

When Neo studies the medium of the mirror instead of being distracted by his reflection—its content—he is freed from the prison of his mind; it is only when he observes the medium apart from its content that he perceives its true power. With this discovery he is awakened from his numbness and slumber. Like Morpheus, McLuhan wants to free our minds by studying the medium, not just the message.

It may appear as if I'm arguing that content doesn't matter. This is not the case. Yet I do believe we too often focus only on the content and ignore the medium. To truly understand the power of media, we have to understand the relationship between the two.²⁰ To focus exclusively on one or the other is like trying to drive a car with wheels but no axles.²¹

THE ECOLOGY OF MEDIA

As we begin to perceive the power of the medium regardless of the message, we soon discover that the metaphor of media forms as conduits or containers is not adequate. Instead, it is more helpful to borrow a principle from the environmental science of ecology. The principle of ecology refers to the ways in which environments change and adapt. For example, imagine two adjacent rooms separated by a wall. In one room the temperature is 20 degrees; in the adjacent room the temperature is 90 degrees. If the dividing wall is removed, the two temperatures are blended to form a completely new climate. In the same way, communication media often serve to remove the walls of time and distance. As a result, formerly separate worlds collide, creating entirely new cultural ecologies.

Electronic culture has broken down major walls as we extend ourselves in a global embrace. Under these conditions, the world undergoes a kind of implosion; the barriers of time and space are abolished, greatly diminishing the scale of our world—which leads to the phenomenon of the Global Village. As we will see in the chapters ahead, this has a profound effect on the way we as Christians practice community and imagine our mission in the world.

THE LAWS OF MEDIA

While these changes are often difficult to detect, McLuhan believed the effect of any medium could be anticipated if we simply asked the right questions. He developed what he called *The Laws of Media*,²² a set of questions designed to tune us in to what he believed to be the four inevitable effects of all media. These are the four questions we will be asking in different ways as we seek to discern our culture and the true power and effects of media.

What does the medium extend? You'll recall that McLuhan believed every new medium enhances, amplifies, or extends some human capacity. Determining which part of ourselves—and this might be a body part (the camera is an extension of the eye), a previous medium (the telephone is an extension of the telegraph), or even an emotion (smoke detectors extend our sense of smell as well as our feeling of security)—is extended is essential to understanding the ways in which that medium impacts society.

What does the medium make obsolete? Every new medium makes an older technology obsolete. In this case the word *obsolete* does not necessarily mean the technology has disappeared but that the function of that previous medium has changed. For example, the automobile made the horse and buggy obsolete. This means the horse and buggy went from being used for transportation to being used for quaint entertainment and romance.

What does the medium reverse into? This is the law where we discover the dangers of media. When pushed to its extreme, every medium will reverse into its opposite intention. For example, when pushed to the extreme, the automobile—a medium intended to increase the speed of transportation—reverses into traffic jams and fatal accidents. This law of reversal can often be the most difficult to predict or anticipate. But sometimes the answer to the following question sheds light on this effect.

What does the medium retrieve? Every new medium retrieves some ancient experience or medium from the past. In other words, there is no such thing as a completely new technology. When we discover which medium is retrieved, we can study its effects in hindsight in an effort to anticipate the future of the new medium. For example, the medium of e-mail retrieves the telegraph. If we want to understand the future effects of e-mail, we would be wise to study the cultural effects of the telegraph in the 1800s.

To demonstrate how we can apply McLuhan's four laws to the media forms available to the church, let's use them to assess the technology of something that, while ubiquitous in most urban settings, often goes completely unnoticed: surveillance cameras.

THE LAWS OF MEDIA APPLIED TO SURVEILLANCE CAMERAS

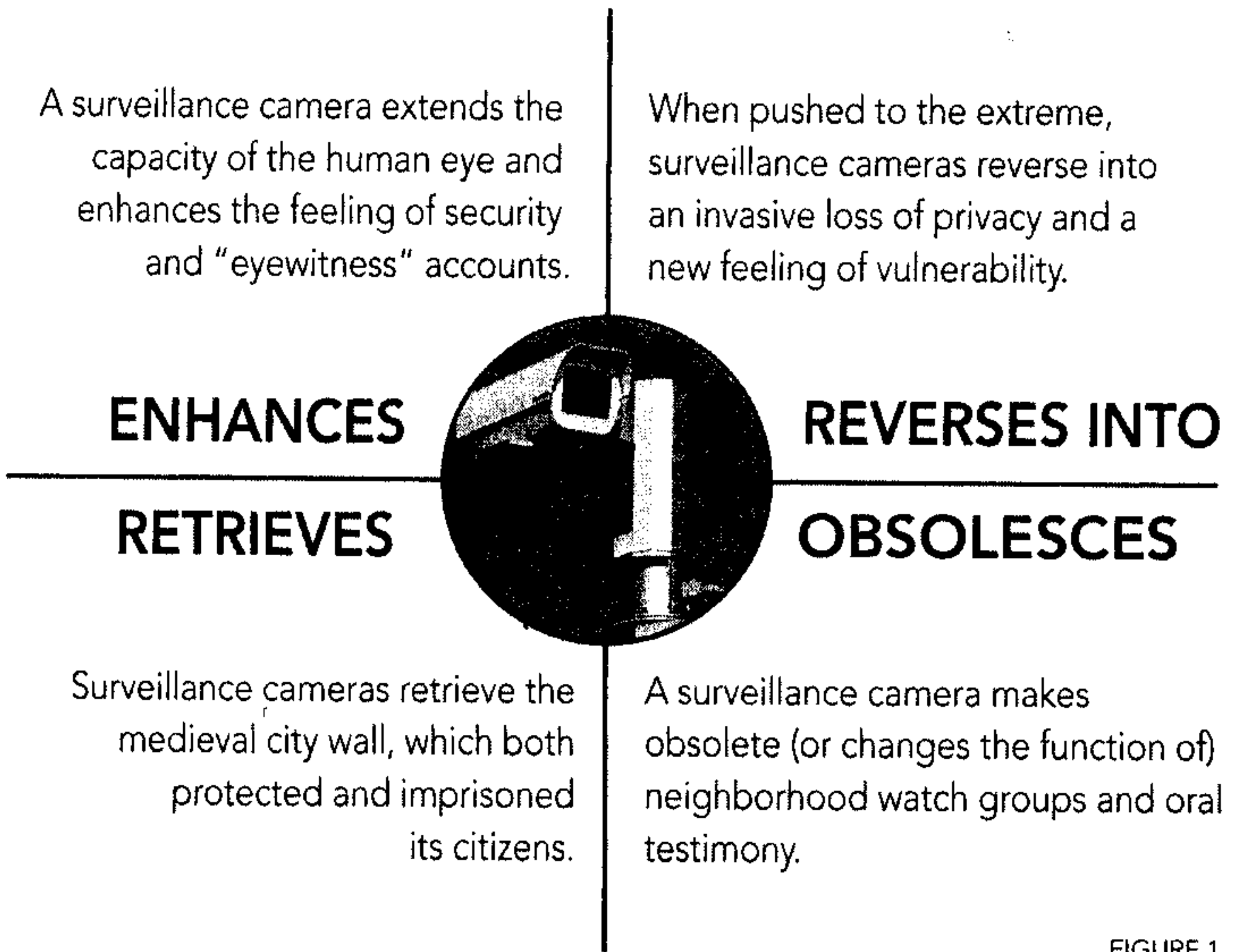


FIGURE 1

This is not intended as a definitive set of answers to these questions—you can probably think of others. The point is not always to find the conclusive answer to each question. On the contrary, the real power comes from simply asking the questions and probing the situation.

New questions serve to move our minds beyond traditional ways of thinking. This is why McLuhan framed his Laws of Media as questions rather than statements. This is not an analytic activity but one that demands creativity, synthesis, and openness. Our media present us with an array of questions and no clear answers. McLuhan knew our cultural context was always changing, so the methods he used to investigate and analyze culture were quite unconventional. Decades ago he said:

In a global information environment, the old pattern of education in answer finding is one of no avail...Survival and

control will depend on the ability to probe and to question in the proper way and place...the need is not for fixed concepts but rather for the ancient skill of navigating through an ever uncharted and unchartable milieu. Else we will have no more control of this technology and environment than we have of the wind and the tides.²³

We are being invited to develop and hone the ancient skill of “navigating through an ever uncharted and unchartable” culture. This skill is not developed through finding the right answers and locking onto fixed ideas but rather by having the courage and wisdom to ask the right questions at the right times and places.

In the next two chapters we will apply this new perspective on media and technology to the story of Western culture and the church. Specifically, we will see how major changes in media and technology caused seismic shifts in culture and shaped the people of God in hidden ways. The lessons of these stories are intended to help us develop discernment for our current situation.