension of ourselves and perhaps it is a good extension,

provided that we understand its limitations and do not lose sight of the importance of using social intelligence whenever possible.

But the development of social networking web sites is a new phenomenon that is changing the way we interact with others. According to Greenfield<sup>5</sup> social networking sites can provide “constant reassurance that you are listened to, recognised and important”. But of course they too avoid all those nuances which Goleman encompasses in his expression, social intelligence. The social network site enables the user to avoid the stress of face to face conversation. For the insecure and vulnerable teenager it is often seen to be easier to resort to the electronic medium for communication and thus avoid the risk of exposing feelings and insecurities. Facebook enables you simply to ask someone to be your electronic friend and if that person accepts you as their friend you can communicate with that person electronically. You may have never met that person face to face. You will have seen only his or her photograph. Facebook calls that person “Your friend”. A young woman who works at Government House told me that she had 224 friends and looked at me askance when I told her that I probably had no more than 20 friends.

Electronic communication makes it easier to reveal yourself in a way that you might not be comfortable with if the communication was face to face. Electronic communication lowers inhibitions because you cannot see or hear the person with whom you are communicating. Professor Greenfield expresses the fear that frequent resort to electronic communication may cause people, particularly young people to lose their sense of identity which is shaped by frequent face to face evaluation and measurement. She put her concern this way, “real conversation in real time may eventually give way to these sanitised and easier screen dialogues, in much the same way as killing, skinning and butchering an

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<sup>5</sup> In an interview printed in the Guardian newspaper for Tuesday, 24 February 2009.

animal to eat has given way to the convenience of packages of meat on the supermarket shelf.”<sup>6</sup> It is now possible to conduct a screen dialogue with a remote friend from a mobile telephone with a screen that fits in the palm of your hand. It is always there, at the ready, to use, not infrequently when you are in the presence of another, but to communicate with someone not in sight. As a neuro-scientist, Professor Greenfield advances the theory that the brain is capable of adapting and responding to the outside world.<sup>7</sup> She describes the brain as “being in constant dialogue with the outside world evaluating everything that happens in terms of personal experience and in turn, being updated by the happenings of the present moment.”<sup>8</sup> The theory continues that if human interaction in this new century is going to be quite different from that of the last century, then the brains or minds of the children of this new century, shaped by the new electronic media, are going to be quite different from the minds of children in the last century.

The latest social networking site that I have come across is called, appropriately enough, “Twitter” and its business is said to be “tweeting”. It is much the same as Facebook except that each electronic communication is limited to 140 characters. Let me read to you part of the transcript of electronic voice instructions for using Twitter: (you will have to imagine the American accent I am afraid)

So, what are you doing? It’s one of the first questions we often ask friends and family. Even if the answer is just mowing the lawn or cooking dinner, it’s interesting to us. It makes us feel connected and a part of each other’s lives.

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<sup>6</sup> Supra.

<sup>7</sup> Supra p58.

<sup>8</sup> Supra p14.

Unfortunately, most of our day to day lives are hidden from people that care. Of course we have email and blogs and phones to keep us connected. But you wouldn't send an email to a friend to tell them you're having coffee. Your friend doesn't need to know that. But, what about the people who want to know about the little things that happen in your life?

Real life happens between blog posts and emails. And now, there's a way to share. Thanks to Twitter its possible to share short, bite-sized updates about your life...and follow the updates of people that matter to you via the Web.

Here's how it works. Meet Carla - she's addicted to her mobile phone, reads blogs every day, and has contacts all over the world. She heard about Twitter and was sceptical. After some of her friends couldn't stop talking about it, she gave it a try.

She signed up for free and saw that Twitter pages look a little like blogs, with very short posts. Each page is personal and has updates from friends. She got started by looking up her friends on Twitter.com. After finding a few, she clicked Follow to start seeing their updates on her Twitter page. Within hours, she began to see a different side of people she chose to follow. She didn't know that Steven in Seattle was a baseball fan, or that Julia in London was reading a new investment book. The little messages from Twitter painted a picture of her friends, family and co-workers that she'd never seen before. It was the real world. Soon, she became a fan of Twitter, and posted updates every day. Her friends followed her updates, and learned that she recently discovered a passion for Van Halen. They could see Carla's life between blog posts and emails. For Carla, Twitter worked because it was simple. The updates were always short - under 140 characters. Plus, she could post updates and follow her

friends using the Twitter website, software on her browser, a mobile phone, or instant messages. By asking members to answer the question "What are you doing" Carla found that Twitter brought her closer to people that matter to her - 140 characters at a time. Find out what your friends are doing at Twitter.com.

Did you hear that? Tweeting is the real world. As I understand those instructions, Twitter is telling Carla that by using Twitter she can follow what ordinary day-to day things her so-called friends are doing so that she can feel close to them and reassure her own identity without having to take any emotional risks herself that would arise if she were actually with those friends exercising her social intelligence; Twitter is not the real world but seems to claim to be better than the real world. Is this a kind of voyeurism? Does the knowledge (delivered in less than 140 characters - and I tell you that that my aside "delivered in less than 140 characters", consisted of 31 characters or a quarter of a Twitter allowance) that Julia (presumably her cyber friend) is reading a new book on investment make her feel close to Julia? Why does Carla want to know what Julia is doing every moment of the day? Is it like being part of an electronic "Big Brother" or reality television show? I don't know the answer to any of those questions but it might be thought that if nothing else, tweeting is trivializing Carla's life. If Carla spends her time blogging, texting and tweeting when will she have the time for abstract thought? When will she have the time to ponder the big questions such as war and peace, whether there is life after death and the mysteries of creating new life? There is no way she can discuss those questions within the confines of the character allowance permitted by Twitter.

If Carla spends her time in the electronic world when will she experience the emotions of love and fear, anger and pleasure all of which are the product of exercises of social intelligence? Where will her brain

get the nourishment to learn how to have deep emotional experiences? And if Carla's brain does not entertain abstract thoughts nor experience emotional highs and lows that come from face to face contact will her brain just adapt to that state of affairs so that eventually her mind is different from her mother's mind and her grandmother's mind all because of the time she spends out of touch with the real world and closely linked to the electronic world? Professor Greenfield postulates that the brain is unlike other organs in that it does indeed, adapt to the world in which it is required to operate and that operating in an electronic world will have a lasting effect on the brain's capacity to develop social intelligence and reason the abstract issues. It seems to me that it is at least a reasonable possibility that the adherence to social networking sites and the adoption of a screen culture will soon see the brain trained to accept information about trivial matters, such as my friend is now drinking a cup of coffee, as sufficient food for its stimulation and will be unwilling and perhaps even unable to grapple with the larger and more important issues in life. Professor Greenfield refers to this as "the me culture."<sup>9</sup> It's a childlike culture which conditions people to need reassurance about small events like the child who continually demands that his or her parent watches while a simple event like "I am now skipping" is in progress; "Look at me Mum; look at me Mum" a selfish demand which may well be acceptable when it is made by a very young child, but not when it is made by someone a little older whose social intelligence should be sufficiently developed to enable her to realise intuitively that Mum is cold and bored to sobs watching this skipping exercise.

There is another, related, aspect to the reliance upon electronic communication. Much of it - I am not referring here to social networking sites - can be anonymous and, as I mentioned earlier, this anonymity

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<sup>9</sup> Transcript of ABC 1 interview on "The 7:30 report" with Kerry O'Brien 19 March 2009.

leads to the making of assertions that are often abusive and the expression of opinions that are without any basis. There is no risk of being called to account. That powerful maker of public opinion, talkback radio, relies heavily on anonymous electronic communication. You have all heard it. "Good morning, we have Peter on the line from Hobart. Peter where to you think the new hospital should be built?" Peter then gives us the benefit of his opinion, perhaps throws in for good measure the assertion that that Fat Cat, the Minister for Health should get off her butt and do some work for a change, all without having to tell us anything about himself, his occupation, his background and whether he has any factual basis for his opinion that the new hospital should be built next door to Government House.

The print media set up blogs enabling anonymous "bloggers", as I understand they are called, to express any view they wish to express. A selection of these views appears in the morning newspaper, again all without being called to account. I say nothing about Wikipedia, the encyclopedia that anyone can edit!!

So I ask, is it alright to use an electronic means of communication to widely broadcast uniformed, unresearched and untested assertions and opinions without any liability? A recent editorial in the *Australian* newspaper<sup>10</sup> referred to an untested assertion broadcast on the radio that there could be an ice-free Antarctic by 2010. No basis for the assertion was disclosed. The same editorial referred to the Prime Minister being asked about environmental analysts' claims that the Great Barrier Reef and the Murray-Darling Basin could well be gone by 2020. The identity of the so-called environmental analysts remained undisclosed as did any basis for the alleged claims. Where have yesterday's ethics gone if it has now become acceptable to use the electronic medium to make assertions

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<sup>10</sup> Wednesday, 17 December 2008.

of fact and expressions of opinion from behind the wall of anonymity and without responsibility?

I don't want to appear to be a grumpy old man. I don't want to take away your I-phone or your Internet connection. But I do think that the issues I have raised might perhaps be worthy of some debate. Is what I say correct, or even a reasonable possibility? If it is, should not we all really make an effort to understand the medium and its impact on interpersonal relationships, because unless we do there is a real possibility that the medium and the screen culture it creates will cause irreversible changes to our brains?

In short I ask, should we not heed McLuhan's warning that we need to understand the medium, we need to know how it is affecting our relationships with others and we need to exercise control over it. For as he said, if we don't control the medium we will lose control of ourselves.

PS: There is a postscript. A few days ago I showed this paper to a work colleague for comment. After she had read it she told me that the previous weekend her granddaughter who is 10, was playing with her Gameboy. It was an electronic game where you choose a dog and do things like feed it and groom it and play games with it. She was lying on the floor playing ball with the electronic dog - completely ignoring Tess, her fox terrier, who was standing next to the granddaughter, ball in mouth, on the tip toe of expectation, trying to interest her in going outside to play ball. My colleague said that it was very sad. As the Americans might say, "I rest my case".