

Flash-mobification: On putting your life on YouTube

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I had a great time with an engaging group of Christian educators and pastors in Austin last week, leading a workshop on [Spirituality in the Smartphone Age](#). The folks were funny and thoughtful. They were also fans of technology and its power to connect and edify, so I didn't have to fight against the "technology is terrible and it's isolating us and killing our brains" thing you sometimes get. Instead we got to have a nuanced discussion about this world we now swim in. Read more about my approach to that conversation [here](#).

One of our topics was the shifts around what is public and what is private/intimate, specifically the practice of choreographing and filming one's milestone moments. We watched two videos. The first, Isaac and Amy's famous wedding proposal:

Then this news story about a servicewoman, home from deployment, surprising her teenage son at his basketball game:

I'll admit it, both of those videos bring a tear to my eye. And if you haven't seen Isaac and Amy's "Yes to Love," an ode to family they created after their engagement, [here it is, watch it](#). But tears aside, I have a visceral discomfort with these videos. Certainly people found ways to surprise one another and propose in creative ways before the Internet. But why are we lip-syncing, choreographing, recording and broadcasting the most intimate moments of our lives? Especially when it involves our kids? Children are human beings, not walk-ons in our own personal Truman Show.

Let me be clear that my discomfort isn't "What is wrong with these people" so much as "I really want to talk about this flash-mobification of our pivotal human moments." (See also: asking people to homecoming and prom on camera. A person in the workshop said she knew women who had researched creative "asks" on behalf of their teenage sons. Ewww.)

So last week, the group let me play devil's advocate and agreed with some of my critique, while arguing these videos share beauty in a world that's often dark and serious, and can't we celebrate them for that if nothing else? Why such a killjoy, MaryAnn? Why? Why? *OK, fine.*

But I took note of a woman in the workshop, a mother of young children whose husband has been deployed twice, who said, "I can't watch those return videos." She talked about the process of preparing for a loved one's return—the emotional and logistical work that needs to happen to be ready to greet that person and help him or her re-integrate into the family and civilian life. It's a process that takes a good bit of time and care. She got us all wondering what life is like for those surprised children in the days and weeks after the camera gets shut off.

After the workshop ended, I began thinking about these videos *liturgically*—that is, as acts of liturgy. Liturgy, of course, means "the work of the people." So what work are we doing in creating, viewing and sharing these videos? And how does it relate to our other common spaces, in the church and elsewhere?

**Community:** Isaac is right, weddings are about family, and marriages don't occur in isolation—and if they do, they're [less likely to last](#). So there's something beautiful about having family participate. Robert proposed on a beach by moonlight, and I wouldn't have wanted my family within 10 miles of that experience. But we got on the phone with family members almost immediately after... back when we had to *call long distance!* Good news is meant to be shared; we are part of something larger than ourselves. At their best, these videos convey that.

**Safety and privacy:** But you can't have healthy community without a sense of autonomy and appropriate "otherness." Videos violate that privacy. If you watch enough of these videos you start to see a common gesture—people covering their faces, often while crying. The boy whose mother has returned from deployment, does this, *and he also runs away*. This may be as a way of grasping for some veil of privacy while the camera is on.

**Dignity:** How do our collective experiences (whether broadcast online or not) preserve the dignity of everyone involved? Is there an option for saying No without judgment? Are people free not to participate? Here's where I think the YouTube moments fall short. One hopes that if a participant says "Don't put this on the Internet," their loved one wouldn't... but the community pressure to go along

with it may be too great for some to resist.

**Authenticity and false intimacy:** We feel like we know Isaac and Amy because we witnessed an important moment in their lives. And *they invited us in to that moment*. But we don't know them. Certainly we hope that the people we see on screen are genuinely themselves. But people behave differently when they are being observed and filmed. How do issues of authenticity come into play in these videos?

**Contextualization:** Each of these videos is different, and that's part of the joy of it. With the flattening and diversifying of our culture, there is no one right way to do things.

**Ritual:** Yet if you watch these [ten YouTube](#) proposals you will likely find some common elements. The intimate moment on bended knee, after all the hoopla is over. Even the language has similar markers in it.

**Liturgical tension:** Thank you to the late Stan Hall at Austin Seminary for this term. Liturgical tension is that shudder of uncertainty that brings excitement to the experience. Will the candles light? Will the baby cry at the baptism (been there), or put the lapel mike in her mouth (been there too)? The trick is to find the right level of liturgical tension. A preacher who says "I'm just gonna wing it this morning" has probably introduced too much tension into the system.

These videos have tension too: will the person say yes? Will everything go as planned? Will the person be angry at being dragged into this particular experience? I think my discomfort comes when the liturgical tension in the video feels too high.

**Upping the ante:** There's a pervasive undercurrent in our culture of "more, bigger, better." What expectations do these videos create for next time? Or for the people watching? Or put another way, why must a sincere expression of love in a marriage proposal, or an embrace with a child after many months away, be augmented and adorned in some way? Is plain, ordinary human contact no longer enough?

From my perspective, my husband nailed it on the proposal 21 years ago. And he is overjoyed to have been able to propose in a pre-YouTube world.

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