Movies, Model Ts, and Morality: The Impact of Technology on Standards of Behavior in the Early Twentieth Century

MELISSA E. WEINBRENNER

In the early twentieth century the United States witnessed both moral and technological innovation. The divorce rate went from 8.8 per hundred in 1910 to 16.5 in 1928. The number of patents granted went from 208,000 in the decade ending 1890 to 421,000 in the decade ending 1930. Lipstick brightened the faces of young ladies; Edison lights illuminated homes and offices. Secretaries began typing; women began publicly smoking and drinking. Iceboxes kept food cool; jazz became a “hot” new dance craze. Although technology cannot force people to behave a certain way, it was not strictly coincidental that changes in perceptions of acceptable behavior accompanied the increasing use of technology. By examining the metaphysics engendered by living in a technologically oriented society and the specific outlooks fostered by two of its most pervasive technologies—the car and the motion picture—one can explore its influence on behavioral standards. Living in a technologically oriented society encourages a general outlook that is objective, temporal, separated, and youth-oriented; the automobile in particular encourages an upwardly leveled society, a “personal” world and a “suddenly happening” environment, and the motion picture specifically fosters group objectivity, sequence as rational and self-exposure over self-examination.

Several prominent social scientists and scholars in the early twentieth century recognized that technology affected social behavior, even though they did not always clearly explain how. In 1929, influential political commentator, journalist, and philosopher Walter Lippmann1
noted a connection between loosening moral standards and the modern “inventive” world, issuing *A Preface to Morals* (232). That same year President Herbert Hoover asked a “group of eminent scientists”2 to conduct a national study of changing trends with particular emphasis on areas of social stress. The President’s Research Committee on Social Trends resultant two-volume work devoted an entire chapter to “The Influence of Invention and Discovery.” The Committee noted that machines had “led to a new environment to which modern man must adjust, quite different from the fauna and flora of nature” (United States 123). Frederick Lewis Allen, who, in the early twentieth century, worked in various editorial capacities on *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Century*, and *Harper’s* before writing his well-known history of the 1920s, noted that the more one uses machines, the more one’s thinking becomes habituated to their particular outlook (116). When society relies upon machines to function, machines’ actions influence and mold the society’s view of reality. To use a machine, one must learn its rules and view the environment through the rules that the machine operates under. Thus the world characteristics emphasized by machines become a metaphysical outlook that spills over into nontechnological areas.

This technological metaphysic manifested itself as objective, temporal, separated, and youth-oriented and refashioned views accordingly. First, objectivity functioned as both a prerequisite and a result of technology. The creation and use of mechanical objects emphasized the uncontrollable part of the environment and forced one to think objectively in order to operate them properly. Tools operate in specific ways and one must learn the laws of their behavior. Lewis Mumford3 points out that using tools or technology to impact the environment forces one into close contact with the immediate environment and focuses attention away from the afterlife or other subjective, nonimmediate concerns (321). The tool user must respect the nature of the tool being used and refine specific skills. Mumford also notes that although the concept of a neutral world, untouched by human efforts, indifferent to moral activities and wishes may have existed among certain scientifically minded individuals for millennia, the habit of thought it engendered did not spread over any wide area until the common, everyday use of machines (361).

Second, technological machinery generated a temporal outlook in contrast with the pretechnological eternal, self-renewing view of reality. Premachine age cultures conceived of an eternal being watching
all that happened. Those societies usually centered around agricultural production which emphasized the “self-renewing” metaphysic. A plant’s “death” created seeds and brought “life” to a new crop. In contrast, technological machines do not carry the potential of self-renewal. Once they “die,” or break down, they become unusable. Instead of eternally existing, technological worlds are limited (Giedion 30). Things have a finite life span.

It should not be surprising, then, that the President’s Research Committee found that interest and belief in a life beyond death had dropped to a fraction of the level held in the turn of the century. Articles on these topics numbered 0.57 per 1,000 in 1910 and only 0.15 per 1,000 in 1930. In the articles analyzed intensively for 1905, researchers found ninety-nine references to a future life, of which 78 percent were favorable; in 1930, investigators found only thirteen such references, of which twelve were antagonistic. The articles’ goals concerned fulfillment of personality, the attainment of rich experience and the achievement of basic values on earth. A temporal metaphysic also emphasized momentary pleasure. One had less concern for the future or possible ramifications of a certain mode of behavior. The number of articles expressing approval of adultery, seduction, promiscuous petting, and other topics relating to sexual “thrill” increased from 18 percent in 1905 to 56 percent in 1929 (United States 411).

Third, an environment based on objects with a specific purpose and limited goal encouraged a loss of universality. Mechanizing production meant dissecting work into component operations (Giedion 30–31). An individual performed a single task, such as a bolt’s placement, and did not understand all the procedures required to make the product. Marshall McLuhan⁴ notes a trend toward separation inherent in technology (Gutenberg 56). Assembly line production required separation of tasks; special machines for specific purposes created separation of operation; inventions such as the phone or silent film separated the senses. This produced a separated, component view of the universe (McLuhan, Understanding 90).

With society becoming separated, the old universal codes of conduct appeared irrelevant and old-fashioned. It was more modern to discard the old, holistic code in favor of a modern, piecemeal approach to morality (Hamilton 151). Just as in one work station an employee painted and in another one screwed in bolts, why not behave one way in one location and another way elsewhere? The component view of
reality also encouraged a trend to separate the functions within one’s own life. Work would be for the office, leisure for time off, and religion, with its universal conduct code, only for church.

Fourth, technological societies venerated youth. Before the rise of technology and manufacturing, land determined status. Technological societies preferred manufactured goods to land (Ostrander 9). Society venerated age and wisdom when land was the most desired possession. Only age taught one which crops or farming methods worked best with a particular piece of land. But in a technological society, the “newness” of property carried greater value. In the early twentieth century, some working-class individuals mortgaged their homes in order to afford an automobile. One Midwesterner commented: “I’ll go without food before I’ll see us give up the car” (Lynd 254–55). Preferring the artificial for the natural environment created a reorientation from faith in the wisdom of age and experience to faith in youth and innovation (Ostrander 2–8).

In a continually developing technological environment, society relied on the young to acquire the skills necessary to maintain and recreate the environment. The young, as the social product of the new environment, were superior to their elders in adaptability and understanding of the environment and qualified to act as authoritative exemplars of social change. Society’s increasing interest in children manifested itself in a series of White House Conferences on Children and Youth, beginning in 1909. In the Victorian era, youth was something to master and shed upon reaching maturity. In the early twentieth century, adults eagerly tried to extend it (United States xlv). Henry Seidel Canby recalled that “self-expression for youth is supposed to have brought about the change in family life that came with the new generation. It was a cause, but an equally powerful one was self-expression for parents who wanted to stay young and live their own lives while the boys and girls were sent off to camps and schools” (May 98). Mothers emulated their daughters and adopted the shorter skirt length. Traditionally, the youth have always been viewed as the ones most likely to rebel and challenge the standards of their elders. In a technologically oriented society, youth’s desire to recast old values had more influence than usual since the youth began to set the standards themselves.

These four characteristics were some of the changes wrought as typewriters, light bulbs, phonographs, telephones, and other techno-
logical machines became common. But certain technologies became so influential and widespread in popularity that they created a unique outlook specific to that machine and not to the general rise of technology. One such machine was the automobile.

When the Lynds examined Muncie, Indiana, one Midwesterner asked, “Why on earth do you need to study what’s changing this country? I can tell you what’s happening in just four letters: A-U-T-O!” (Lynd 251). In 1900, only 8,000 cars roamed the nation’s streets. In 1930, the figure soared to nearly 26 million (United States 172). Within a single lifetime, a rarely seen machine became a common city sight. Widespread use of the car created a three-fold outlook: an upwardly leveled society, a “personal” world, and a “suddenly happening” environment.

First, the upwardly leveled society was a uniquely American reaction to the automobile’s introduction. When Henry Ford perfected the technique of automobile mass production and offered a car for under US$500, he put the machine within the reach of many middle- and working-class families. In other countries, only the wealthy elite could afford the vehicle. When The Grapes of Wrath was shown outside the United States, some audiences greeted it with bewilderment or laughter. The poor migrant family drove a car and so must be wealthy, some viewers thought confusedly (McLuhan, Understanding 221). By putting the machine within the price range of most Americans, the pedestrian became the second-class citizen.

As a result, the automobile made it increasingly difficult to differentiate between the wealthy elite and the average city dweller. In times past, the wealthy had maintained that prostitutes and other immoral individuals came solely from the lower classes. Now it was harder to ascertain the class standing of someone committing an “immoral” crime in a car. This anonymity also allowed the wealthier to engage in misconduct without it reflecting back on their class. The desire to behave appropriately for one’s class had less meaning (McLuhan, Understanding 222).

A second aspect of the automobile outlook, the “personal” world, involved using the car for the sheer enjoyment of its functioning, not simply as a way to get from one location to another. The pleasure drive became an increasingly popular way to spend one’s leisure time. Many car owners spent their Sundays touring the countryside rather than in church (Lynd 265). Douglas Browning notes that using any tool for the
pleasure of its function, rather than as a means, makes it an extension of the user. It becomes intensely personal (13).

The 1920’s changeover from open to closed cars further emphasized the personal nature of the car. In 1919, about 90 percent of the cars made were roadsters or touring cars. By 1929, 90 percent were coups or sedans. The first moderately priced closed car, the 1922 Essex, started the swing from open to closed cars. No longer a luxury, Hudson offered a closed sedan priced only US$100 more than touring cars (Donovan 151–52). Closed automobiles increased the chances of smoking or drinking in the car and not being recognized. An observer once remarked: “A bulwark of American morality has always been the difficulty of finding a suitable place for misconduct” (Jeansonne 19). If so inclined, one had a chance to misbehave. One juvenile judge called the automobile a “house of prostitution on wheels” because one-third of all the girls brought before him for sex crimes in the last year had committed their offenses in cars (Jeansonne 19). The closed car had a peculiar intimacy. When driving a car, the interior and exterior worlds separated. The speed of the machine gave an alien cast to the exterior landscape. As a result, the interior world became more “real” and intimately personal—a small, very private world. Sharing that world with another person provided a quality of intimacy not otherwise encountered. This may partially account for a policeman’s dismayed observation that “conditions have been getting worse, with all sorts of couples kissing and hugging in automobiles” (Browning 16).

The third characteristic of the automobile outlook, the “suddenly happening” environment, created a present-minded, crisis-oriented consciousness. Since the automobile traveled more rapidly than previous forms of transportation and became an extension of the driver, the world presented itself as a place of the sudden. The “suddenly happening” world of the auto differed from the previous concepts of the suddenly happened—such as an unexpected death or unforeseen event. When driving, the world flashed by at a “sudden” speed and was continually happening—one watched for other vehicles, unexpected road conditions or unknown surprises. This present-minded, crisis-oriented approach, though not a new idea, did not become part of the everyday mind until the advent of the driving public (Browning 15).

The “suddenly happening” fostered a desire to live for the moment, a “who knows what the future may bring” mentality. This engenders a situational approach to morality and a desire to do what feels good
now. The most commonly read periodicals showed a growing lack of interest in religion and marked increase in the approval of “sexual irregularities, easy divorce and sex freedom in general” from earlier in the century (United States 441).

The suddenly happening outlook also made one impatient with behavior that hindered or created obstacles to movement. One unique manifestation of this impatience was the acceptance of the women’s shorter skirt length. One scholar attributed the shorter skirt length’s popularity to the increased ease of driving and shifting gears.

Even as the number of Americans who owned automobiles soared, so too did the number who watched motion pictures. In Muncie, Indiana, weekly attendance at the nine theaters equaled three times the city’s entire population (Lynd 255). On Sunday, more people went to the movies than to church. By 1922, more than forty million people went to the movies each week. The number continued to grow over the next few years, reaching an average weekly attendance of ninety million by 1948 (Brown 275). With so many people going to the movies so many times, the motion picture influenced society’s view of reality. As Marshall McLuhan points out, with new forms of communication the medium itself rather than the information it conveys is more important in shaping metaphysical outlook—“the medium is the message” (McLuhan, Understanding 90). The act of being able to watch a movie carried greater impact than what was necessarily seen on the screen. The motion picture medium fostered three outlooks: group objectivity, sequence as rational, and self-exposure over self-examination.

First, unlike earlier novelty viewing in the kinetoscope, which was inherently subjective and individualized, movie watching was a fundamentally objective, group process. It was tested in the social consensus and as such strengthened and was predicated upon mass experience. George Herbert Mead and other social psychologists found film strengthened mass experience (Levinson 60). Owing to the high demand for the new medium, it developed along the lines of least resistance and thus catered to the baser instincts of society. In addition, being a new industry, initially it had no censors or other established institutional procedures to govern the subject matter. This partially accounts for the fact that motion pictures were more apt than any class of magazines studied by the President’s Research Committee on Social Trends to portray divorce and sexual irregularities in a more approving light (United States 419). Norma Shearer’s character sympathetically
had an affair in 1930’s The Divorcee. The biggest box office draw of the late 1920s and early 1930s, Mae West, used double entendres to approvingly suggest sexual irregularities. In her first film, Night After Night, a hat check girl exclaims “Goodness, what lovely diamonds!” West’s character responds by noting “Goodness had nothing to do with it, dearie.”

Second, motion pictures fostered the tendency to accept mere sequence as rational. In a stage production, the dramatist provided a reason for an individual’s presence on the stage. However, in film, whatever the camera turned to the audience accepted. This view of reality had to be nurtured and built up; it did not come naturally. When John Wilson of London University’s African Institute tried to use film to teach the natives, he discovered that they needed to be taught how to view film. They did not accept the premise that whatever the camera showed was acceptable. If someone walked off the screen, the natives wanted to know what happened to that person. In order to satisfy the African, the cameraman followed departing individuals until they walked behind something that naturally obstructed them from a watcher’s view, such as a large tree or building (McLuhan, Understanding 90).

Accepting the premise that mere sequence was rational inculcated the idea that whatever is, is acceptable. This translated into a reluctance to judge behavior. If someone was already misbehaving, why criticize them? Society reasoned that since individuals inevitably misbehaved, rather than trying to change their behavior, why not accept it as adequate. In other words, try to understand, at least, rather than condemn. Thus, rather than condemning a wide-spread practice as immoral, the tendency was to make it morally acceptable simply because it was widespread.

In addition, film, by its very nature of bringing people “close” encourages the mind-set that the viewer and the actor are of the “same group.” Distance is a factor in social relationships. Knowing every detail of someone’s expression, demeanor, and physical structure is the sort of familiarity one generally has with intimate acquaintances and friends, not strangers. The very nature of the medium (larger than life close-up shots of people and situations) reinforces a reluctance (but not inability) to judge behavior, as that would mean judging an “intimate” member of someone of the “same group.”

Thus it should be no surprise that the President’s Research Committee found a shift in the attitudes toward sexual behavior and
increased acceptance of previously immoral conduct. Historians argue over the extent of the change. Frederick Lewis Allen and William Leuchtenberg call the change a "revolution." Roderick Nash calls the term an exaggeration (13). Regardless, there was a marked increase in the public discussion of topics previously considered immoral. A number of popular articles discussed sexual topics and changing standards of morality quite openly. So much so that Current Opinion ran a piece arguing that it was “Sex O’Clock in America” (Current XL 113–14). Forum ran a piece entitled, simply, “Sex Simplex” (Paradise 108). Although historians might debate the extent of changes in actions, there was an apparent change in attitude. Society became more willing to accept behavior it had previously frowned upon publicly (Hamilton 150–57). This reflects the motion picture tendency to accept what is as suitable—sequence as rational.

Third, the motion picture outlook favored self-exposure over self-examination. The change was from an introspective to a behaviorist psychology. One posed or acted for an unseen camera. Facing hunger and death in the midst of a wilderness, a stranded aviator wrote: “I built a raft, and this time took off my clothes to try it. I must have looked good, carrying the big logs on my back in my underwear.” Alone, he thought of himself as a public character being watched. Mumford points out that the motion picture developed this sense of the camera and the resultant camera-eye (243–44). The change was significant: one preferred self-exposure over self-examination, candor over confession.

This meant a decline in the internal guilt mechanism. In The Lonely Crowd, David Reisman traces the change from an inner-directed to an outer-directed motivation (37). Earlier generations had internalized a broad Christian code and acted as one believed one should in order to satisfy personal conscience. An outer-directed drive in society growing increasingly reluctant to subjectively judge others meant a relaxation of standards. In addition, a trend to self-exposure encouraged sensational, attention getting behavior. Many individuals tried hard to live up to the perceived requirement for being “entertaining” (Hamilton 151).

In a technological society where millions drove cars and watched movies, attitudes changed. The widespread familiarity with technology generated an objective view of reality and less acceptance of subjective standards of morality, a temporal outlook that encouraged the search for momentary pleasure, a separated view that worked against the
retention of an old-fashioned universal code, and a youth orientation that gave the traditionally rebellious younger generation more authority in setting standards than it had ever enjoyed before. The pervasive influence of the automobile leveled society upwardly, thus weakening the elite’s claim that only the lower classes committed immoral crimes, a “personal” world that encouraged intimate behavior in the car, and a “suddenly happening” environment that generated a present-minded, crisis-oriented approach with an impatience toward the impractical or needlessly elaborate. The motion picture, another highly influential technology, generated the acceptance of group objectivity which fed off the baser motives of society and reinforced them as acceptable, an acceptance of sequence as rational encouraging the acceptance of whatever happens, or is, as permissible, and the preference of self-exposure over self-examination that weakened the internal guilt mechanism and encouraged “shocking” behavior. These technologically encouraged outlooks led to changes not so much in action, as in attitudes toward standards of behavior. Although not the sole reason for shifting attitudes, the use of technology encouraged in some measure the changing and modification of traditional moral views.

Notes

1. Walter Lippmann would receive a special Pulitzer Prize commendation in 1958 for his insightful analyses of news events. He was a keen observer and participant in contemporaneous events. As well as helping draft Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points in World War I, he popularized the phrase “Cold War” as a result of his 1947 book of the same name.

2. The President’s Research Committee on Social Trends included Wesley C. Mitchell (Chairman), Charles E. Merriam (Vice-Chairman), Shelby M. Harrison (Secretary-Treasurer), Alice Hamilton, Howard W. Odum (Assistant Director of Research), and William F. Ogburn (Director of Research). Edward Eyre Hunt served as Executive Secretary for the Executive Staff. Other contributors included Warren S. Thompson and P. K. Whelpton (Scripps Foundation for Research in Population Problems), F. G. Tryon and Margaret H. Schoenfeld (Institute of Economics, the Brookings Institution), O. E. Baker (Bureau of Agricultural Economics, United States Department of Agriculture), W. F. Ogburn (University of Chicago, with assistance of S. C. Gilfillan), Malcolm M. Willey (University of Minnesota), Stuart A. Rice (University of Pennsylvania), Edwin F. Gay (Harvard University), Leo Wolman (Columbia University), Ralph G. Hurlin (Russell Sage Foundation), Meredith B. Givens (Social Science Research Council), Charles H. Judd (University of Chicago), Hornell Hart (Bryn Mawr College), R. D. McKenzie (University of Michigan), J. H. Kolb (University of Wisconsin), Edmund de S. Brunner (Institute of Social and Religious Research), T. J. Woofer, Jr. (University of North Carolina), Edgar Sydenstricker (The Milbank Memorial Fund), Willigam F. Ogburn (University of Chicago, with assistance of Clark Tibbitts), S. P. Breckenridge (University of Chicago), Lawrence K. Frank (General Education Board), Leo Wolman (Columbia University).
University), Gustav Peck (College of the City of New York), Robert S. Lynd (Columbia University, with the assistance of Alice C. Hanson), J. F. Steiner (University of Washington), Frederick P. Keppel (Carnegie Corporation of New York), C. Luther Fry (Institute of Social and Religious Research), Harry H. Moore (Committee on the Costs of Medical Care), Edwin H. Sutherland (University of Chicago), C. E. Gehlke (Western Reserve University), Sydnor H. Walker (The Rockefeller Foundation), Howard W. Odum (University of North Carolina), Carroll H. Woody (University of Chicago), Clarence Heer (University of North Carolina), Leonard D. White (University of Chicago), Charles E. Clarke (Yale University), William O. Douglas (Yale University), and C. E. Merriam (University of Chicago).

3. Lewis Mumford noted these changes as they were happening, resulting in his path breaking 1934 book *Technics and Civilization*. He was the first scholar to explore in detail the link between society and technology. Even as recently as 1995 "The Mumford Principle" earned him recognition as the "foremost scholar of technology." See Frederick (198).

4. Marshall McLuhan emerged as the foremost observer and commentator on the mass media in the mid-twentieth century. He is perhaps best known for his phrases "the medium is the message" and the term "global village." With recent interest in the potential impact of the internet, McLuhan's work has seen a resurgence in interest and previously out-of-print editions have been reprinted.

5. The first conference focused on the care of dependent children and paved the way for the 1912 creation of the Federal Children's Bureau. The second conference, held in 1919, focused on child health and welfare standards. Woodrow Wilson also proclaimed that year the "Children's Year." The 1929 conference produced the most detailed report yet written on the needs of children: thirty-two, 10,511 page volumes.

6. Mead, one of the founders of social psychology and pragmatism, noted that group social settings encourage the internalization of the attitudes of others (Mead 154 – 55).

7. The sexual and violent excesses of early films ultimately led to a religiously led crusade to urge reform via pledges and boycotts. Mark Vieira details how a Catholic, midwestern crusade affected the industry, while Thomas Doherty adds in the impact of the unique circumstances of the 1930s. Some eleven million Catholics took the pledge to boycott morally offensive films. Although Hollywood nominally agreed to guidelines in 1930, industry leaders basically ignored them until declining revenues in the Depression Era and increasing pressure led to the creation of the Production Code Administration in 1934.


**Works Cited**


Melissa E. Weinbrenner, Division Director of Humanities, teaches American history, Women’s history, and film studies at Northeast Texas Community College. She has made numerous contributions to both *The Encyclopedia of American Counterculture* and *The Encyclopedia of the United States of America, Past and Present*. Her journal publications include work on public days and holidays in Colonial America.