

## **Preliminary Findings on Media Fasting: Motivations and Gains**

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### **Abstract**

Information, media, and technology (IMT) devices have become extensions of people because of constant use and technological bias inherent in such devices. The effects of IMT are not yet understood, but some people believe they have felt the effects of too much IMT. Media fasts provide one suggested solution. This qualitative survey research analyzed the motivation and felt effects of media fasts. Twenty-one people participated in the research and were acquired through the researcher's contacts, Facebook friends, Facebook groups and pages, and in-person. Participants responded to open-ended questions regarding motivations and felt effects. The responses were coded into groups for the content analysis of answers. The participants' motivations included unplugging and refocusing. Felt gains included better focus, understanding, and offline relationships. Participants generally listed more than one reason or felt gain for completing media fasts. Due to the small sample size, these results cannot be generalizable to larger populations. Suggestions for future research are discussed.

### **Preliminary Findings on Media Fasting Motivations and Gains of Christians**

New technologies have increased the amount of communication information people process each day. People deal with constant interruptions by the pings and beeps of e-mail, phone calls, and status updates on smart phones and computers. The way that communication happens is changing from personal, face-to-face relationships to technology-mediated "friendships" via cell phone and social media. Social media use has exploded in recent years accounting for nearly 20 percent of computer online time and 30 percent of smartphone online time (Nielsen, 2012, p. 4). Nearly 40 percent of social media use is performed on cell phones (Nielsen, 2012, p. 5).

New technologies and media have grown at such a rapid pace that research on how it affects people physically, emotionally, and spiritually has not kept pace and the effects of these media may take many years to manifest completely. M. McLuhan's media ecology, which studies the environments produced by certain media, has a foundation in media determinism (Chandler, 2012). Media determinism argues, "the development of society is directed by its

technology” (Chandler, 2011, p. 281). McLuhan’s best known aphorism, “the medium is the message,” summarizes the idea that media is composed not only of its content, but also its medium (1964, p. 25). If McLuhan’s ideas are true, there is good reason to investigate how information, media, and technology (IMT) devices are changing society. Some scholars argue that media fasts may mitigate the effects of IMT devices (Cooper, 2006, 2011; Foster, 1983; Miller, 2011). The purpose of this research is to discover the motives and felt gains behind media fasts by surveying those who have completed such fasts. A media fast is taking an intentional break from one or more IMT devices.

Some of the IMT effects that have been studied include brain chemistry and pathway research that shows differences on a physical level (Dokoupil, 2012; Kanai, Bahrami, Royle, and Rees, 2012; Small and Vorgan, 2008; Small, Moody, Siddartg, and Bookheimer, 2009). One study used MRI brain scans to show the physical differences between “net-savvy” and “net-naïve” participants. When Small and Vorgan (2008) had the “net-naïve” spend 5 hours online in the next week, their second brain scans had already begun to look like the brains of the net-savvy. Opinions have been divided on whether these changes are positive, negative, or have no effect. Human brains could be changing in order to more effectively process large amounts of information, the changes could be the deterioration of human brains, or such changes could be natural and mean little.

Most of the focus has been on how media and technologies are useful innovations for society. For example, IMT devices have created a global village that connects people across the world in ways that feel like small town friendships. D. Rushkoff (2001) wrote,

“The Internet’s ability to network human beings is its very lifeblood. It fosters communication, collaboration, sharing, helpfulness, and community” (p. 153). The Internet gives more people access to more information. Library books are easily downloaded onto smartphones and other devices. Any question is easily Googled and answered immediately with reasonable accuracy. The Internet has also created a do-it-yourself mentality among its users (Rushkoff, 2001). Users are able to create content and interact with others with the same interests. Rather than watching television, users create videos and post them to YouTube. Television can be watched on Netflix, when it is convenient and without advertisements. The Internet encourages users to shop around and find the best prices on products. D. Tapscott (1997) wrote:

Typical Net Gen shoppers know what they are going to buy before they leave the house ... and they are well informed and confident in their decisions—83 percent say they usually know what they want before they go to buy. (p. 173)

The Internet also makes it possible to alert the world of disasters, unjust treatment of people, and other humanitarian issues. In moments, tweets can alert the world of revolutions and the world can respond with encouragement and petitions asking their governments to step in and assist. Those in the revolution are able to connect with each other to coordinate the efforts. D. Wolman (2013) wrote:

The speed of communication through digital channels gives activists unprecedented agility during street operations. Online, they can organize, debate, plan, and broadcast at a level of coordination that was unavailable,

indeed unimaginable, in the past” (para. 2).

The Internet gives humans numerous connections and insights.

For Christians, IMT devices promise new ways to spread the gospel. B. Gruenewald (2010) states that “the outreach potential is huge,” noted as LifeChurch.tv moved its outreach efforts from websites to Facebook pages (para. 6). IMT devices give Christians greater opportunity for godly influence across the world by making use of the global village. The global village also gives Christians access to devotional and evangelism resources that can be shared on the Internet.

However, other scholars have questioned the effects media and technologies have on people. Q. J. Schultze (2002) defined informationism as “a non-discerning, vacuous faith in the collection and dissemination of information as a route to social progress and personal happiness” (p. 26). K. Healey (2013) wrote: “The Internet itself is often regarded as a source of unmitigated political, cultural, and economic progress” (p. 173). Information overload, as explained by N. Postman with the term technopoly, is like “cultural AIDS, which I use as an acronym for Anti-Information Deficiency Syndrome” (1992, p. 63). The quantity of information and media that a person processes each day has made it impossible for the person’s information immune system to work effectively at repelling that which is unnecessary or unwanted. T. J. Tidline (1999) sought to discover if information overload was an actual issue or purely a myth. While information overload is not scientifically proven as a problem, mythology has provided a way for people to discuss the feelings of overload associated with media

and technology. Tidline’s research showed that people not only felt, but also coped with information overload by placing it within the framework of the information society myth.

Some scholars believe that IMT devices have had a detrimental effect on people’s relationships and personal lives. For many years, scholars like McLuhan (1964, 1967), Postman (1990, 1992), and C. J. Sommerville (1999) have warned of the dangers that technology and media may have on our lives. Further, some research shows that hyperactive and hyper-connected brains lead to depression (Jayson, 2012), and that the Internet has encouraged addictive behavior (Aboujaoude, 2010). M. Jackson (2008) argues that the constant interruption from cell phones has caused problems with attention and productivity, thereby eroding the three pillars of attention: focus, judgment, and awareness. N. Carr (2011) argues that the way people quickly switch tasks while surfing the Internet causes the loss of the ability to read books. He states that the brain seeks to continue switching tasks, making it difficult to read deeply and for any length of time. Experience with college students has shown (Turkle, 2011) that children are growing up without the ability or the desire to have conversations. Texting is preferred because the conversation content and length is controllable. Whether positive or negative, people clearly feel some effect due to the use of IMT devices.

Christian scholars express concern over IMT devices becoming “a kind of technical idolatry” (Healey, 2013, p. 172), which would elevate “technology to the status of a sacred object or ultimate source of wisdom, intelligence, and social progress” (p. 175). Postman (1992) wrote that “embedded in every tool is an ideological bias, a pre-disposition to construct the world as one

thing or another, to value one thing over another” (p. 13). The first two commandments given to humanity by God were “you shall have no other god before me” and “you shall not make for yourself an idol” (Exod. 20:3-4, NRSV). Some Christian scholars believe that society has lost track of the mediums’ effects because people primarily focus on the content and the desire for more. Schultze (2002) wrote, “The quest for more bandwidth can be a manifestation of the insatiability of human desire” (p. 66). People desire faster and easier access to IMT and do not think of the consequences of the quest.

McLuhan asserts that all technology is “an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies” (p. 67). By using technology and gadgets, people have put trust into those devices and allowed them to transform man. E. A. Griffin (2012) summarized McLuhan’s concept by stating, “A medium shapes us because we partake of it over and over until it becomes an extension of ourselves” (p. 323). McLuhan (1964) used Psalm 115:4-8 to explain how our gadgets become idols:

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; they make no sound in their throats. Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them (NRSV).

An iPhone can be said to have many of the characteristics that the Psalmist describes. By trusting in and using technology, people have allowed it to become transformative. S. Hips (2009) wrote that words and images have changed our theology and religious practices, which “are deeply informed and

shaped by our media and technology. We become what we behold” (p. 84). The transformative power of IMT devices should be a great concern for Christians as they should seek to be transformed by Christ alone.

Hips (2009) warns that the current culture filled with images causes people to receive impressions and experiences rather than forming creative ideas of their own. This has caused the “eroding and undermining of imaginative creativity” (p. 80). This erosion happens to spiritual imagination as well and hurts a person’s ability to expand personal experiences and understanding of God. Hips indicates that “a vivid spiritual imagination is crucial for helping us enact the call to love our enemy and bring about reconciliation in places of deep brokenness” (pp. 80-81). Nevertheless, Hips believes there is hope: “Media and technology have far less power to shape us when they are brought into the light and we understand them” (p.183).

Some scholars argue that IMT devices undermine relationships with God and others (Brinton, 2014; Nance, 2013). H. G. Brinton (2014) states that social media undermines “religion by encouraging ‘one size fits all’ messages, putting value on ‘likes’ and ‘followers,’ and distracting people from a relationship with God and their nearest neighbors” (para. 2). S. Nance (2013) argues that young adults’ values of avoiding risk and needing the ability to edit communication before sending are at odds with the kingdom values of intimacy, risk, and trust. When people avoid risk, God is unable to show His majesty and saving power.

For Christians who have felt negative effects or transformation by IMT devices, scholars have proposed various methods to mitigate

the effects and control of IMT devices over a person. Scholars have agreed on the importance of self-assessment in maintaining godly IMT tool practices (Schultz, 2002; Woods & Patton, 2011). Understanding IMT devices and their biases has also been shown to be important. R. H. Woods and P. D. Patton (2011) state, “To the extent that we understand the inherent potential and limits of any particular technology, we open up its redemptive possibilities” (p. 35). Bill McKibben (2006) argues that feeling the natural rhythms of life through nature is key. Sommerville (1999) suggests reading books, which cultivate deep thought and understanding. K. Healey (2013) agrees that the key is being intentional about the amount of Internet use being less than deeper forms of communication and thought. While Postman (1992) suggests adding religious instruction to school curriculum would be beneficial. Giving attention to God and other people provides another suggestion for dealing with IMT overexposure (Lunn, 2009; Jackson, 2008). A structural change to the way information is distributed has also been suggested (Christians, 2002). P. Anderson (2013) suggests that rather than being media consumers, people need to become the creators that God intended and use influence to affect change in the world.

Many Christian scholars have proposed media fasts as a way to slow the effects caused by overload (Cooper, 2006, 2011; Foster, 1983; Miller, 2011). R. J. Foster (1983) defined fasting as “the voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity” (p. 15). Fasting has been a common practice among many religions for centuries. Among Christians, the Bible has illustrated that fasting is beneficial in times of distress and grief, spiritual preparation, repentance, and atonement. Foster (1983) wrote that for

Christians there “is an urging, a prompting, a sense of rightness that this is what we are to do” (p. 15). Foster asserted that we fast to “reveal things which control us” and “to give us balance in life” (p. 15).

K. D. Miller (2011) sees Amish media practices of abstinence or controlled use being appreciated and adopted by the e-generation to work at “recovering balance” (p. 27). Because fasting serves as a powerful tool for controlling life issues and people clearly face the effects of overexposure to IMT devices and media that undermines relationships with God and others, there is a need to extend the current research into how media fasting might mitigate the effects of IMT devices. Current research on media fasting has been informal (Cooper, 2006, 2011; Patton, 2014; Silver, 2012), resulting in a lack of academic research data.

## **Research Questions**

In order to understand if media fasts are effective at mitigating the felt effects of IMT devices, more information on why people complete media fasts is needed. T. W. Cooper (2011) has listed the purposes of personal fasts. These reasons include focusing consciousness, regaining self-discipline, taking personal inventory of identity, feelings, and thoughts, regaining life balance, and becoming more genuine. These are reasons why one person chooses to complete media fasts. This research seeks to know the predominate reasons from many people.

**RQ1: What are the reasons that people complete media fasts?**

Understanding what people feel they gain by a media fast is another step in beginning to answer the greater question of whether such fasts are effective. Miller (2011) indicates

that some individuals in the e-generation are beginning to live the Amish way of life, which causes a regaining of balance and a natural, chronological rhythm to life and time. Cooper (2011) wrote that a fast involves unplugging “oneself from some sector of society or personal experience (p. 13)” and, that by doing so, a person can identify the functions that sector fills in his or her life. These experiences can help a person unveil the gains from doing a media fast. This research also seeks to know what other gains are felt by those who complete media fasts.

RQ2: What do people feel is gained by completing a media fast?

## **Methods**

### **Survey Procedures**

This qualitative survey research is preliminary in nature and uses surveys to ascertain the motives and felt gains of those who practice media fasts. The researcher created a short, 12-question, open-ended question survey based on the research questions. For example, one of the questions used to answer RQ2 was, “Would you recommend an IMT fast to others? If so, why?” This question(s) was(were) effective because participants freely stated what they felt others would gain based on what they had experienced. Because media fasting is new and the people who complete media fasts are somewhat difficult to identify, conversations about why people complete media fasts are few and far between. Thus, a survey was chosen in order to discover the main reasons that people complete media fasts. The open-ended questions give participants a creative freedom to answer.

The validity of the research tool was improved with the assistance of the researcher’s professor and colleague through

weekly conversations over the course of one semester. The tool was also tested and revised based on the answers and suggestions of test subjects prior to administering the tool to study participants.

### **Study Procedures**

Participants were sought from the researcher’s contacts. Participants included colleagues, friends, and other people referred to the researcher by this group who had previously completed media fasts. Requests were made through Facebook posts to the researcher’s timeline, two Facebook pages, and two Facebook groups geared toward ministers, personal emails, and in-person requests over a period of four weeks. There were 28 responses out of 2,349 potential participants. While the potential reach was 2,349 people, the actual reach was likely much less due to Facebook’s sharing algorithms. The survey was administered online and in-person. All in-person submissions were entered into the online survey tool for analysis. There were seven invalid responses—five were due to the fact that participants had not completed a media fast and two were respondents that only completed the demographic questions. This left 21 valid responses. Following the completion of the survey process, the researcher coded responses. Answers were grouped similarly for analysis. Each open-ended question produced several categories of responses. Only survey questions that were pertinent to the research questions were reported.

Participants were sought equally regardless of gender, age, occupation, or religious preference. The final group of participants were 100 percent Christian, with 71 percent claiming to be Protestants and 29 percent claiming to be “other Christian.” The dominant vocation was minister (pastor,

priest, evangelist) at 47 percent, with 53 percent other secular industries, students, or stay-at-home mothers. This represents a nearly 50/50 split in religious and secular vocations.

## Results

Research question 1: What are the reasons that people complete media fasts?

When asked, “Why have you completed an IMT fast?,” participants responded within four categories. Due to the open-ended questions, responses may fall into more than one category and percentages do not equal 100. The largest response was a desire to unplug or disconnect from distractions with one of these participants wanting to “focus on God.” Participants also wished to refocus on study, God, people, goals, priorities, reading, or prayer. Recentering (refocusing) included gaining peace of mind, decreasing stress, and spending time on more productive activities. Other responses included being on a trip or retreat and in response to God directing it or due to a religious event like Lent or Holy Week (see Table 1). Participants were also asked, “What do you do with the time normally spent with IMT?” The largest group of participants spent the extra time reading, writing, or studying, followed by relating with other people. Reasons also included praying, meditating, or otherwise focusing on God, life activities like sleep, work, or exercise, and using media that was not included in the fast (see Table 2).

Table 1  
*Reasons for Completing a Media Fast*

Reason	# of Responses	% of Responses
Unplug	15	71
Refocus	9	43
Trip or Retreat	4	19
God’s Direction	4	19

Table 2  
*How Fast Time was Spent During Media Fasts*

Activity	# of Responses	% of Responses
Reading, Writing, or Studying	14	67
Relationship Building	9	43
Focusing on God	8	38
Sleep, Work, or Exercise	8	38
Using Other Media	3	14

Research question 2: What do people feel is gained by completing a media fast?

When asked, “Would you recommend an IMT fast to others? If so, why,” 20 participants answered yes and one chose not to answer. The reasoning for saying yes fell into five categories. The most cited category was a need to disconnect from media and understand media reliance, followed by refocusing on God and the “real world,” gaining understanding of themselves or reality, benefiting physically, psychologically, or spiritually, and enhancing offline relationships. One response stated, “It would benefit anyone.

What you put into your heart definitely comes out, so limiting and choosing carefully what goes in is helpful to all. Each of us need a reset at times” (see Table 3).

Table 3  
*Reasons for Recommending a Media Fast to Others*

Reason	# of Responses	% of Responses
Need to Disconnect/ Understand Media Reliance	9	43
Refocus on God and Real World	8	38
Understand Self or Reality	5	24
Benefit Physically, Psychologically, or Spiritually	3	14
Enhance Offline Relationships	2	10

## Discussion

In this sample, nearly three quarters of the participants felt a need to unplug and/or detox from IMT devices. This time allowed them to focus on other activities. With all respondents stating that they would recommend an IMT fast to other people, this group of people feels they benefit from media fasts. Gains felt are varied, but focus on stepping away from media and refocusing on God and reality, and gaining a better understanding of self and world. Schultz (2002) makes an insightful statement: “Unless we counter-balance our cyber-practices with habits of the heart, we are far more likely over time to fall selfishly into cultural chaos and moral confusion” (p. 66). Many of the participants feel that completing media fasts helps them to engage in the world, focus on God, and become less media-reliant. While these findings cannot be generalized to a larger population due to the small size and scope of the research, the findings indicate that some people have felt the effects of IMT devices and seek to

mitigate these effects through media fasts (Tidline, 1999).

The researcher had hoped that this research would have a greater scope and be generalizable to a larger population. However, finding willing participants proved quite difficult. This could be because media fasts may not be practiced widely. The researcher was unable to find any non-Christian participants. This may be due to the participant selection process being biased by the researcher’s sample group. Future research should use alternative, non-biased sample selection procedures. Future research also could use a larger sample size and a multiple-choice format. Multiple-choice questions could be created using the results of this survey and may receive more responses from a more generalizable sample of the population. Future research might also focus on whether people who complete media fasts show outward signs of its help over time or what practices are used during media fasts.

This research did establish that discussion about the effects of IMT devices on people and how these effects might be mitigated through media fasts is a worthwhile conversation. Christian leaders would benefit from considering these preliminary results and determining if people ought to be encouraged to complete media fasts. Such encouragement may help someone overcome the felt effects of IMT devices.

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