

ARE YOU READY FOR THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION...?

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Truth be told, the digital revolution has long been with us. In the 1940s, complex machines were used in radio transmission by code-breakers, weapon designers, and rocket scientists to manipulate complex calculations in World War 2. These were the beginning of our digital age, although a far cry from where we have gotten to today with machine learning and possibly artificial intelligence. However, this article is not about the complexities of our digital age. Hopefully, it will not be another “digital-burlesque” meant to tickle your curiosity or entertain you.

Interestingly, articles on digital innovations have become novel. It excites curiosity and engages perplexed audiences; a form of digitronic-sensuality of the soul. We have become like early consumers of film and television, almost worshipping the screen and believing outlandish prospects of images on walls. Most societies have this outlandish idea that we can manipulate the past, present, and future through the power of digital systems. In some cases, some Christians believe with broad strokes of digital tools, we can orchestra the souls of men. Less I bore you with more words, let me cut to the chase. My simple question is; the digital revolution is here with us. Are you ready for it?

There is a widely held notion that technology answers everything, and that, with the right technology we can solve the most complex problems in society today. In their book “The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business,” Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen outline in great detail and scope all the promise and peril awaiting us with new forms of technological innovations - from technologies that will change lives to the widespread political change that will transform the globe; to the ever-present threats to our privacy and security. Referencing Internet incidents galore, they warn of a perpetual “code war” between attackers and defenders and expand upon this type of conflict within authoritarian and democratic states. Citing

the Arab Spring as an example, Schmidt and Cohen predict that its online propagation presages an easier initiation of future revolutions, which nevertheless face uncertain outcomes when they encounter, as they eventually must, the state’s material powers.

Take note of these two words, pessimism and optimism. These two words are the cornerstones of this article, and where you stand regarding these two words when it comes to the Church and new media technologies. It does not have to be a dichotomous relationship or an ‘either-or’ scenario. However, this article is about understanding the polarities of optimism and pessimism and how they conflict with how Christians or the Church engage with new media technologies. At the end of this article, the primary question is, “How ready are you to engage with the digital revolution?”

The world might have its standards when it comes to new media technologies. Does the Church have its standards? If anything, the present pandemic might not only ask us to re-think how effectively we engage with new media technologies; it implores a careful introspection of engaging and using these new forms of technologies.

Christian apologists like C.S Lewis, Neil Postman, Jacques Ellul, and Marshall McLuhan, to more recent authors like Quentin Schulze, have all held views regarding how we as Christians engage with new forms of technology and how we could serve man and ultimately honor God.

I am only another individual trying to understand where my forebears in the faith versus technology discourse have walked.

Re-Engaging Media

The present pandemic has exposed us to the need to delve more into new media technologies. It has exposed the condition and lack of our churches. The pandemic took many organizations by surprise. Most,

including the Church, are scrambling to put in place systems to keep them afloat. Some have encouraged opening up and embracing the new world order – after all, humans were made for technology and technology for humans. We are communicating like never before from our homes comfortably, having training and conferences across borders. The use of ZOOM software jumped 30-fold in April, as the coronavirus pandemic forced millions to work, learn and socialize remotely. At its peak, the firm counted more than 300 million daily participants in virtual meetings, while paying customers have more than tripled. Zoom said it expects sales as high as \$1.8bn in 2020 - roughly double what it forecast in March. The pandemic, in many ways, has fast-tracked what Schmidt and Cohen predicted will happen in the very next ten years; only it has come faster than we thought. Man has become one with technology or is becoming more tech-savvy. Where do we go from here? However, most will be amazed to know that many Christian communications scholars are wary of the dangers of unreflective indulgence in new media technologies.

The call to re-engage media is a call to Christians to prepare institutions and logistics better to engage with the world. We cannot afford to do business as usual. The next generation of missionaries and missionary support groups will be engaged in Churches and on tonline platforms, which is happening at an exponential rate. We cannot relegate to the background the media team or department, whatever you call them. We cannot treat media and new technologies as an appendage of our ministries or tools in a dusty tool-box that is used and tossed away anymore. Like other ministries, we all need to embrace that the tech and media space is a force for change and an essential department in missions. As such, funding and resourcing individuals or the Church in these areas is imperative. This is a call for re-engagement. Are you ready for the digital revolution, Christian leader?

From the editorial pages of USA Today, The Week, and even Wired - which devoted an entire issue to this topic in 2017 - commentators agonize over the societal destabilization caused by the ongoing tech onslaught and grasp at possible solutions: decentralize the Web; create apps to limit our time online or reclaim our lost sleep cycles; improve encryption technology; break up the Big Tech companies or require them to make their algorithms more transparent or more racially sensitive; and so on. Telling-

ly, most of these solutions involve more technology (Lurie, 2019, p., 49). Some dangers need to be noted as we embrace these new technologies and adapt to the “new-normal.”

Reflective media

With the idea of re-engagement out of the way, I will focus on this article’s core - Reflective media. Reflection is an idea that calls for searching heart, soul, and spirit - asking ourselves why and how we engage with these forms of new media technologies. It is a search for authenticity and truth in how we employ new media technologies and, in effect, fellowship with our neighbors. Reflective media reminds us that we engage with these tools not to satisfy our own parochial and self-centered desires, but first to glorify God and serve others. Finishing the task, discipling the nations, or even reaching the lost with the gospel is a far cry from the ultimate purpose of our use of digital media. The fundamental purpose of all forms of communication has been and will forever be GOD and HIM glorified. If the purpose of all we want to achieve with digital tools is not grounded on the foundation of God’s glory, then we have lost it. Are you ready for the digital revolution? What will it take?

It is a call for sacrifice and worship. It is about asking whether technology controls us or we control technology. It is about asking whether technology is another tool to raise smoke-screens and translucent windows to the world. At the same time, we project a counterfeit hologram of our lives to our neighbors. Suppose we have not paused to engage in such a reflective posture to engaging new media technologies. In that case, we have no business in re-engaging in the first place because our desires and aspirations will all be misplaced, or at worst, self-gratifying.

Responsible media

Let me conclude with my third point. Responsible media. The world is changing at a breakneck pace. Technology is impacting everything from governance to commerce. The rate of migration and movement of individuals across the world has never been the same. The Church needs to understand these changes and equip itself for reaching the world. This includes understanding how access to new forms of technologies creates other forms of technological inequalities.

This pandemic has exposed the varying levels of technological inequalities we face across the world. Not only is COVID-19 killing demography that is underprivileged and marginalized, but our churches have also created an elitist click of individuals who believe the world can so easily be solved online. While we get lost in our pseudo-online churches and meeting rooms, millions do not only lack access to the internet; they still lack life necessities. Issues we take for granted, food, clothing, access to quality and affordable health care, and access to clean drinking water, are still challenges. These individuals wake up each day and do not worry about how much bandwidth they have, but where the next meal will come from or water they will drink. Responsibly engaging with media reminds us that the reason we engage with media is not because of the novelty of fast online meetings and fancy apps that can connect us across the globe. The purpose of these apps and technologies about the voiceless and the marginalized - those who will never understand what it means to be online and most likely cannot have any form of church service because they have been cut off from the rest of the online world. Proverbs 31:8-9 admonishes us with these words:

“Open your mouth for those with no voice, for the cause of all the dispossessed. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the cause of the poor and needy.”

Responsible media, coupled with **reflective media**, will produce the right frame for **re-engaging media**. God has blessed those of us with access to new technologies because the vast majority out there do not know Christ or have no voice in society. Let us not get lost in the technologies’ novelty to forget the real intention of such power. Let us not get lost in the avalanche of *technique* and forget the essence of authentic fellowship, virtuous communication, and responsibly engaging with media.

We are only ready to partake of the digital banquet’s power, only when we know and understand that the one who set forth the banquet is God himself. We are to find Him and understand how we can glorify Him amidst all the cacophony of innovations being thrown at us. Until we catch that vision, none of us is ready to partake of the digital revolution, and the world will ride over us because its default position is to glorify the God of this age. Are you ready for the digital revolution, Christian?

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