Character and . . .

Screen Life

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The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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This issue is dedicated to Allison Cress, 1998-2017.

Screening Our Character: A Response to Forshey, Sinno, Slaughter, and Yartey

Quentin Schultze

I remember when we in the Schultze family got our first television set in the mid 1950s. It was a heavy, square wooden box on wobbly metal legs with a large, hard-to-rotate channel control knob on the right side that went "kerchunk" each time the channel was changed. With a rabbit ear antenna on top of the set, the black and white image always looked washed out. By today's high-definition standards, the picture was a joke. But for my family just having "TV" was exciting. We had our own home screen. We were truly middle class.

The Schultze family quickly adopted television into daily life.

As I recall, the greatest concern my parents had about introducing television into our house was the possibility that the long-legged set itself might tip over on me when I changed channels. I don't remember any conversations about appropriate viewing standards. We just put the set in the living room and watched it.

After going to bed down the hallway in our tiny, working-class home, I could hear the shows my father watched until the local stations shut down around midnight. I especially remember listening to professional

wrestling, which I found baffling. Was the wrestling real? Bogus? I recall asking my father why he laughed when it seemed to me that the wrestlers were actually hurting each other. This was long before the glitz, bravado, and photogenic personas of today's championship wrestling matches.

Years later I became a communication scholar and began reflecting on my family's quick adoption of television, arguably the most important communications medium between the printing press and the cell phone. I have to admit that my family simply went the way of the world, using the new medium almost exactly like everyone else in our neighborhood. Even though television was a radically new medium that at least implicitly raised all kinds of questions about how to use it fittingly, my family unreflectively adopted the same practices that guided most families' use of the medium. We rarely asked the tough questions: What should we watch? How much? When? Individually or together? Should we talk about what we watched? What values should guide our discussion of such questions? I just watched what I wanted to watch, when I wanted to watch it, unless others wanted to watch as well. The oldest person got to determine what station was on. When it came to family discernment, that was about it.

There is a period of time in the development of each new medium when such basic usage questions are nearby. Before long, however, the questions evaporate. Our habits are set. And chances are our habits match those of most others. One of the findings in my research that most impacted my thinking about this issue is the fact that Christian and non-Christian families adopted essentially identical television practices. Faith commitments seemed to make almost no real difference. Why? Well, partly because television was a privately consumed medium. Going to the movies created all kinds of concerns for many Christians because it was a public act in front of witnesses. Watching television was private and easily hidden from the outside world. The internet and the cell phone eventually amplified such privacy so that the individual person could consume media without revealing her or his practices even to immediate family members.

Today all of the screen media—from old-fashioned TV to smartphones—are in ongoing development. The content and the

physical-digital technologies are changing as we use them. It's an exciting but perplexing time. I can watch live television and play movies on my cell phone almost anywhere I am. My screen is in my pocket, ready to use. And new apps connect me to amazing content from around the world. But what am I doing with all of this innovation? Do my media practices echo my core values—and those of my family? Do my media habits reflect my inner character or are they shaping my character? Who am I in this creative screen media landscape?

I take care of a three-year-old grandson two days a week. He knows how to use my cell phone and my iPad. He knows how to access YouTube and look for videos about dinosaurs. I caught him using the remote control to turn on our cable television set and change the channels. He is adopting media practices simply by watching adults. Moreover, he is quick to figure out new technologies. Just as he is rapidly learning English, he is magically becoming a screen user. I wonder what I can do to help him begin to see screen media as more than just a means of enhancing personal pleasure. Even though he is too young to involve in discussions about best practices, let alone values and character, he is not too young to be learning media habits. He simply needs winsome role models.

The legendary media scholar Marshall McLuhan argued that mass media are extensions of our individual senses—especially seeing and hearing. I think they are also extensions of our character—particularly what we value. Our media practices—how we use media—concretely demonstrate some of our deepest commitments. They speak about what we enjoy, appreciate, and even love. To put it differently, our media practices reflect our real hearts' desires. They are evidence of our true character.

It is fashionable today to talk about the apparent effects of media on people. It is far less common to hear anyone talking about the effects of our character on our media usage. Yet this might be more important. To some extent, we collectively fashion media in our images.

The essays in this volume contribute to the ongoing discourse that we all need to have about character and screen media. They raise essential questions: What kinds of communication do we have access to? How shall we converse about our use of media technologies? What is the purpose of using personal screen media? Why spend any time using such media? Aren't there more important things to do in our lives? Most important of all, perhaps, "How can our use of screen media help us become the kinds of persons and communities that we ought to be?"

Today the entertainment industry uses the term "second screen" to refer to television's offspring such as computers and smartphones. The shift from the first screen (television) to the second screen (computers, smartphones, and the like) is a complicated story about changes in industry and community. What we take for granted today—the ubiquitous communication appliance we carry in pockets and purses—is not just a tale of technological development. It's also a story about changing communication practices that become ubiquitous but invisible to us over time. These essays make some of our choices visible once again. And they challenge us to reconsider some of our practices.

All four essays help us raise essential questions about whether new technologies make us more or less virtuous. Do first- and second-screen devices render us humbler, freer, and more fulfilled individuals? Do they help us build more peaceful, just, and diverse communities? Moreover, how can we use such technologies for the social good? How can we create and consume screen media in ways that enhance human life toward greater flourishing, what the ancient Greeks called *eudemonia*, and the ancient Hebrews called "shalom"?

As the essays suggest, there are no inherently "smart" or "dumb" screens. All of the electronic screens in our lives are the product of the people who create and consume them—nothing more and nothing less. Media always reflect peoples' values; media are among the ways that we humans "practice our values." This is a sobering reality that ought to forestall our technological exuberance—the ways we become dazzled with the latest and greatest means of communication, as if they naturally solve human problems, relieve human suffering, and usher in a more just society.

The essays show that media are the products of our hearts, souls, minds, and hands. Our use of screens is both a *porthole to* and a *mirror of* our collective character. It's easy for us to scapegoat media for their negative influences on us. We are far too inclined to worry about what the media are supposedly doing to us rather than to consider what we are doing to ourselves. What are we really accomplishing with screens? Why? What do our everyday screen media practices—when, why, and how we use such media—say about us? What do our media habits reveal about who we really are—what we believe, cherish, and desire? Could it be that screen media are portals to our disordered desires? Let me put it this way: If future anthropologists sought to know what modern Americans truly believed and valued, what artifacts should they dig up and study? Screen media or church architecture? Text messages or liturgy? Blogs or sacred writings?

Our use of screens is both a porthole to *and a* mirror of *our collective character.*

So I would like to discuss the essays in this book as a playful kind of anthropological investigation into how we humans "screen our character." I suggest that we have a choice of *adopting* or *adapting* all of the new screen technologies that come our way.

Adopting technologies is the easier, less reflective choice. Adopters follow the trends and act like everyone else. My parents adopted television by inviting a set into our living room and providing no insight or guidelines about using it, other than being careful not to knock over the set (maybe today this would be like thinking that parents have done their job with smartphones when they convince their teen drivers not to text and drive). As adopters, we use our televisions, computers, and phones like everyone else. Before long, we lose track of all of the decisions we had to make along the way—all of the micro and macro decisions about when, why, and how to use our screens. As adopters, we become machinelike creatures caught in our own, unreflective webs of digital activities.

Adapting new technologies is the far more difficult and reflective choice. It requires us to be humble, creative, discerning persons and

communities. Instead of going with the flow, we challenge ourselves to use technologies in worthy ways that reflect our desires to be virtuous people. In short, we challenge the social mores and practices that are coming to us through the screens, and simultaneously seek to shape our use of technologies in ways that mirror our better selves in life-affirming communities of eudemonia. These essays do just that.

This latter, adaptive approach to using technologies is particularly fitting for screen media because communication and community are intimate bedfellows. We form community in and through the remarkable process of human communication. In fact, communication is how we make and manage relationships—with God, others, and ourselves. We are constantly forming and deforming our communities even as we go about our seemingly private business of using screen media.

Susan Forshey, for instance, rightly wonders about the relationship between character and screen binge watching. She quotes novelist Annie Dillard, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” Is watching two years of a television series in one weekend a good thing for a person or society? Is it merely frivolous, fun activity or does it say something more significant about our values? What about doing it communally with friends and family? What about doing it as a lonely person grieving over a lost love?

Forshey directs us to virtuous screen-media usage as a kind of stewardship of time, talent, and above all character. The underlying idea is that “practices” have no meaning in and of themselves. The value of all human endeavors—including binge viewing—becomes clear when viewed as stewardship of time and talent. How should people steward their use of time, including viewing time? What is the meaning of binge viewing contrasted with moderate viewing? Which is better for persons and community?

Stewardship questions are age old. The Hebrew and Christian traditions, in particular, emphasized God’s ownership of the world and everything in it. Human beings are thereby caretakers or stewards. We humans are responsible for how we use God-given resources, from the environment (the Creation) to time (such as Sabbath-keeping instead of nonstop work and activity).

Perhaps the most unsettling aspect of binge consuming is the potentially addictive component. This age of digital screen media is also an age of unprecedented addictions. We seem to be able to become addicted to just about any practice. In a sense, we easily fall in love, head over heels, with things that are only "good" in moderation if at all. Our endorphins go berserk on us. We even binge on vacations, transforming times of rest into exhausting travel and frantic sightseeing—glued to the "screen" outside the windows of the bus, car, or plane. Aristotle thought that moderation was the greatest virtue. Certainly it is not one of our strengths when it comes to screen media usage.

We even binge on vacations.

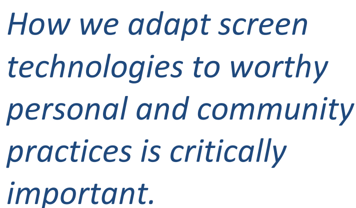
Is binge viewing a sordid waste of human talent—of human effort and ingenuity? Forshey's essay moves us to think about this important issue with regard to any excessive use of screen media. At some level maybe we all are binge users of media who don't ask the tough questions about stewardly use of our time and talent.

Rafic Sinno's essay on the pleasures and pitfalls of Pokémon Go also raises helpful questions about stewardship. Let me admit right up front that the treasure-searching Pokémon Go app could be out of fashion by the time you read this essay. But Sinno's essay is not really just about Pokémon Go. It's about the growth in popularity of semi-social, semi-geographic smartphone gaming. Pokémon Go is also about digital fads that come and go. Most importantly, the essay is about the human desire to be part of an exciting new gaming adventure and apparent community. Both the digital communications technologies themselves and the content they deliver are prone to a kind of fad-chasing mentality. The added competitive impulse—find more Pokémon Go treasures than anyone else—completes the gaming cycle.

The community angle—be part of meaningful group activity—adds to the meaning of such games. Of course this is partly an illusion because the game itself is highly personal and even private. Years ago the historian and Librarian of Congress, Daniel Boorstin, coined the term "consumption community" to capture the ways that Americans tend to identify with others by consuming the same products and services.

Those who consume the same television series might think of themselves as part of a community; in fact, today they can probably find such a "community" of consumers on the internet and join the discussion. Sinno's fair-minded critique of Pokémon Go suggests that such apps have potential for fostering some type of gaming community beyond mere shared consumption, but such community is hardly a satisfactory substitute for non-technological, in-person, intimate community.

Sinno wonders about the truly social aspects of such fetish-like uses of personalized screen devices. When we play such a game are we really interacting with other people? Are we observant of the communities and cultures around us? Are we so focused on the technological buzz that we had best be careful about squelching the very kinds of social discourse that we need for healthy, flourishing lives in community? There are many different kinds of screen-based gaming technologies, some of which emphasize social interaction. Once again, how we adapt screen technologies to worthy personal and community practices is critically important.



How we adapt screen technologies to worthy personal and community practices is critically important.

Sinno uses the helpful term "allure" to describe the widespread adoption of Pokémon Go. Imagine being able to find Pokémon "creatures" with your cell phone just about anywhere you would go. It's a simple game—find creatures "hidden" around your neighborhood. As a Chicago kid, I would have gone nuts with that kind of technology. I would have been hunting around the parks and lakes and emerging strip malls. Friends and I would have been racing around on our bikes without helmets, paying scant attention to stop signs and stoplights; we would have been on a mission. And I could imagine having done it with young adults, and even with those like my older brother who had cars. Excitement, adventure, travel, fellowship, competition, exercise—what else do we humans need for delightful gaming? Bring it on!

I don't wish to discount the joy of playing such a game. There's a place for such gaming in the good life, the life of virtuous character and good

community. In fact, numerous social groups and nonprofit organizations began using the Pokémon Go to advance worthy educational ends. But what about the stewardly use of time and talent? Sinno rightly poses this overarching question about the inherent “good” in any kind of time-intensive screen gaming.

Sarah Slaughter takes us in a very different but important direction related to contemporary screen media: privacy. The invasion of personal privacy will continue to become one of our great nemeses in the age of digital communication. The more involved we become in high-tech interactions with others, the more that other people will be able to know about us regardless of how much privacy we think we have.

Slaughter addresses the “cost of convenience” involved in the ways that we automatically approve privacy policies and terms of agreement required for our participation in nearly every kind of technological interaction. Who among us has time to read the lengthy documents typically composed in legalese that pop up on our screens when we download new software or start a new account with a social media site? She rightly points out that our failure to read such documents does not give us any legal standing if we seek redress for invasions of our privacy. When we sign on we invite various kinds of surveillance into our private lives. Little did most of the users of Pokémon Go realize, but the company was probably collecting data on the whereabouts of game users. Similarly, those of us who get involved in binge video watching probably don’t even think about the fact that a database somewhere is tracking our odd viewing habits.

Of course the answer that we commonly hear to potential invasions of privacy is that information collected in databases is not necessarily connected to specific individuals. Each of us is simply a database number, not a person, when it comes to data warehousing information about our screen media pursuits. There is some truth to this justification for tracking individuals’ private activities. But there is also the fact that data can be extracted and tied to individuals, particularly through court orders. And the enormous identity-theft business today demonstrates that people of ill will can and do use bits and pieces of information to pretend that they are particular persons. People of low moral character

will take advantage of access to databases. Bad things will happen. People will be harmed—financially or personally if not both. Databases of private information are temptations.

Slaughter rightly asks about the importance of privacy for human flourishing. We all know how authoritarian regimes have used eavesdropping and surveillance to control oppressed people. The freedoms to think and act as we wish are monumental freedoms that make both democracy and the good life possible. Of course our actions can also be governed by civil and criminal laws based more or less on agreed-upon moral practices. We don’t have an absolute right to harm others. Nevertheless, what if we sign away some of our privacy in order to participate in the screen culture? Are we thereby inviting legal intrusion into our private lives?

Here we have to admit that adapting technologies to our own worthy goals in life is not easy. We can seek to be people of good character, but invariably others may not be gracious towards us. We can’t control how they will use information about us. We live in a time of data gossiping when our lives are increasingly open to others’ inspection. Computer forensics may be the most important legal development of our age.

I don’t know exactly what it would be like to live a simple life of stewardship regarding others’ and our own privacy. Slaughter has opened our eyes to this issue regarding one small but important aspect of screen communication. We all can hope that those who give us the choice of either opting in or opting out of various levels of digital privacy will be people of high moral character and not simply technologists, attorneys, and marketers.

Franklin Yartey courageously journeys into one of the most intriguing aspects of screen technologies: How might we think about the screen as a window to serving others? The phone in my pocket is a window to pleasure, but is it also a window to service? Is it a potential way of treating others around the world as my neighbor? This is countercultural thinking. It challenges our faddish adoption of screen media as devices for personal pleasure and convenience. It directs us to a spacious arena of creative thinking and action.

I have long been intrigued by the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. The Babylonians created an enormous tower in order to make a name for themselves. They were self-seeking technologists. Pride and self-service were their guides—their character flaws. So God decided to set them straight by confusing their language. Unable to converse with each other, they could not continue work on their idiotic tower to the heavens. In one sense, it is a humorous tale. Imagine construction crewmembers suddenly unable to converse with each other.

In another sense, however, Babel is a story about how God preserves countercultural thinking. Dissent is essential for the good of humanity. Real dissent. Outrageous dissent. Yartey points to the phone in my pocket and asks me to consider it a means for me to love God and my neighbor as myself. That's technological heresy! Isn't technology all about self-service? Isn't technology about making my own life more pleasurable, efficient, and productive? Yartey's voice is one of those created in the post-Babel diversity. We need to listen to him as a kind of prophetic voice.

Yartey asks if it is possible that through the magic of microfinance I can help someone I don't know—someone from another place and culture—to invest in the time and talent that God has given them. Could it be that what to me is a tiny amount cash—a few trips to a café—might be another person's ticket to freedom, self-sufficiency, and even community betterment? Is this just naïve if not utopian thinking?

What if we all seriously aim to put the character traits of a good neighbor in action via our personal media devices?

For years I taught a college senior seminar that included a unit on neighborliness. What does it mean to be a good neighbor—or a "Good Samaritan"? This is one of the great themes of the Old and New Testaments. A real neighbor attends to others' needs rather than just to his or her own desires. In a sense, neighborliness is love in action. What if I think about my smartphone as a means of being a good neighbor? What if we all seriously aim to put the character traits of a good neighbor in action via our personal media devices? Yartey challenges us

to think in these terms through the potential of microfinance. For me, it is an inspiring possibility. I would rather identify with this kind of countercultural thinking than with the Babylonians' self-satisfying technological arrogance.

The four essays in this volume are concrete illustrations of how to adapt rather than merely adopt screen technologies. They reveal another way, a better way, than the unreflective, self-serving practices that dominate screen media usage. They also show us that the quality of our character is essential. We should not just criticize media for negatively impacting us. We can't just go along with the flow and assume that we will be virtuous people. When we look at our screens we are looking at ourselves as if through a mirror. Our media actions do speak louder than our rhetoric about how blessed we are with all of our modern technological conveniences. But blessed by whom? For what purposes? We are always one screen away from catching glimpses of our true character. Little did I know as a child when my primary worry about television was knocking over the set.

Dr. Quentin Schultze is a communication professor, writer, speaker, mentor, and master teacher who proclaims the good news that virtuous communication can overcome many of our personal and social problems. The problem today, he says, is that we assume new technologies like so-called smartphones will necessarily improve our relationships when in fact no technologies are better than the people who use them. He's written hundreds of articles and many books, including An Essential Guide to Public Speaking *and* Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age*. Dr. Schultze has been interviewed by most major print, broadcast, and online media. He is Professor Emeritus of Communication at Calvin College and Distinguished University Professor at Spring Arbor University. He aims to live according to the monastic motto, "Speak Only If You Can Improve Upon the Silence."*

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