

# OpenTheo

## Unruly Media and our Disordered Discourse

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The first follow-up to my earlier podcast on the danger of apologetics (<https://adversariapodcast.com/2022/01/07/the-danger-of-apologetics/>).

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## Transcript

In a previous podcast, I discussed the danger of apologetics. I spoke about the way that apologetics, by presenting an oppositional posture towards unbelievers and opponents, as a primary context for Christian reflection and thought, can end up taking its bearings not from the scripture itself or from the positive truths of Christian theology and the tradition, but from an instinctive posture of opposition or accommodation to another party. The result can easily be inattention to the scripture and the tradition, and instead of listening to the scripture on its own terms when we hear it, we start to listen for things that are useful for our arguments.

Within this and the following podcasts, I want to take some steps towards thinking in a healthier manner, helping us to develop some of the structures and some of the habits that will enable us to think in a manner that is not so driven and determined by our unruly passions. While we might flatter ourselves that our thinking is a purely objective and rational activity, so much of our thought is determined or shaped by our passions, by our emotions, by our relations, by the contexts in which we're thinking, by the way that we feel about the people with whom we are talking and our immediate instinctual reactions of the moment. Our capacity for good thought is not just about the level of our smarts, it is about our ability to manage our passions and relationships well.

When someone lacks good emotional self-regulation, their thought can often be just a process of rationalisation, and in such situations, the smarter the mind, the greater the liability. The self-rationalisations of the person who has a very sharp mind will be better than those of someone who lacks such a mind. In such a situation, having high intelligence is not necessarily of benefit.

As relational people, we do not think in isolation, we think, generally, in conversation of some type or other, and how we position ourselves in conversation is clearly of immense importance. If we have poorly managed tensions with the people with whom we are talking, we won't be able to take their ideas on board. We will struggle to explore their way of seeing the world, to try to emphasise, to give it the strongest representation that we can, to test our opinions against theirs.

Taking these things into account, being able to regulate our own emotions, and also to have healthy relationships with other people, is something that is integral to thought. Thought is not just abstract rational processes, it's also about emotional relationships and personal relationships. It is about creating healthy contexts of discourse and conversations within them, places where we can explore ideas that might otherwise be threatening.

Beyond creating and cultivating healthy contexts and ecosystems of discourse, we need to learn to inhabit these contexts as well as we can. Often the contexts that we are trying to inhabit are profoundly suboptimal ones, ones that tend towards the whipping up of unhealthy emotions and exacerbating the tensions between people. In addition to learning how to create good environments, we need to learn how to handle ourselves within hostile ones.

Within this and the following podcasts, I want us to think a bit about the way that our contexts of discourse work, the way that our media of discourse work, and then how we might handle ourselves better, what are some of the tips by which we might manage our emotions and have healthy relationships, even in contexts where people are at odds with each other. Within this particular podcast, I want us to think a bit more narrowly about various kinds of media and the tendencies that they have. Within a healthy society, we have many different forms of speech and discourse.

These different varieties of speech allow for different types of conversations to occur and also for different types of thought that correspond to them to occur. Sometimes, for instance, we need combative or what some have called agonistic arguments, contexts in which we stress-test ideas by sharpening arguments against each other in combative discourse. However, if this were the only sort of discourse that we had, we would be in deep trouble.

A lot of the discourse that we need is more exploratory in character. Rather than arguing against each other, often we need to think with each other, to share ideas and to build

up ideas and make them stronger through conversation. Contexts where there's a strong agonistic or combative flavour to the conversation can often close down this form of exploratory thought.

People end up trapped in narrow and unimaginative positions as a result. This is one of the dangers of focusing more narrowly upon oppositional apologetic discourse. Most discourse is not a matter of war, of attacking and defending, but is more a matter of collaborative building or exploring.

In order to think well about the sort of conversations that we have, we need to think more carefully about the sort of media that we use. Here I'm using media in a very broad sense, not just thinking about technological media, but also things like the spoken word. And it's with speech that I think we should begin.

Understanding the characteristics of speech will begin to understand some of its strengths and weaknesses, some of its potentials, some of the ways in which we can use it most effectively, and some of the ways in which it might be less effective for our purposes. One of the first things to notice about speech is the way that it involves the living voice and the active speaker. Speech is very much the action of a person in a moment.

And that action is one that has immediacy. It is highly time-bound and situational. Here and now, the speaker speaks in to a set of circumstances, and generally by that act of speaking, changes things.

For this reason, it matters quite a bit what the speaker is intending to do by that act of speech. What effects do their words have? The words cannot be abstracted from the situation. Calling out fire in a crowded theatre has immediate negative effects that can really harm people.

For this reason, people are often a lot less accommodating of free speech when it's spoken speech as opposed to written speech. Speech is also something that is generally exchanged between persons in the moment. It takes the form of discourse and dialogue.

The dialogic character of speech and the exchange of words forms audiences and communities of conversation. It unites people and it divides people. On account of this character of speech, much speech is not informational in character, but is about forming rapport and community.

About connecting people, about serving a social function. We might think about this, for instance, in the context of discussions of the weather, something that is traditionally seen as a British pastime. We talk about the weather not to inform people about how things have been in the last few days, but as a means of connecting with them.

Or forming through such so-called small talk some form of rapport. Words are energising

and dynamic. They are actions of the moment.

And to exchange them well, we need sharp wits. As speakers are very active and present in contexts of speech, one can deal with unwelcome words and arguments by using one's wits to deflect or diffuse them, either smothering disagreement or misplacing conflict. This is because speech is not just about abstract ideas and concepts, but about the negotiation of relationships.

Those who are deft at negotiating relationships can often avoid having to engage with unwelcome ideas. While they are vehicles for ideas, words are no less actions and signals. The spoken word contrasts with the written word.

The written word is far more deliberate. Thought is placed into what you are going to write down on a piece of paper. In many respects, we will place more weight upon written words for this reason.

While spoken words are generally dialogic in character, as we have conversations with other people, the written word has more of a monologic character. The writer is generally in solitude, writing down their thoughts onto a piece of paper that will later on be read by some other party. The speaker in this situation is far more distant from the reader.

The immediacy of the personal interaction that you have in the case of speech is generally not present in the situation of writing. Writing enables us to detach the word from the immediacy of time and the moment. And in the process of this, it allows for different forms of communication.

The person who reads the written word generally does so alone. It's generally private, solitary reading. The communal effects that one sees in the case of the spoken word are much diminished in the case of the written word.

By the written word, the word can become an object and a physical artefact. We might think about the way that the words written by a dear relative who has died can have a particular sentimental value. You gather the letters together of someone who loves you.

In contrast to the immediacy of the spoken word, the power of the spoken word often residing in its timeliness, the written word can provide an enduring testimony. The written word changes the way that we relate to the temporality of the word. The written word is a great way to develop distance from the immediacy of thoughts and feelings of the moment.

The sort of distance that enables us to objectify and to analyse them. As the written word is detached from the immediate presence of the speaker in the moment, it's harder to brush off. The written word sticks around physically.

We might think about the way that Darcy's letter in *Pride and Prejudice* serves as a testament that Elizabeth Bennet cannot just brush away. Had he spoken those words to her in the context of a communal setting, she could easily have brushed it off with her wit. But away from the writer of the letter, she can't do so.

She has to deal with the words themselves and their import. Just as writing is an activity that requires reflection and deliberation and is a far more determined action as a result. So reading of the written word shares many of those features.

The reader who's reading the written word generally does so alone and they're forced to reflect upon those thoughts and deliberate about how to respond to them. Print intensifies many of the features of the written word. It increases the distance between the writer and the reader.

Once the words written by the author have gone through the processes of editing and publishing, they are in most cases much less immediate. Printing, with certain exceptions such as journalism, is a much slower form of discourse. And as a result it tends to downplay the role that would be played by passion.

It extends the realm of discourse. Across time, print greatly increases our power to replicate writing and to spread it far and wide. Printed literature is also generally less clearly addressed.

Much written material is addressed to a particular recipient or to a particular audience. But the printed word is word that can spread far and wide. On the other hand, the printed word is less democratic in character.

Access to the printed word tends to be limited to those who have run the gauntlet of editors and publishers. As the printed word is much more divorced from its speaker, context and situation, it encourages a conversation across times and places far more than most other forms of discourse. While the sending of a letter to someone can be seen as a very directed action, reading a book does not have quite that same character.

The writer of the book has not directly addressed the book to you. The act of the writer seems to be quite distant. The act of the reader, who picks up the book and reads it, is the more immediate of the two.

Within a traditional form of discourse, there's a great deal of variegation. One of the features of traditional discourse is the way that there are many different realms and different modes of discourse existing alongside each other. These discourses are differentiated and separated from each other.

One of the most basic modes of differentiation is provided by physical distance and division. You need physically to be in the room and at the table to participate in certain conversations. You might think, for instance, about the ways that different forms of

discourse come together to form an act of society, such as a court case.

There's written legislation and the conversation across time and lawmaking. There's the reporting of the affairs of the court. There's cross-examination of witnesses.

There are conversations between legal representatives and their clients in privacy. There is legal advocacy in the court. There are legal precedents that are consulted.

Deliberations among the jury and then the various forms of speech of the judge. Justice involves the interplay of these and several other different conversations, each of which needs its own integrity and character, often needing to be separated from the others in order to do its work effectively. The divisions between these conversations are provided by the differentiation of participants, places and times and in other sorts of ways.

We might think about the different forms and modes and contexts of speech that need to be involved. For justice to be done and seen to be done, certain things need to be public. Certain other things need to be done in privacy.

Some things need a monologic character. Other things need to involve dialogue and discourse. Some of those dialogues need to be deliberative and exploratory.

Others need to be far more combative. Justice requires things to be written down in a testament form. Other things need to be spoken in the moment.

This is not something that happens automatically. There is a lot of thought that has been put into the construction of these contexts and ecosystems of discourse over the course of history. Healthy, discursive functioning of society does not just happen.

Recognising the differences between the ways that discourse can function in socially dense realms and in highly aerated realms is very important, for instance. Many of the problems that we face today in thinking well about various things come from the fact that it is difficult to manage healthy relationships and to emotionally self-regulate in disordered contexts of discourse. New media don't fit tidily into traditional modes of speech, writing or print.

Blogging, for instance, is in some cases like an intensification and greater democratisation of journalistic modes of speech. In some contexts it could be compared to an accelerated republic of letters, the community of intellectual correspondence in the 17th and 18th centuries. Blogging could often allow for a greater interaction between readers and writers.

The followers of a blog also led to a context of ongoing conversation. Closer connection between writers and audiences can lead to communication going both ways and the creation of different sorts of communities. The discourse of blogging can be more provisional so there's less of a detachment of the word and the writer.

Much of the culture of blogging, however, changed as the delivery system changed. Rather than subscribing to blogs, people increasingly just received their blogging material through social media, merely being exposed to those things that had gone viral. As blogging and other forms of online media gave more of a voice to readers of books, readers started to form more of their own communities and to have a greater influence upon the writing of books and the production of other media.

Much contemporary media is deeply influenced by the fact that there are online communities that are vocal in response to them, that seek to be represented in the characters, that are pressing for certain plot and character developments, that have certain theories about the ways that stories are going to go. Perhaps, for instance, they want to see two characters end up together. Through such active involvement in fan communities and participation on what has been called the second screen, where we respond to things that we witness on the first screen of the movie or the TV show that we're watching, what it means to write a book or to produce a TV show has rather changed.

While traditional mass media generally put the crowd in the position of the silent audience who were receiving the information, new media increasingly give them a voice. Social media operate by a different sort of logic and give platforms to people who otherwise would not have enjoyed them, or who would have enjoyed them on very different terms. We might think of the way in which people who would not have had access to the platform of the media can now produce their own sorts of journalism, or the way in which people who would not enjoy the right to speak from the pulpit can now speak on social media and express their opinions there.

Social media is variegated and indeterminate. It contains characteristics of spoken and of written discourse, along with printed and other forms. It's inconsistent, however, and uneven.

It's not always predictable how it's going to work, as Michael Sarkasis has perceptively observed. On social media, words are generally not inert, as they tend to be in printed books, but are seen as more active, as they tend to be in speech. Speakers matter a lot more on social media.

Much of what people are trying to do when they speak on social media is to present themselves in a particular way, to relate to other people, to position themselves. However, this is not always the case. A lot of people speaking on social media are anonymous, and they're not deeply invested in what's taking place there.

Some anonymous or pseudonymous people are at a distance from what's taking place and participate in the conversation more in order to share ideas and to throw ideas around, rather than in order to belong to a particular community. On the other hand, even among those who are anonymous, people can be deeply invested in their personas

online. They can increasingly identify with their online self, how they appear to others in that place.

The role of the online self is incredibly important. The role played by the online self can often be compared to the role played by a mirror. When you see your face in a mirror, you see something of how other people see you, and that reflexive awareness of yourself shapes the way that you see yourself thereafter.

You position yourself relative to the mirror to see yourself as others see you, and by seeing yourself in such a manner, to shape your appearance accordingly. Seeing oneself in a mirror can be a very important part of the way that one sees oneself. If we were to imagine a world where there were no reflective surfaces, and there were no images produced of the self, we would come to a very different understanding of ourselves in such a world, because there would be no mediation of the image or of the reflection by which to do so.

Social media produces a sort of social reflection or image of ourselves. Much as the image on the mirror, the persona that we see in the spectacle of social media, becomes constitutive of our sense of ourselves. We are constantly preening ourselves within this mirror of social media, looking at that spectacle to see how we appear.

It is important to recognise the degree to which registering ourselves on social media can become part of how we are forming ourselves. So if we have a holiday, we want to share the pictures, and we want them to be liked and recognised on social media. If they are not, we have not been seen, we have not been recognised, and somehow we have fallen short of arriving at a full realisation of ourselves.

Social media then can become integral to the way that selves are formed. Media have always had an important effect in the way that selves are formed. Many people have observed the way that with the spread of literacy, people reading more closely, and people also writing more extensively, selves started to be formed in a different way, whereas previously people were far more focused upon the outward expression of the self.

Increasingly, people started to reflect upon their emotions, to speak in a more discriminating manner about them, as they started to keep personal diaries and spiritual journals. Writing allowed for a greater degree of introspection, the objectification of the self to the self, by which the self could come to a deeper self-knowledge, and engage in far more searching introspection. Social media can resituate the primary realm of the objectification of the self, the place where we go to, to see the self, and relate to ourselves as something outside of ourselves to reflect upon, whereas formerly we might write a private diary, increasingly we relate to ourselves as we see how others see us on social media, and as we cultivate an image for ourselves within that larger social spectacle.



As this sort of act of self-forming is prevalent on social media, there's a lot more attention to the way that people are positioning themselves and presenting themselves within that realm. In a much greater manner than for the printed word, which is a far more inert form of the word, suspicion can be excited as people wonder how the speaker is seeking to act and present themselves through the words that they are saying. What matters is not the meaning of the words uttered in the abstract, but the intention behind them.

What is the speaker trying to accomplish with them? What is he subtweeting? What is he signalling? How is he positioning himself? What effect does he want to have? However, as with so much on social media, these things are inconsistent. There are some people on social media who are communicating more using the norms of print culture. They are not treating words as immediate, but as detached from themselves as the author.

Further aspects of the contrast between different modes of social media can be seen in the different ways that things such as anonymity have played into it. In the older forms of the internet, it was very much a place of words that privileged people who were able to present themselves well within the medium of words. Such people, being completely anonymous, did not enjoy the privileges or the disadvantages that come with appearance, with social status, with institutional office, with fame, or with other forms of attraction.

With all of these things removed from the picture, some of the features of print were greatly accentuated. Print can downplay the immediacy of the author, and in certain respects, anonymity on the internet can have a similar effect. In such a context, people's words stand or fall for themselves.

That more anonymous form of the internet took place in a great number of diverse settings, in the obscurity of various forums and sites where people who had similar interests would go to find each other. In that context, people joke that there are no girls on the internet. When people's online personas are weak, and don't have a strong relationship with their actual persons, what people present themselves to be may have no relationship whatsoever with what they actually are.

The common dynamics of attraction, for instance, between men and women, can't function very easily within such a setting. The norms of such highly anonymous settings typically tend to be those more associated with male groups. Social media, however, foregrounded personas.

It enabled us to present an image of ourselves online, to share our interests, our appearance, and the different associations that we have. And as a result, it greatly changed the sorts of dynamics that occur online. Speech online increasingly became a matter of relating to each other, of aligning with different people, of attracting certain people's attention.

While the old anonymous internet led to certain challenges to traditional authority, and democratized speech in various ways by allowing anyone to step forward, and be judged by the weight of their words alone, the new sort of internet created by greater social media allowed for much more of an effect of social appeal, Attractiveness, fame, popularity, and other things associated with image became much more important. And because of the character of the internet as a vast shared spectacle, these things could exert their power over a much larger population, and to a much greater extent. On social media, there's a new form of hierarchy that privileges a more social sort of appeal.

Whereas in traditional society, the person with institutional authority may carry the greatest weight, within the older form of the internet, it was the person who was most deft at expressing their ideas and opinions. In the newer form of the internet, words continue to be important, but increasingly it's the person who has the most compelling and popular image, who has the greatest appeal, that will be the most popular. As a result, a lot of social media is about posturing, about performance, about being seen to be a particular sort of person.

People who hold more traditional forms of authority can be incredibly bad at navigating social media. Their forms of authority are greatly diminished by social media, and also they don't function in the same way. We might think about the pastor, for instance, who looks after a particular congregation.

That congregation was once more discernible as a specific community. Its boundaries were much more visible. You could see who was associated with who, who had meaningful relationships with each other.

In the age of social media, many of our most formative relationships can be with people who are completely invisible and unknown to the people who are otherwise closest to us. The pastor might speak to a congregation of 200 people every Sunday, but the person on social media can reach a crowd of thousands and millions. Voices who were once marginalized within their churches can gather together and form new communities online that challenge existing power structures.

This has been very important for tackling forms of abuse within churches. However, it's also led to a situation where there are vast numbers of sheep choosing among competing shepherds. Because of the degree of choice we have in affiliation online, online communities can easily become radicalized.

Whereas the older form of the internet was a very male place, the newer form of the internet that's very social and based upon images is a context in which women, especially young and attractive women, can exert a disproportionate influence. Those more accustomed to traditional modes of discourse should beware before getting into arguments with certain people who are popular on social media. The rules are very different.

The game is very different. The authority and influence that someone might wield in one realm does not easily translate to the other. Authority does not generally give you much currency on social media, nor for that matter does cogency of argument.

Personality, popularity, charisma, and appearance matter for a lot more. That doesn't mean that such things should be dismissed as unimportant, but it's important to know the game that we are playing. Places like Twitter can serve as a sort of stifling context.

Louis XIV of France set up the Palace of Versailles as a context to attract nobles to a central location in pursuit of prestige through conformity and the currying of favor in a mass continuous spectacle. This served to break down pockets of resistance that might otherwise have arisen. It concentrated and centralized power within a spectacle ruled over by this great king.

A similar concentration of all the political, journalistic, and academic classes all in one suffocatingly dense social realm can occur in places like Twitter. They're all jockeying for position, wanting to be seen by the people that matter, performing according to the official ideology, determining who's in or who's out on the basis of how well they abide by these rules. Then they are watched by the great unwashed multitude who are all equally obsessed with the spectacle, constantly talking about the elites and the politicians and how they stand relative to them.

This entire discussion started with a consideration of the way in which our thinking can be mediated by other parties that we stand in opposition to or over against. Social media is a profoundly powerful engine for producing this form of thought. There is always someone wrong on the internet, and much of social media is about reacting to certain people who are consistently wrong, against whom we position ourselves.

Every week, like clockwork, I see people responding to David French's latest article, for instance. French occupies considerable real estate in people's minds. They constantly react against him.

He becomes the foil against which they think. French is just one example of a great many. More generally, we see this constant conflict between the left and the right and their caricatures of each other.

They are constantly at each other's throats, fixated upon the most stupid things that the other side have come out with. For people who spend much of their time on social media, it can be almost impossible to step back from its tensions and antagonisms and to think about things on their own terms. What we have here is a dysfunctional relationship with a form of media.

People relate to social media as a means of forming their sense of self, where they belong, who they are. It also serves as a frame for thought, a context that is always

socially and emotionally charged, where people are excited to outrage and constantly think against the foil of opponents. This contrasts markedly with the form of society that is encouraged by the printed word, where people are encouraged to think about things in solitude, through the act of reading and reflection and deliberation, where people's selves are formed in such solitude, where introspection is encouraged and processing of things by the act of writing and reading of literature that makes one a more discerning and discriminating judge of one's inner life.

Such a society is far less preoccupied with the social spectacle than ours is. It also enjoys space for thought and reflection that is removed from the antagonisms of the social spaces. If we don't step back from these social spaces and think about ideas on their own terms, in contexts that are free from the tensions and antagonisms that we experience in argument, we'll find it very difficult to engage in close and sustained attention to persons, reality and to texts.

Instead, people in such contexts tend to become preoccupied with the antagonisms. They want to know how to own the libs, for instance. They lose the ability to step back and relate to reality itself, without constantly having the libs and their concerns to attack them, intruding upon that.

Tying all of this together, we need to be a lot more alert to the way that our media shape us and the way that we talk and think. Our media are means by which we form ourselves, by which we form communities, and by which we form our minds. If we use our media in a careless and irresponsible manner, the disordered character of our minds, our communities and ourselves will be a testament to our error.

Within the next podcast, I would like to take this conversation a bit further to discuss some of the psychological dynamics that are involved in healthy thought and how we might better cultivate them.