Four years after I first arrived in New Guinea, new media arrived in the village. It wasn't cell phones, the Internet, or even television. It was writing, which came in the form of census and law books, sponsored by the state. Of the 2,000 people who lived in the region, only 10 could read and write effectively, and they were the ones who would try to carry out the state mandate to census the population and bring them under the rule of law.

Doing a census sounds easy. All you have to do is list people's names in a book. The problem with doing this in these remote villages was that many people did not have formal names. They already knew everybody they encountered and usually used a relationship term to refer to them, like mother, father, sister, brother, friend, trading partner, etc. Eventually they settled on creating "census names" for which they adopted the English term "census name" into their language.

As anthropologist Roger Rouse has pointed out, the emergence of individualism as we know it today emerged from the micro-rituals and routines of what he calls the "taxonomic state," such as
censusing and mapping, which allow the state to see its citizens. As people in the village took on fixed, static names, they could start to build more stable individual identities which might one day be objectified in the form of an identity card such as a passport or driver's license.

Inspired by the clean, straight lines of their books, the census officials dreamed of eliminating the haphazardly built traditional villages in favor of houses built along clean, straight lines, with each house numbered to match the census book. The villages would have the additional advantage of having high populations, making it easier to govern the people from a central location while also increasing their population numbers so that they would receive more funding from the state. Their lives were quite literally being made over "by the book."

At the same time as the census came in, so did the rule of law. Until then, all disputes had been settled out in the open as affairs of the local community. The goal was not to establish guilt but to heal
the relationship. When law came to the village, individuals were taken into the courthouse and measured against the letter of the law. The court is not necessarily interested in healing relationships but in determining motives, intentions, and guilt, all of which are intimately tied into the logic of individualism.

Several people resisted these changes. They did not want to move into new houses and villages. They liked how they lived and settled disputes. So the government leaders held a meeting. First, it was decided that the only people who could vote were those who could read and write. Then, they voted on whether or not they could force people to move into the new villages. The vote was unanimous, and soon after that they began forcing people to move, sometimes by burning down their houses.

The next two months were a dark time. Stress and tensions rose. Witchcraft accusations ran rampant. Angry villagers on the brink of losing their homes campaigned vociferously to preserve their homes while those in favor of the government plan tried to sell their vision of future prosperity.
But what was perhaps most remarkable about this sequence of events was how it ended. As the bickering continued, the architects of the movement looked around at the changes they had created and did not like what they saw. They felt seduced by the counts in the census book into thinking of their friends, kin and neighbors as nothing more than numbers. They felt seduced by the clean lines of their village plans into creating villages that looked clean and rational but were not very functional. The doorways all faced the same way, whereas traditionally they could position their doorway in such a way as to be open to kin but private from passersby. They started to recognize that there were important reasons why they had lived as they lived, and they felt seduced by their new technologies into imagining an alternative way of life that they ultimately found that they did not want.

This is one of the great paradoxes of technology. It empowers people in ways they have never been empowered before, and those who master the technology seem to be the ones who benefit the most. But technologies often have unintended consequences, and in retrospect, it might be those who seem most empowered by the technology who are in fact overpowered and seduced by the technology itself.

I returned to the United States soon after these events in 2003. Wikipedia had just launched. Facebook would launch the following year, followed by YouTube, then Twitter, and the whole new mediascape we now call "social media."

Thinking about how new media had affected my friends in New Guinea, I wondered how these new media might affect us. How might we be seduced by the technology to promote changes we do not intend?

TELEVISION

When TV came into our homes over 50 years ago it immediately transformed our relationships in a way that can actually be seen in the
arrangement of the furniture. Everything had to be arranged to face
the box in the corner. For many people, this arrangement replaced
the dining room, so instead of family dinners spent around a table,
they were now spent around the box in the corner. And for 50 years,
the most important conversations of our culture happened inside that
box. They were controlled by the few (a few large TV networks) and
designed for the masses (to win over a large audience). So they were
always entertaining, even the serious ones. Our politics became
entertainment and spectacle, made to fit between commercial breaks.
In such ways, our media technologies shape our conversations, and
taken altogether our conversations create our culture which Neil
Postman grimly described in 1985 as one of irrelevance, incoherence,
and impotence.

Postman recounts that the Lincoln-Douglas political debates of
1858 unfolded over the course of seven hours, with each candidate
allowed an hour or more to respond in front of an attentive crowd. It
was a true debate. Now we have sound-bites. If you can't state your
argument in eight seconds or less, it's no good for TV. And in 1985
there was little you could do about it. Postman challenged his readers
to imagine sitting in front of a television watching the most serious
and "important" newscast available and ask yourself a series of
questions, "What steps do you plan to take to reduce the conflict in
the Middle East? Or the rates of inflation, crime and unemployment?
... What do you plan to do about NATO, OPEC, or the CIA?" He
then says that he "shall take the liberty of answering for you: You
plan to do nothing." In 1985, we had few options, and that was
precisely Postman's point. There was no talking back to the media.

All media are biased, Postman noted. The form, structure, and
accessibility of a medium shapes and sometimes even dictates who
can say what, what can be said, how it can be said, who will hear it,
how it will be heard, and how those messages may or may not be
retrieved in the future. Postman coined the term "media ecology,"
noting that media become part of the environment all around us,
transforming how we relate to one another in all aspects, from art to
business, public politics to private family life. While any technology can have an effect on society, the change brought about by a change in media is especially profound, because a medium serves as the form through which all aspects of culture are expressed, experienced, and practiced.

A major new medium "changes the structure of discourse" Postman notes, "by encouraging certain uses of the intellect, by favoring certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom, and by demanding a certain kind of content."

Consider Postman's own narrative about how electronic media remade American culture. In the mid-1800s, the telegraph brought new forms of discourse to the nation. For the first time, information could travel faster than a human being and was no longer spatially constrained. The type of information was different, though, as the telegraph did not allow for lengthy exposition. People increasingly knew more of things, and less about them. Such news from distant lands could not be acted upon, so its value wasn't tied to its use or function, but to its novelty, interest, and curiosity. This created a discourse of "irrelevance, incoherence, and impotence" that we still recognize today on television. Postman pointed out that virtually all aspects of American culture—economics, politics, religion, and even education—had transformed into entertainment. We were, to borrow the title of the book, "Amusing Ourselves to Death."

Postman was writing in 1985, at the dawn of cable television, with its sudden onslaught of television options beyond traditional networks. In a famous novel written that year, Don Delillo describes a noxious cloud that may be seen to represent the mélange of decontextualized and disembodied information that began oversaturating our everyday experience, the phenomenon anthropologist Thomas de Zengotita simply called, "the blob."

"What do people do in relation to the nameless, the odorless, the ubiquitous?" asks DeLillo. "They go shopping, hunt pills ... " and ultimately find themselves coming together in the long lines of the superstore, "carts stocked with brightly colored goods ... the tabloids
... the tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial ... the miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity ... the cults of the famous and the dead."

Postman's notion of media ecology reminds us that media become the environments in which we live. Humans are meaning-seeking and meaning-creating creatures, and the media we use populate our environment of meanings. It is in this environment of meanings that we search for our sense of self, identity, and recognition. "Onslaught," a famous Dove TV commercial, demonstrates what this is like for a young girl immersed in our current media environment. It shows a young girl bombarded by a flurry of media messages telling her to be impossibly thin with perfect skin, shining flowy hair, large breasts and buttocks, and more than anything, that how she looks is her primary measure of value. The commercial quickly progresses to a future in which the girl has low self-esteem, false body-image, and an unending desire to "fix" herself through the consumption of beauty products and plastic surgery. The lyrics underscore the point, "Here it comes la breeze will blow you away/all your reason and your sane sane little minds."

THE PROMISE OF THE INTERNET

The Onslaught video was made for the media environment of 1985 or 1995, but it was released in 2007. Large corporations no longer had a monopoly on visual media. Rye Clifton posted a remix of the commercial on YouTube called, "A message from Unilever." He points out that Unilever is the parent company for both Dove (the creator of this wonderful program rallying against the sins of the beauty industry) and Axe (the creator of many of the more objectifying and distasteful ads that are creating the problem in the first place). Using imagery from Axe as the "breeze that will blow you away," bombarding the young girl with objectifying imagery from Unilever's own ad campaign, thereby reveals their hypocrisy.
Another, created by Greenpeace (2008), shows a young girl in Indonesia taking in a flurry of images of the trees in the environment around her being destroyed to clear the way for palm plantations providing palm oil for Dove products. The song is the same, but with parody lyrics, "There they go, your trees are gone today, all that beauty hacked away. So use your minds." The video ends with the young Indonesian girl walking away from a recently cut down forest, and a subtitle that reads "98% of Indonesia's lowland forest will be gone by the time Azizah is 25. Most is destroyed to make palm oil, which is used in Dove products."

The video raced to over 1 million views on YouTube. Two weeks later, Greenpeace activists were invited to the table with senior executives at Unilever who then signed an immediate moratorium on deforestation for palm oil in Southeast Asia (Greenpeace 2009). Greenpeace noted that it was the single most effective tactic they had ever used.

Recall Postman's challenge in 1985. "What are you going to do about [major world issues you hear about on TV]… ?" He can no longer take the liberty of answering for us. We are no longer constrained to doing nothing. We can talk back. We can create.

While the mass media of television and major newspapers were one-way, controlled by the few, and made for the masses, the Internet offers a platform in which anyone can be a creator. It is not controlled by the few, and content can be created for niche audiences. More importantly, the Internet allowed us to experiment with new forms of collaboration and conversation. Wikipedia allowed anybody anywhere to contribute their knowledge to create the world's largest encyclopedia, just as eBay allowed anybody anywhere to sell to anybody anywhere else who had access to the Internet. Blogs allowed anybody anywhere to launch their own content platforms. YouTube allowed anybody anywhere to publish their own video channels.

In late 2007, four Kenyans came together to create Ushahidi, which means "witness" in Swahili. Ushahidi allowed people with
ordinary cell phones to contribute important location-based information in times of crisis. They invented it in the chaos of riots that erupted after the Kenyan national elections. As traditional media outlets were overwhelmed and inadequate, Ushahidi allowed 45,000 people who didn’t even know each other to work together as citizen reporters to provide key life-saving information. The creators of that platform then gave it away for free online so that others could use it. After the Haiti earthquake of 2010, some Tufts University students implemented Ushahidi Haiti and started receiving thousands of messages such as, "We are looking for Geby Joseph, who got buried under Royal University." These messages were then mapped, not on Google Maps – which was not good enough at the time – but on Open Street Maps, an open platform that allowed volunteers all over the world to trace satellite imagery to provide the most highly-detailed maps available. A U.S. Marine also sent a note to Ushahidi Haiti, to say, "I cannot overemphasize to you what the work of the Ushahiti/Haiti has provided. It is saving lives every day. I wish I had time to document to you every example, but there are too many... The Marine Corps is using your project every second of the day to get aid and assistance to the people that need it most."

Social media platforms have played key roles in major democratic uprisings around the world. In Egypt, protestors used Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to inspire mass protests against President Mubarak, who had used his power to silence dissent and stay in office for over 30 years. After 18 days of mass demonstrations, Mubarak stepped down.

But social media can also be used by dictators and terrorists. In the wake of failed protests in Iran in 2009, the government posted pictures of protestors and offered rewards for identifying them, effectively using the Internet to extend their control and surveillance. And for several years, ISIS has effectively used slick video campaigns, radio shows, podcasts, and high-production-quality online magazines to attract young people from all over the world to join their cause.
We are discovering that a media environment that allows anybody anywhere to produce anything anytime and share whatever they find with anyone creates major challenges for our culture. Long-standing institutions such as major newspapers are closing. Essential occupations such as journalism are dwindling as many journalism majors now move into "content marketing" jobs, creating social media content to promote brands and products.

Just as the mediascape dominated by television favored content that was entertaining (even about serious topics), so does social media. But we now live in an "attention economy" in which our lives are so immersed in media that we simply don't have time to pay attention to it all. In the battle for our attention, content creators create shocking false headlines combined with surprising, shocking, or near-pornographic imagery as "clickbait."

Meanwhile, platforms like YouTube and Facebook use sophisticated algorithms to predict what we might like based on our friends, previous likes, and shopping history. We end up only seeing what Facebook thinks we will want to see, and end up living in what Eli Pariser has called "filter bubbles."

The 2016 US presidential elections magnified these problems. Democrats and Republicans lived in alternate media universes throughout the campaign season. They did not share the same basic facts about what was true and untrue, and both sides leveraged attacks at the other for producing "fake news." And since anybody anywhere can produce anything anytime, there was plenty of fake news going around, some of which was produced by people outside the United States with vested interests in the election outcome.

What can we do? There are online petitions to encourage Facebook and Google to stop personalizing our content in such a way that creates filter bubbles, and to create technologies that stop the spread of fake news. But some scholars, such as Evgeny Morozov, worry about such online petitions. Morozov worries that true activism that involved real people organizing in the streets is now being replaced by slacktivism, easy little "likes" and clicks done
from the privacy of one's home that do not create lasting connections with real people who share similar activist goals.

Thirty years ago, scholars like Neil Postman worried that the major media corporations were using mass media to create a media environment that created a culture of irrelevance, incoherence, and impotence. Now, it seems that we might be doing it to ourselves.

**THE INSTAGRAM EFFECT**

Today, a new medium emerges every time someone creates a new web application. A little Tinder here, a Twitter there, and a new way of relating to others emerges, as well as new ways for contemplating one's self in relation to others. Listing our interests, joining groups, and playing games on Facebook; sharing photos and videos on Instagram or Snapchat; swiping left or right on Tinder; sharing our thoughts, ideas, and experiences on blogs; and following, being followed, and tweeting on Twitter are not only ways of expressing ourselves, they are new ways to reflect on who we are, offering new kinds of social mirrors for understanding ourselves. And because these technologies are changing so quickly, we are not unlike those villagers seeing a photograph of themselves for the first time. We are shocked into new forms of sudden self-awareness.

Unlike those villagers who barely know their own image, most kids today have grown up with parents posting their accomplishments on Facebook and then transitioned to having their own accounts in high school. They know how to craft their best self for the camera, and they're more comfortable than ever snapping picture after picture of themselves, crafting beautiful pages full of themselves and their likes and activities on Facebook and Instagram, and sending out little snippets of their lives on Snapchat. The era of the selfie is upon us.

I recently started noticing something strange about the profile pictures my students were using on the online portal for my course. They were all beautiful. When I face my students in person they look,
Michael Wesch

on the whole, like you would expect any large group of more or less randomly selected college students to look. They look normal. On the whole, they look average. But online, they are magnificent! The women have flawless skin, bright white smiles, and beautiful hair. The men look as if they were cut right out of an adventure magazine. Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that what I am seeing is the filter.

Most of these pictures have been lifted from their social media accounts, where one can find more of the filter. Blur effects filter out skin blemishes. Color filters make the images look professional and aesthetic. And of course, the only pictures that are posted are the ones that make it past their own critical eye, which serves as yet another filter. As a result, social media gives us a steady media stream of beautiful people doing amazing things, and those people are our friends.

And it isn't just young people. My Facebook feed is full of images of smiling families sharing a night out, going to school, playing at parks, and competing in their latest sporting events.

Television media gave us a steady stream of beautiful people doing amazing things, and this could sometimes make us feel inadequate or that our lives were not interesting or exciting. But we could always comfort ourselves in knowing that the imagery was fake and produced by a marketing machine.

But now every one of us is our own marketing machine, producing a filtered reality for our friends to consume. Essena O'Neill rose to Internet celebrity status on Instagram, and then suddenly quit, going back to re-caption all of her old images to reveal how they had been filtered. In one picture she sits on the beach, showing off sculpted abs. "NOT REAL LIFE," she writes. "Would have hardly eaten that day. Would have yelled at my little sister to keep taking them until I was somewhat proud of this. Yep so totally #goals." It can be inspiring to see your friends, or other people that do not seem so different from you, looking amazing and doing
amazing things. But as Essena O'Neill discovered, it can also feed into a culture of feeling inadequate.

Sometimes the consequences are devastating. Madison Holleran, a track athlete at Penn, seemed to have it all. Smart, beautiful, athletic and at one of the top schools in the world, she seemed to have it made. And her Instagram account showed it. We see her smiling as she rides piggyback on a handsome boy. We see her proudly showing off her new Penn track uniform. We see her smiling in front of a row of beautiful houses, dressed in a beautiful dress. Indeed she seemed to have it all. The last entry is a beautiful array of floating lights over a park in the city. She took it just one hour before she took her own life.

Writing about the event for ESPN, Kate Fagan noted that she talked to her friends as they scrolled through Instagram, saying, "This is what college is supposed to be like; this is what we want our life to be like." Think of it as "the Instagram Effect" – the combined effects of consuming the filtered reality of our friends.

We have a tendency to compare our insides to people's outsides. Even before Instagram people were filtering their beliefs and appearances to put on a good show, but social media has the potential to magnify the effect. We see other people's lives through sophisticated filters, each image, post, and tweet quantified in likes. Seeing ourselves in a Polaroid is nothing new to us, but seeing ourselves with such a clear quantification of our "like"-ability and consuming a steady stream of filtered lives most definitely is.

"The constant seeking of likes and attention on social media seems for many girls to feel like being a contestant in a never-ending beauty pageant," reports Nancy Jo Sales in her book American Girls. A recent study shows that there has been a spike in emotional problems among 11- to 13-year-old girls since 2007, the year Apple's iPhone ushered in era of the always-on mobile social networking world. Since then, the "second world" of social media has become more important than the real world for many teens, as the complexities of teenage romance and the search for identity largely take place there.
A 2014 review of 19 studies found elevated levels of anxiety and depression due to a "high expectation on girls in terms of appearance and weight." Over half of American teenage girls are on unhealthy diets. The American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery reported an increase in plastic surgeries among teens due to a desire to look better on social media.

**THE UNTHING EXPERIMENT**

When Carpenter reported on the radical cultural changes that were in part brought about by people seeing their images in a Polaroid, he did so in hopes that we would analyze our own use of technology as well.

To analyze the effects of my tools on me, I once tried to avoid all visual images for a month. I stopped watching TV. I used an image blocker on my web browser (Wizmage for Chrome) and configured my phone to not load images. Of course, I couldn't avoid all images. I still caught a glimpse of a billboard or product box now and then. But I lived more or less without the supernormal stimuli of photoshopped and surgically enhanced beautiful people living apparently extraordinary lives beyond any life that I could ever imagine for myself.

Within just a few days, I started to notice a difference. I found ordinary people and ordinary life much more interesting, engaging, and beautiful. Three weeks later, I was in an airport and felt a surge of *joie de vivre* as I entered the mass of humanity. I was surrounded by beautiful people doing extraordinary things. Every one of them seemed to have an attractive quality and something interesting to say. Just a month earlier, I would have entered that same mass of people and seen nothing but overweight, unstylish, unkempt, and unattractive people. But within a few weeks removed from the onslaught of media, my consciousness had changed.

It struck me that media puts us in a state of passive consumption. In media worlds, people and their lives exist for our enjoyment. They
are objects and characters to like or dislike, rather than complex people with complex histories and experiences to engage and interact with. As I stopped seeing people as objects, I saw beauty and worth in each of them. Without the distraction of media, I freed up several hours of my day that I spent exercising, talking to friends, and being out in the world.

LEARN MORE

- Amusing Ourselves to Death by Neil Postman
- Here Comes Everybody by Clay Shirky
- The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom, by Evgeny Morozov
- What Made Maddy Run by Kate Fagan
Challenge Five: The UnThing Experiment

Your challenge is to give something up and live without a key technology for at least 48 hours.

Objective: Practice the art of seeing. See your seeing as you observe how this technology might shape your assumptions. See big – how it is an integral part of a larger cultural system. See small – how it might shape our most mundane routines (or even our bodies). See it all - how our lives and culture might be different (for better and for worse) without it.

Step 1. Give something up, like shoes, chairs, or cars. Or try giving up some form of virtual communication platform for at least 48 hours, and potentially a week or more.

Step 2. Post daily updates using #anth101challenge5, reflecting on the following:

• What do you miss about using the thing?
• What have you gained by not using it?
• How have you changed? Any insights? Do you see the world or other people any differently?

Step 3. Continue the experiment until you have some significant results. (Extend the time frame or move up a level if you do not have any significant insights.)

Step 4. Use your insights to reflect on the key lesson: "We create our tools and then our tools create us."

Learn more at anth101.com/challenge5