

Working notes on a theology of online life

prepared with the Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church

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These notes were prepared in response to a request for resources for thinking theologically and pastorally about uses of communication technologies and social media, with particular reference to current conversations about 'Holy Communion Mediated Through Social Media'. They are intended to help locate the immediate discussion in a broader context, with a view to discerning how Faith and Order might most helpfully contribute to this vital and complex conversation. Properly theological work on this subject will depend in part on informed thinking about our relationships with media technologies.

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Recent discussion about holy communion in relation to social media has drawn attention to critical social, cultural and psychological changes related to widespread adoption of information-and-communications technologies. Church conversations about these technologies have tended to focus on functional questions about, for example, how digital media products can be used to do the kinds of things that church congregations, networks and institutions have always done - if more efficiently, creatively or with greater reach. The discussion about *Holy Communion Mediated Through Social Media* has highlighted several trends, and a lack of focused (practical theological) attention by church bodies to the profound and rapid changes associated with the development and use of electronic media technologies during the past fifty to sixty years.¹

Without adequate background work on the social, psychological, theological and religious implications of our adoption of media technologies and habits, the current practical theological discussion of a central sacramental ritual is seriously constrained. The CODEC Research Centre for Digital Theology continues to do valuable research work on the theme, for example with a recent symposium addressing the pertinent issue of *Sacrament and Liturgy in Digital Spaces* (<https://www.dur.ac.uk/whatson/event/?eventno=38036>). These notes contribute to the discussion a relatively critical perspective on our relationship to media technologies, and intend to stimulate continuing theological exploration of the meanings of relationships between people and machines, and the effects of those relationships on our relationships with one another.

¹ As with any technological development, there are various pivotal points identified by analysts and commentators. Some, for example, emphasise the development and use of radio, television and film propaganda during the interwar period - fictionalised by George Orwell in his 1949 novel and more astutely by Aldous Huxley in 1932.

We have found no existing guides to good practice, or user-friendly discussion material to help church members think through the range of issues at stake.² A reading list suitable for church use cannot therefore be quickly produced, though a carefully-prepared studyguide and related resources are long overdue. Preparation of such a guide calls for patient, careful and collaborative work by theological practitioners, taking account of the kind of literature represented by the following indicative list.

Only some of these suggested sources are explicitly theological in content or intention, but all deal with themes which may be seen as directly related to the discussion of *Holy Communion Mediated Through Social Media*: themes such as attention, presence, immediacy, relationality, communion, perspective, control, congregation, sociality, ritual, being human, learning, formation, public and private, and so on. These and many other works illuminate the wider horizon in a way which can inform and guide our attempts to think theologically about life together as we go about the everyday work of pastoral and liturgical praxis.

- Aboujaoude, Elias *Virtually You: the dangerous powers of the e-personality* (New York: Norton, 2011)

‘Yet for all of the change wrought by the virtual world and thoroughly incorporated into our lives at this point, the more subtle reconfiguring of our *psychological* landscape that has taken place along the way is often lost on us. To the extent that most of us discuss the Internet’s effects on our psychology at all, we tend to gravitate toward the romantic, the social, and the clinical.’

- Borgmann, Albert *Holding on to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millenium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999)

‘Common hyperinformation is the huge amount of colourful information we accumulate through pictures and videos especially. But all the other records we keep and that are kept about us are part of hyperinformation. Utopian hyperinformation is the brainchild of scientists who, in the tradition of artificial intelligence, believe that the core of an individual is the information contained in the brain, and purport that software can and will be extracted from the wetware of neurons and transferred without loss to the hardware of a computer or some other medium forever and again in this way and that so that the core of individuals, their personal identity, will achieve immortality.’ (Borgmann, *Reality*, p.230.)

- Brock, Brian *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2010)

In this serious and far-reaching theological work, Brock deals with such themes as ‘technology as meaningful experience’, ‘moral deliberation in a technological age’, ‘sanctification as the remaking of rationality’, ‘worship and work between creation and new creation’: ‘... turning moral deliberation into a

² There are, however, various ‘how to’ guides to, for instance, Ian Tarrant’s ‘How to Worship with Data Projection: PowerPoint and Other Tools’ in the Grove Booklet Worship series (W192). On a related theme, there are a number of good theological works on cinema and film as theological media: e.g. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *Through a Lens Darkly: Tracing Redemption in Film* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2015); Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment: Film’s Challenge to Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004); Clive Marsh, *Theology Goes to the Movies: An Introduction to Critical Christian Thinking* (London: Routledge, 2007).

method balancing supposed benefits and harms of technological development depends on a radically oversimplified definition of technology.... It is impossible for Christians to equate (this kind of) technology assessment with properly theological moral deliberation about technology' (p.20).

- Campbell, Heidi A and Garner, Stephen *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Baker Academic 2016)

Campbell and Garner take seriously the notion that 'technology and new media are the environments in which we find ourselves' (p.19), without acknowledging what a radical shift this represents in how they are thinking about location, context and use of machines. They nevertheless recognise technology as 'a human activity that is carried out within the context provided by God for human beings to exercise their creativity and agency' (p.23). This is a good introduction to the kind of discussion required of a contextual theology evolving between Web 2.0 and Web 3.0.

- Detweiler, Craig *iGods: How Technology Shapes Our Spiritual And Social Lives* (Brazos 2013).

'The internet has always been social. It was created to bring people together across distances and disciplines, to make it easier to connect. It has always been a place to share research and information, to find out who was doing what. Yet who could have imagined the complex web of relationships that has resulted in all kinds of mutual benefits. Is God pleased with how the internet has drawn us closer together?' (p.131). How does information exchange become relationship or draw us closer? How did a heavily-funded military project eventually become civilianised and commercialised as the internet we know? How do numerous networks and interests interact to create the illusion of a unified 'cyberspace'? This is an informative resource which addresses some core theological-ethical questions.

- Doueihi, Milad *Digital Cultures* (Harvard, 2011)

With attention to digital divides, control and storage of data and images, the effect of display, impact on literacy and notions of belonging, and so on.

- Hoover, Stewart M. *Religion in the Media Age* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006)

Hoover's focus on media 'reception' represents a shift in media studies away from the question of whether media are significant for religion to the question of how media are integrated into daily life. My review of the book is in *The International Journal of Public Theology* 1 (2007), pp.496-497.

- Lanier, Jaron *You Are Not a Gadget* (London: Penguin, 2010)

A remarkable book by the inventor of virtual reality, on what it means to prioritise the human over the machine.

- Lynch, Gordon *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), Ch.3: 'machines, tvs, and shopping: the shape of everyday life in contemporary western society'.

In this chapter, Lynch considers 'the specific roles that both electronic media and consumption play in our lives today' (p.43).

- O'Connell, *To Be A Machine: Adventures Amongst Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers and the Futurists Solving the Modest Problem of Death* (London: Granta, 2017)

Light-hearted in style and serious in content, this is an exploration of the philosophical and scientific roots of transhumanism; that is, the use of technology to fundamentally change (they say improve) human bodies and minds.

- Tapscott, Don *Grown Up Digital* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009)

How the net generation has already changed our world, and why we need to wake up and pay more critical attention to the fact.

- Teich, Albert H. *Technology and the Future (11th Edition)* Boston, Mass.: Wadsworth, 2009

Teich helpfully describes differences between the ways in which technology has been discussed in the 1960s and in the 21st century.

- Turkle, Sherry *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015)

Anything written by Turkle is illuminating. This is one of the best books available on how people interact with devices and with one another, passionately and with profound intelligence countering the erosion by technological habits of basic human qualities of empathy, focusing, reading emotions, deep thought, interconnecting, mentoring, responding.

Seminal publications from previous generations remain important reference works; for example:

- Heidegger, Martin *The Question Concerning Technology* (1954)

In a complex thesis, Heidegger argues (amongst other things) that modern technologies differ from their predecessors in their tendency to conceal rather than to reveal, and therefore to distance us further from encounter with revelation of what is true.

- Ellul, Jacques *Technological Society* (1964)

Ellul anticipates that technology will over-ride anything that impedes its continuing development, including humanising habits. 'Technique' dominates and dictates. Ellul includes a brief history of developments in use of machines, then in self-augmentation, from the 16th century onwards.

- Debord, Guy *The Society of the Spectacle* (1968)

The spectacle is 'a social relation between people that is mediated by images' in an increasingly artificial society formed around a web of experiences tailored to the individual.

- Baudrillard, Jean *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1981 / 1994)

Baudrillard's thesis is that our mapping of reality has developed to such a degree that we struggle to see the difference between actuality and its simulation, or indeed prefer to live in the simulation.

- Postman, Neil *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (London: Methuen, 1987)

Postman's devastating analysis of television's effect on culture charts the rise to dominance of the 'now... this' culture, and the way in which television changed our understanding of what it means to know something. To follow on, try Aric Sigman's *Remotely Controlled: How television is damaging our lives* (2007). Sigman addresses one of the most significant effects of technological changes, rarely taken as seriously as it warrants; namely an incapacity to face boredom and therefore deep thought or contemplation.

Some of the references above are relatively old in light of the rapid pace of technological and social change. They nevertheless remain pertinent to current Church conversations. In addition to these books, there are numerous films, podcasts, journal articles, web sources and newspaper articles which can continue to inform our explorations and reflection.³

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³ See for example the article, 'our minds can be hijacked: the tech insiders who fear a smartphone dystopia' in The Guardian, 6 October 2017.

⁴ For earlier contributions to this conversation, see e.g. Hall, Gary P. 'Choosing Life or Second Life? Discipleship and Agency in a Mediated Culture' *International Review of Mission* Vol. 97 No.384/385 January/April 2008, pp.7-20; Hall, Gary 'I Dreamed About Ray Charles Last Night': Reflections on Liturgy and the Machine' in Stephen Burns, Nicola Slee, Michael Jagessar (eds.), *The Edge of God: New Liturgical Texts and Contexts in Conversation* London: SCM, 2008.