



# Marginalia

## Our Shrink-wrap World

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I was shocked recently with my first-ever purchase of a flat-screen television. Expecting a hernia-inducing effort not unlike the intense strain of an Olympic power-lifter, I was amazed at how much smaller and lighter it was. My “clean and jerk” television-carrying method was no longer needed. Personal computing has gone from desktops to laptops to netbooks and now tablets, and cell phones have now become computers of sorts with a remarkable array of computing/connecting services. While our communicating devices are smaller, the amount of time we spend communicating with them is shorter. With the advent of Facebook and Twitter, we actually read incredibly brief statements of our friends and believe that in so doing we are keeping up with them. Conversations have turned into “tweets” and meaningful dialogue has become a “chat.” We live in a shrink-wrap world where most things have been made smaller.

Yet one thing that hasn't been shrink-wrapped is the amount of information now available to us, which is expanding exponentially. The smaller our devices get, the more powerful they are and the more unable we are to keep up. We are no match for these machines. They give us more bytes about everything than we ever dreamed possible. Because we have so much more information and can access it so much faster, we are easily overwhelmed by it. Recently, I devoted one year to reading biographies. Two of them were John Mott and Oswald Chambers, men who lived about 100 years ago. In both cases, they traveled by ship. And in both cases these trips were often the only respite they seemed to have in otherwise hectic and busy ministries. It was on board those ships that they had time

to reflect and think and...gulp...relax a little. But those days are long gone. Now we are just glad that there is wi-fi on board so that we can keep up with our inbox. Such is life today.

Viewed positively, this shrink-wrap world has dramatically increased our understanding of the scope of the mission task. As the theme of this issue illustrates, we are not only out to preach the gospel, we are out to transform the world in every area of society. We would do well to note the magnitude of this shift. Did the missionaries of yesteryear even think about transforming the very societal framework of the places in which they worked? Did they contemplate and write strategic plans about how they would change societal structures, the so-called “seven mountains” of society: business, government, media, arts and entertainment, education, the family and religion? In some cases, they were simply trying to stay alive and show the love of Jesus in a hostile environment. By contrast, we are today witnessing many innovative strategies never conceived before.

Viewed negatively, the more we know, the more complex issues become. The bliss of viewing the world in hard and simple categories is no longer possible for us. What the microscope and telescope did for the expansion of learning about the natural world, the new technologies and new media have done for the expansion of just about everything else. While in one sense mission theory and strategy has been advanced and become more sophisticated, in another sense it has struggled to keep up with the complexities of a world better understood through these new technologies.

In some ways, the more we know the more we realize what we don't know.

It used to be that we would talk about “world religions” that neatly divided the world faiths into clean and neat categories. But as my colleague HL Richard has pointed out, the concept of “religion” itself is dubious. In fact, there are many Christianities, many Islams, many Hinduisms and Buddhisms. Neat categories have been replaced by very messy constructs much closer to the reality on the ground. So what are we to do? We need to carefully walk the tightrope and balance the tension between generality and specificity. We speak in general terms because it makes communication possible. As mobilizers, we can't get away from the general way of looking at things. However, we must recognize that such communication is only a beginning. Technically, it is virtually impossible to communicate meaningfully at the complex level if we only speak in generalities. We cannot overlook complexity in the hope that it will just go away. “Keep it simple, stupid” has a short reach. As strategists, we must embrace specificity and complexity.

The generalists and specialists in the mission enterprise need to work together, even while we speak a somewhat different language. This distinction reminds me of a similar reality that often exists between the marketing and research/development divisions of a company. While they are usually a lesson in stark contrast, they are nevertheless necessary to each other. Similarly, while mobilizers and strategists usually live in different worlds, the consequences of ignoring each other are grave. f