

RETHINKING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN MINISTRY IN THE FACE OF COVID-19 AND BEYOND

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Digital technology has been very critical for humanity in the face of the novel coronavirus, taking into account its usefulness in dealing with several issues relating to the pandemic. The coronavirus is so infectious that it has become necessary for governments and policymakers to introduce new policies such as lockdowns, social distancing, and restrictions on public gathering to prevent the pandemic from spreading further in our communities.

Thus, with the advent of lockdowns and social distancing, the normal way of communication has become a major challenge and that has necessitated the use of digital technology in communication in a more robust way than in the past. Governments, religious institutions, health institutions, and civil society organizations have all adopted digital technology as the most reliable and efficient way of communicating critical information in times like these.

This development appears to have added impetus to a new paradigm shift in communication that has already been caused by digital technology which, in turn, has significant effects on religious activities. In this article, it is appropriate to discuss the importance of digital technology in Christian ministry and the need to reset our minds towards it even beyond COVID-19. It is also needful to be educated on the characteristics of digital technology and the dynamic nature of the digital space.

The Dynamic Nature of the Digital World

Digital technology has introduced new terms such as digital age, digital culture, digital space, digital media, and digital community, resulting in a new global order known as the “digital world.” The intriguing aspect of this development is that the digital world has developed into new cultural perspectives that writers refer to as “digital society, information age, technoculture, technocapitalism, global media culture or globalization” (UN Global Situation of

Young People, 2003:311). Some use “compunity” to denote “the merger of computers and community.” Some scholars call it “digital natives” in reference to those born into the digital world. Their generation began from 1985, while those born before this era and making effort to stay abreast with the digital age are referred to as “digital immigrants.” The older generation is still in its adventive stage in the digital space and thus needs to learn very fast to settle down.

Digital technology involves the use of devices such as radio, television, megaphones, digital cameras, cellular phones, video projectors, satellite systems, internet, and computers. This development has not only accelerated communication; it has also recast our cultural values and societal norms in terms of communication, relationships and worship in the church. These days, the gospel can be communicated to people in any part of the world using digital technology. Ways of giving offerings in church, partaking of the holy communion and marking church register have in most cases been calibrated into the digital technology.

Digital technology has also enhanced collaboration and innovation in ministry and the impact is obvious, particularly during our present situation of the coronavirus pandemic. The church has responded to the challenges of COVID-19 during lockdowns and restrictions on public gatherings for church services and other social activities. Church members are able to access church programmes through the digital space, such as television, radio, internet, and mobile phones. This development provides us with a very clear picture of the importance of digital technology in Christian ministry.

As the church seeks to address the challenges posed to ministry in the context of postmodern epistemology, Christians need to thoroughly understand the technological trends that have been driving the various developments around the world. For example, the world came under rapid transformation during

the inventions of steam engine, electricity generator, and the printing press; the church was not exempted from that transformation. Each of these three scientific innovations brought many benefits to humanity but only one out of these three – printing press – will be briefly highlighted in this article.

The Church's Engagement with Digital Technology

Adopting paradigm shifts that are triggered by new technology is not a new phenomenon to the church. In the medieval world, the church adopted the print technology of Johannes Gutenberg (1395-1468) and that replaced the traditional way of producing literature in which books were either written by hand or printed from engraved wooden blocks. This new technology enabled Gutenberg to finish the publication of the Holy Bible by 1455 (Denteh 2013:102). Today, the Bible and other Christian literature are also gradually being shifted from hard copies or printed formats to electronic devices. Are we, therefore, to resist this development or readily embrace it as the past Christians incorporated the use of printed Bibles into the church?

The fascinating aspect of this progress is that, while the advent of the printing press characterized the shift from pre-modernity to modernity, the use of digital technology today has become another shift from modernity to postmodernity. The crucial point with this latest trend is that digital technology, which has come to stay with humanity, is easily accessible to many people. By digital technology, people can communicate with one another in every part of the world in real time without being physically present. The onus now lies on the church to access the digital space as a new ministry environment.

For Dawson (2014), "Life in cyberspace is in continuity of the so-called 'real life' situation of the world and it is rapidly changing the 'face of religion worldwide.'" Jacobson (1999 in Cassey 2001:32) states, "It seems that God has arrived on the internet" and as a result the internet has "become a major purveyor of spiritual expression at a time when spiritual hunger is growing in the West." Cassey (p. 32) identifies the digital technology, particularly the internet, as "a medium that can transcend both spatial and temporal boundaries," thus giving people the opportunity to "enter into a completely new set of relationships... that can be close or distant, yet inherently

all (in principle) interactive." Cassey avers that this development has widened "the social foundation of religious life as it diminishes the relevance of location for religious identities."

The foregoing reflections confirm the indispensability of digital technology in the world and, for that matter, it has become a strategic medium through which the church can reach all nations and all people groups. With digital technology, the age-long gap between the church and unreached groups have been drawn closer than ever before. The issue is no longer about the difficulty in identifying the location of the people but rather how to identify the most relevant type of digital technology to use at a given time. The church has to contextualize the digital systems at its disposal to enhance its ministry activities.

Biblical Perspective on Technology

Some Christians keep asking whether the Bible endorses the use of technology in ministry, particularly the new phenomenon of reading the Bible from electronic devices. Others question the ethical and moral implications of this practice in the light of Christian ethics and morality. To some extent, their concerns appear legitimate though not an absolute. To address this dilemma, Christians need to grasp thoroughly the meaning of technology. We spend a lot of time arguing about technology, but we seem to fail to examine its meaning through the lens of Scripture.

Waddell (2013) defines technology as the "Application of knowledge to the practical aims of human life or to changing and manipulating the human environment." Waddell further states that technology "includes the use of materials, tools, techniques, and resources of power to make life easier or... more productive." There is a big question here. Which of the concepts stated in Waddell's definition is alien to the Bible? The above definition implies that the practice of using "tools," "devices," and "materials" by humankind constitutes the concept of technology. If this is the case, then should we accept technology as part of God's provision for humankind or reject it as an evil thing?

Although there is no direct mention of technology in the Bible, from the above definition, it is implied that technological devices were used by people either upon direct instructions of God or through

their own innovations for personal use. Some useful examples are the building of a city by Cain (Gen. 4:17), and the forging of all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron by Tubal-Cain (Gen. 4:22). Bezalel and Oholiab were divinely endowed with knowledge, craftsmanship, and skills to “devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft” (Ex. 31:3-6, ESV). They were to use this technology towards the construction of the tabernacle during the exodus. The import is that the construction of the tabernacle did not just contain aspects of technology, but was in itself a system of technology, if we are to consider Waddell’s definition.

The Psalmist’s warning of people in his day who trusted in chariots (Ps. 20:7) is an evidence of the use of technology at the time. Another instance is that, the apostle Paul wrote many letters which may also be described as technology enhanced. Jesus used tools in Joseph’s carpentry shop. The import of this argument is that, the sovereignty of God is so overwhelming that knowledge given to His people is not only for their personal use, but also to serve His purpose in His own glory. The world must know this fact so that humanity can use technology in a very responsible manner to serve the purpose of God for His creation.

Ministry with Responsible Technology

Our discussion thus far indicates that the use of digital technology is vital for ministry, but the church has to be proactive with the way it conducts ministry in the digital space. There is the need for the responsible use of digital technology by Christians. From a broader perspective, the effective use of digital space ministry can be attained through the formulation of missiological models and relevant approaches by the church. Developing a missiological approach towards digital space ministry will help to enhance the knowledge of Christians in terms of the most appropriate digital systems to use at any given time. There should be a framework about how to harness digital technology for ministry in a manner that glorifies the name of the Lord.

The church should learn to understand digital technology and explore the culture of the digital community so that it can relevantly fashion out the gospel message in an appealing manner to the church’s audience. Naturally humans are supposed to shape

their tools for their own use, but digital technology is so pervasive that it rather appears to be shaping us and that has both positive and negative effects on society. The caveat, however, is that if the church fails to dominate the digital space, there is the likelihood of it being overwhelmed by the ungodly acts of some people. It is when the church becomes proactive in developing a missiological framework for the use of digital technology that the issue of using it wrongly and the abuses associated with can be addressed thoroughly.

Conclusion

The overriding point, however, is that every Christian who is able to access any kind of digital technology or electronic device should have the potential to witness the gospel to the digital community. There is no need to hesitate because the more we delay the more souls will die without Christ. Thus, we all ought to see ourselves as labourers in the Lord’s vineyard called to fulfill God’s mission mandate in our lifetime. Finally, let us inform ourselves that the pace into digital space ministry has been expedited by the advent of COVID-19 and it is obvious that, approaches towards ministry will never remain the same even after the coronavirus pandemic.

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