



the SOCIAL CHURCH

a THEOLOGY of DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

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VALUE 3: THE FADING LINE BETWEEN ONLINE AND OFFLINE

AS I WRITE THIS, I am 30,000 feet above your head. Quite possibly directly above yours if you live somewhere in between Nashville and Des Moines. Yet, I'm still sending and receiving emails, answering tweets from folks at the conference I just attended, and getting advice from my Facebook friends on how to win the epic armrest battle I'm having with the woman next to me. ("Start scratching your arm, mumbling something about a rash." I did. I won. Hooray fake rashes!)

Why do I share this with you? For starters, it's amazing. WiFi access has been available on airplanes for years, but it still mesmerizes me every time I connect up in the air. Most mornings I struggle with using our juicer correctly, so the fact that someone figured out how to beam a WiFi signal into space, bounce it off a satellite, and into my computer on an airplane moving 500 mph baffles me.

More importantly, this example shows the depths of how dependent we have become on technology. Before you read any further, I need to clarify something. It's tempting to say

something like, “It is a severe oversimplification to say technology ubiquitousness is ‘bad’ or ‘good.’” The question we need to answer is, “What are the unintended consequences of social technology?”

I’m wearing a Nike FuelBand on my left wrist right now. It’s a device you wear like a watch, but it measures various biorhythms such as your daily step count, calories burned, and how you’re doing with your daily activity goals. As you accomplish different milestones, you can share them with your social networks. My wife and I even have a fun little competition going with who can rack up the most fuel points. (We’re synced up on the iPhone app and can see each other’s progress throughout the day.)

The FuelBand is interesting because it embeds technology onto my body, tracking my movements and automatically sharing them with those in my social circles. It’s something I wear 24/7. It is always with me. It’s technology that is, quite literally, ubiquitous. The power of the FuelBand lies in its ability to leverage my online tribe for the sake of making me more active. Another app on my phone encourages Facebook friends to cheer me on as I take my daily jog. When someone likes my status update, the app briefly quiets the music in my headphones and floods my ears with a round of applause. The line between “offline” and “online” is once again blurred.

Devices like the FuelBand are just the beginning. Google revealed “Glass,” a cyborg-like set of eyeglasses that displays real-time information to the wearer on the inside of one of the lenses. Think *Terminator* but with less Arnold. I imagine one of the more helpful uses of Google Glass will be when we forget someone’s name. Eventually, devices like this will be able to recognize who it is we’re speaking to and, through the vast amount

of search data available on the web, display their name indiscreetly on the inside of our eyeglasses.

Apple and other tech giants are excitedly drawing up plans for smart watches, essentially computers we wear on our wrist. These devices will be able to beam information back and forth to our smartphones, presumably for the purpose of conveying this information to our social circles. Wearable technology will give way to nanotechnology, permanently blurring the lines between physical and digital.

Technology is becoming embedded into nearly every facet of society. Our refrigerators can tell us when we're running low on certain items. Our cars speak to us, able to reroute us instantaneously depending on traffic patterns or if we've missed our exit. Our mobile phones can automatically tell loved ones when we're approaching an agreed upon meeting spot. As Tina Fey wrote in her painfully humorous autobiography, *Bossypants*, "Technology doesn't move backwards. No society de-industrializes."¹ It's a brave new world, and we get to help shape it.

THE BIRTH OF REAL-TIME MEDIA

Remember the 2013 Super Bowl? The Baltimore Ravens faced off against the San Francisco 49ers in one of the most memorable Super Bowls to date. Why? For starters, the two head coaches, Jim Harbaugh and John Harbaugh, were brothers. This was the first time in any major sporting event, football or otherwise, such a thing had occurred. (Imagine being their parents!)

Second, the lights in the New Orleans Super Dome went out for about thirty minutes in the second half. One entire side of the stadium went dark due to a failure in the power grid rigged specifically for the game. Oops.

While the Ravens ended up winning the game, there was another winner that night. It wasn't a team, player, coach, or bigwig sitting in a box seat. It was a brand. More specifically, Oreo. (To be even more precise, it was the ad agency behind Oreo, 360i. More on them in a bit.) "Team Oreo," perhaps unbeknownst to them at the time, ushered in a new era of ubiquitous, real-time media advertising with a gem that may not look like much (an oreo in a dark space with the text, "You can still dunk in the dark"), but marked a completely different way brands must think through advertising in the social media space. Why? Because this ad went from conception to creation to approval to delivery in less than fifteen minutes. For those unfamiliar with the advertising world, this is an *astounding accomplishment*. To translate this into church terms, think of it as brainstorming, planning, and executing an Easter service in thirty minutes or less. Now do you see what I mean?

The agency I mentioned above who was responsible for producing the ad, 360i, had all hands on deck the night of the Super Bowl. Agency president Sarah Hofstetter explains, "It was easy to get approvals [from the Oreo execs] and get it up in minutes." But a situation like this isn't for the faint of heart. Hofstetter warned, "You need a brave brand to approve content that quickly. When all of the stakeholders come together so quickly, you've got magic." In my favorite part of the interview, Hofstetter explained, "What happens when everything changes, when you go off script? That was where it got fun."²

When technology is used properly; when the limits of creativity, of "what is possible?" are pushed; when smart, forward-thinking people put their heads together and think of new ways to do old things, *that's* when things get fun. I don't need to tell

you this has implications for the church. If you're reading this book, you already know this.

REAL-TIME CONNECTION

According to Google, desktops will be irrelevant by the time you read this. Access to social networks is now being done primarily through a mobile device. Villages in Africa don't have access to clean drinking water, yet the people huddle around car batteries to charge their mobile devices for two hours per day. This is insane. This is our world. This may make you uncomfortable, which is completely understandable. But the goal is to better understand the culture in which we find ourselves, not to pass value judgments on the values themselves.

Again, in the words of Cynthia Ware:

Rising from the convergence of new communication and information technologies, these new facilities include instantaneous communication (including one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, and many-to-many), interactivity, peer-to-peer sharing options, extended social networking, and the nurturing of virtual communities. Through wikis, e-books, innovation jams, podcasts, vodcasts, blogs, and etc., collective interactivity and participatory communications abound and are transforming our ability to connect, collaborate, and converse on a global scale in real-time.³

The connectedness value emerges from requiring real-time access from everywhere and anywhere to anywhere. This "access" is 24/7, on-demand, and pervasive, regardless of geography.

The emerging "always on" generation connectedness requires a new skill of determining when and how one connects. Limitations previously in place—Internet speed, WiFi coverage, mobile

device functionality—are no longer in place. In fact, estimates are by the year 2015, the entire world will be wired in some form or fashion, either through satellite or tower coverage. In short, the excuse of, “I couldn’t get any cell coverage!” won’t hold water much longer.

In early 2013, a new pope, Francis I, was chosen after an aging Pope Benedict retired early. In a widely circulated picture, we can see clearly how quickly the connectedness value has emerged (see link in the Notes section).⁴

In a side-by-side comparison, we see the ordination of Pope Benedict in 2005 on top. On the bottom, we see the ordination of Pope Francis. The contrast is so stark, it’s almost comical. In 2005, the group featured is attentively watching the installation activities. Eyes straight forward, focused on the action.

The 2013 group, however, paints a much different picture. Virtually every person in the photograph is illuminated by the glow of a mobile device. Each device is pointing toward the action, capturing the activity for the world to see. An individual in the 2013 side might be using their mobile for a number of different reasons: taking pictures or video for archival purposes (“I want to show this to my kids someday!”), recording for news or informational purposes (“I need a clip of this for my blog!”), or to share with their social networks (“I’m going to tweet this!”).

Regardless of the reason, every person in the photo values connectedness as evidenced by the mobile device adoption that facilitates the connection. We value connectedness because we value sharing. To be connected is to let others into our world for however brief the moment might be.

IN HEAVEN THERE IS NO BEER . . .

I went to an Iowa Hawkeyes game not too long ago, and it was fascinating to see the attire of everyone. As I looked around

Kinnick Stadium, each section alternated Hawkeye colors: black, gold, black, gold. At first, I thought it was random. But the sheer volume of people wearing the same colors in the same sections hinted at a coordinated effort.

I started to wonder, “How did they do this? And why didn’t I get the memo?!” So I did a little research. I went to their Facebook page and found specific instructions for what colors to wear in each section. The announcement simply said: All EVEN sections wear gold, all ODD sections wear black.

That was it. If you were to look at this scene from an aerial view, you can see the carefully formed stripes of black and gold formed around the stadium. All of this was coordinated using social media. This is the power of new media to move people.

In Iran and Egypt social media has been used to organize mass demonstrations and protests to combat oppressive governments.

This is how real movements are started.

This is how people network with real-world results.

I think it’s important we understand our responsibility to use this power of new media to our advantage to spread the gospel.

Flash mobs gather in an “informed spontaneity” all over the world, imploring people to freeze like mannequins in Grand Central Station, help a would-be groom pop the question to his unsuspecting, soon-to-be blushing bride, and even throw a giant dance party for Oprah!

Increasingly, relational connections are starting to form primarily online. The social web is turning into a relationship catalyst, spurring people to create, act, change, and meet in new and interesting ways. It is normal now for us to connect with people online before we meet them in person. (In fact, I would say this order is actually becoming *more* normal. It’s the new *norming*

norm, so to speak.) Connectedness facilitates relationship. Our phones and mobile devices can serve as a portal that tells us about the world around us. Applications like Yelp and AroundMe make it possible for us to use our devices to interpret our reality.

Technology is all around us, and the pace is quickening. Will the church keep pace?

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