

Freedom in Digitalized Contexts

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Introduction

Freedom in Digitalized Contexts

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„Digitization is penetrating everyday life, just as electricity did around a hundred years ago. It opens up a multitude of creative opportunities: individually, socially, and for the church and diakonia.“

The potential for innovation and the opening up spaces of freedom are enormous. These must be done responsibly. Freedom is the reference point of ethical judgment. Freedom in a Protestant understanding is communicative freedom, which proves itself in respect of all other human beings and the appreciation of nature, responsible to God.

Freedom in Digitalized Contexts

Ethical approach:

"Freedom is a gift of God." In a theological perspective, freedom in a comprehensive sense only exists in the „attachement to God and in relation to other people... It can thus only take place in the mutual recognition of the freedom of others and in dialogical understanding with them. It is not primarily a negative freedom ... but above all a **positive freedom** that leads to an ethical way of life.“

Digitalization opens up possibilities of more freedom. These developments are to be measured, evaluated and, above all, shaped according to the standard of positive freedom in order to develop society (and the economy) in a **life-serving and human way**.

Freedom in Digitalized Contexts

Ethical approach:

The memorandum has attempted to reflect theologically on all sectors of society that are being changed by digitalization with the help of the "**Ten Commandments**". The "Ten Commandments" are – given after the Exodus – instructions for a life in freedom.

In an extensive interpretation – in the tradition of Luther's catechisms – exemplary "**resonances** between current phenomena of digitalization and the respective commandment" have been explicated with the aim of opening up space for discourses in order to bring ethical education and creative potential of humanity into balance.

Basic Assumptions

Digital systems are to be understood (and described) **technologically**:

These systems do not understand and decide, they cannot act, have no emotions, etc., instead they are able **to simulate** all this, better and better.

Sensors collect data, algorithms process them according to binary logic, link them if necessary according to logical rules (which can optimize themselves through feedback loops) and control a data output, possibly an actuator.

AI is an instrument developed by humans to fulfil the mandate to act as **God's mandataries** in the world (cf. Gen. 1, 26ff; Ps. 8 et al.), in order to cultivate and preserve the world (Gen. 2, 15). Thus, the evaluation of AI, like the evaluation of other technologies, depends essentially on their use by humans. At the same time, as social media, they have an effect on the attitudes and actions of the users by organizing perception, providing behavioural impulses (nudging) etc. In this respect, digital devices are not "neutral", instead the implemented algorithms follow a logic that must also be evaluated ethically.

No Dystopia - No Way to Heaven

Digital technologies are not "saviours", not all-embracing problem solvers. They should support people, possibly replace them in some sectors (simple routine tasks), optimize their actions, especially open up freedom, also in the area of personal interaction.



Thesis

Digitalization has to be evaluated in a **differentiated way**. In many areas of life it makes sense, opens up new aspects of freedom, leads to more humanization, in other areas the effects are critical or even highly problematic.

It depends essentially on the design of digitalization: Which frameworks are given, which regulations have to be developed, how is the problem of "power" regulated in the economy and society, but also in organisations?

This perspective will be developed with a view to four sectors of action as examples:

Topics

1. Health and Care (5th Commandment)
2. Sunday and the Rhythms of Work (4th Commandment)
3. Social Media as a Game Changer in Communication (5th, 9th Commandment)
4. The Problem of Economic Monopolies (8th Commandment)

1. Health and Care

The significance of this sector: New ways of healing and supporting people with handicaps // Economic relevance in Germany (and Europe): 6.4 mill. employees in Germany

Digital devices are not only "external" to people, such as smartphones or, in the health sector, fall sensors, walking sticks with integrated tracking systems, warnings in case of hypoglycaemia or automated calls for help, etc. They are (more or less) **implanted**, too: Exoskeletons, prostheses, brain-computer interface. Many possibilities for medical healing are opening up, but for reasons of cost (today and in future?) they are not open to everyone. The same applies to chips for personal recognition, micropumps, stimulators in the brain, pacemakers with radio connections for evaluation, etc.

Organs can also be digitally controlled, digital technology becomes "internal" to the human being, with changes to the self-image of people: Understanding of mankind!

Ethical question: just distribution of resources?

1. Health and Care

„**Digital aids**“ open up more ways of being able to live "at home" for as long as possible, even high aged or with handicaps. Furthermore, high-tech cameras and, if necessary, loudspeakers in glasses for the visually or hearing impaired are useful for **improving sensory functions** to enable them to live independently or to improve work processes in „sheltered workplaces“ (digital gloves, etc.). For example, augmented reality, interactive and multimedia learning and assistance systems make work instructions and training in workshops more comprehensible for people with disabilities.

Aids in hospitals and care facilities are:

- Improved documentation and optimisation of planning processes in diaconal facilities (digital duty rosters).
- Facilitation of room and laundry cleaning, automated bed systems, pick-up and drop-off services,
- Improvement of internal and external communication, etc.

Ethical relevance: Relief from simple routine work, more sustainable use of resources, more time for patients.

1. Health and Care

Care robots such as Pepper or Lio, which are being tested or introduced in several facilities (e.g. in large facilities such as AGAPLESION Bethanien Diakonie Berlin), help residents by serving drinks, taking menu requests, assisting with personal hygiene in the future or reminding them of appointments.



1. Health and Care

In addition, care robots, such as the seal "Paro" as an animal simulation, can activate people suffering from dementia or other illnesses by having patients interact with these systems.

In some cases, these systems can elicit reactions from ill people that are not possible in therapy.



1. Health and Care

The use of such systems can **make sense in triadic constellations** (i.e. as a supplement to human interaction). The use of robots for therapeutic/communicative purposes is **ethically problematic if they function dyadically** (replacing human caregivers) and if

- emotions are simulated, which (many) patients (have to) misunderstand as human reactions,
- simulated contact replaces human communication.

Digital tools cannot replace the regular, reliable presence of human caregivers. This became particularly clear at the beginning of the Corona pandemic, when extreme contact bans were introduced to protect elderly and pre-diseased people (esp. in hospitals and care facilities).

- Digital services are helpful in maintaining contact. However, humans as relational beings, as implied by the image of God, are dependent on personal relations.

1. Health and Care

Ethical issues to be clarified in this context are:

The consequences of the use of technology in terms of

- data protection (vs. security and surveillance needs, deletion of data, etc.),
- the depth of intervention in people's perception/orientation (dealing with health data that opens up help, but whose misuse can violate personal rights),

The design of changes in working conditions:

New organisational procedures (avoiding too far-reaching standardization, controls, etc.).

"Facilitating work: Digital assistance systems can facilitate the care of people in need - they do not replace personal contact. Ideally, they take over routine tasks such as transport and thus give carers more time for those in need of care. On the other hand, it is harmful if digital systems merely control work processes (to save time and money) and overburden caregivers.

1. Health and Care

The introduction of digital systems has to be organized in consultation with trade unions and other employee representatives for all changes to work processes. The reduction of possible fears, the avoidance of monitoring/controls, the inclusion of employees' competences, good training, etc. are essential for a successful and humane implementation.

Digital systems open up opportunities for humanizing the world of work by relieving employees of heavy and routine work and also opening up scope for self-determination in work processes. At the same time, there is a risk of work processes becoming more compressed. It all depends on the design, but:

More positive aspects and possibilities than negative ones.

2. Sunday and the Rhythms of Work

Changes in time rhythms due to the digital transformation:

- Increasing dissolution of "fixed" working hours.
- Challenge for the work-free weekend / Sunday (checking mails, etc.)
- On the way to the 24/7 economy, a 24/7 lifestyle?

2. Sunday and the Rhythms of Work

Since 321 AD : Sunday as a day of rest.

Globalization and digitalization as "drivers" to end the Sunday rest?:

2019: Around 6.3 million people in Germany work **permanently or regularly on Saturday or Sunday, i.e. 16% of all employees** (in 2000, this rate was still just below 10%)

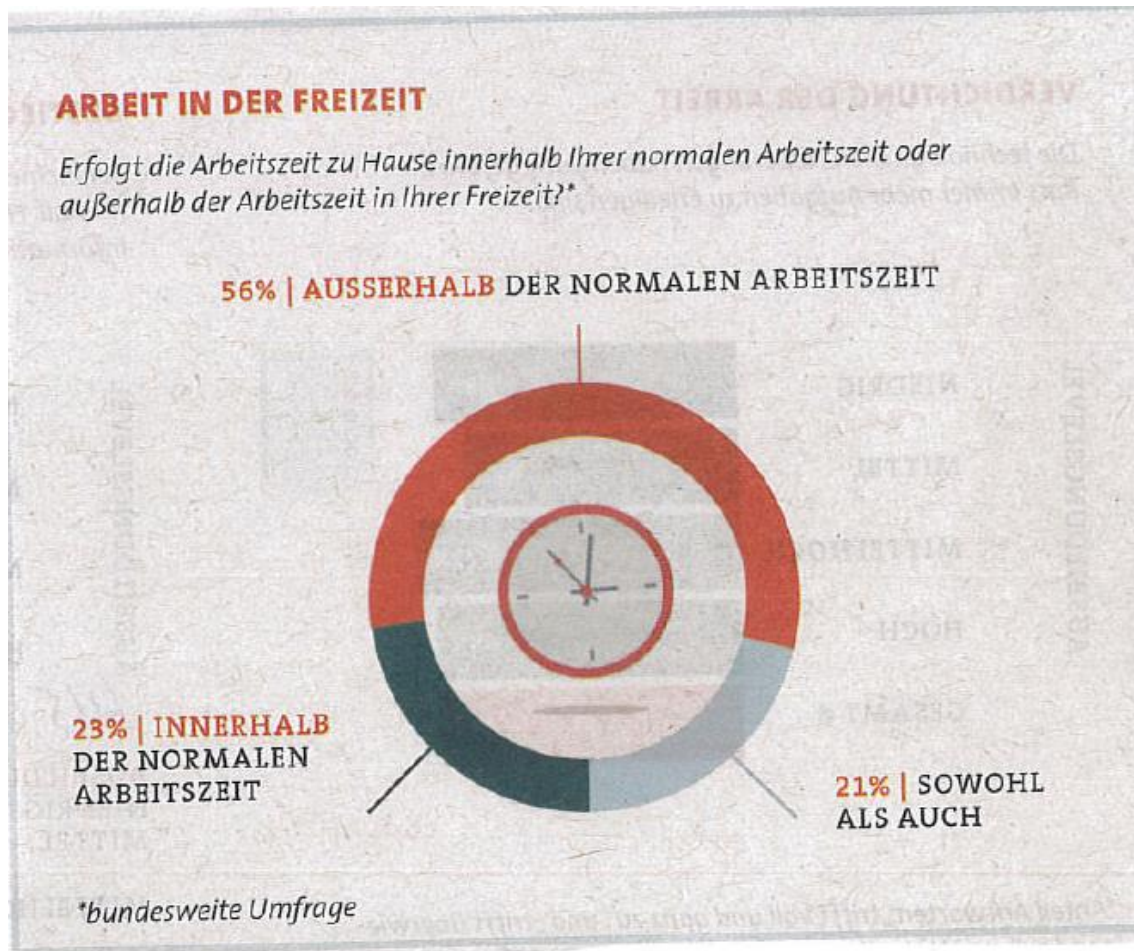
In addition, another ca. 4 million employees work occasionally on Sundays and public holidays. The work-free weekend, an achievement of the 1960s, is thus a thing of the past for every fourth employee in Germany. More than nine million employees worked on Saturdays or Sundays at least twice a month in 2019.

2. Sunday and the Rhythms of Work

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2. Sunday and the Rhythms of Work



2. Sunday and the Rhythms of Work

New challenges for a „politics of time“:

- **Set limits to potentially permanent availability** (PC or mobile phone) by agreements
- **Reconcile work and family life**
- **Protect Sundays** and public holidays facing new challenges: Online marketing, call centres, etc. (Pressure on stationary trade)

What's the future of the Sunday in a digital world?

2. Sunday and the Rhythms of Work



Sunday is to be understood "as a help and a blessing for all, not as a disturbing interruption of everyday work."

Ulrich H. J. Körtner , Evangelische Sozialethik, Göttingen 1998, p. 321.

2. Sunday and the Rhythms of Work

Sunday stands for

- the changeover from purpose-oriented to need-oriented time
- the discovery of a culture of setting limits
- the "economy of the gift" of God, whose "logic" contradicts the optimizing/calculating logic, that determines everything.

Digitalization promotes flexible working time models

+ which can make it easier to reconcile job and family life,
– or dominate family time and leisure time?

+ which may coordinate needs of employees and customers,
– or exploit the employees more and more?

Collective agreements (with the support of trade unions) are necessary to improve possibilities of freedom for all sides.

2. Sunday and the Rhythms of Work

Christian freedom implies "that neither the keeping of the Sabbath nor of any other day is necessary". (CA XXVIII)

In this respect, we cannot speak of a „holy day“ or a "qualitative difference" between Sunday and working days in a strict theological sense, but we can say culturally: Sunday must "not simply be understood as part of non-working time" (Trutz Rendtorff, Ethics II, 2nd ed., p.72), it's more, it's a special day for all.

In what moderate way is Sunday also to be included in the flexibilization with corresponding social partnership regulations?

Positive and negative aspects are balanced, it depends on the design of working hours!

3. Social Media as a Game Changer in Communication

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3. Social Media as a Game Changer in Communication

More Freedom of speech, but who ist trustworthy?

Social media "can bring people together and help conserve resources in the process." **Contacts and exchanges** are easy to organize, across continents. **Access to information**, educational opportunities, etc. is enormously facilitated.

In dictatorial regimes, there are opportunities for freedom of information, networking of actors, etc.

In democratic societies, the power of the gatekeepers of the traditional media is relativized, there is the chance of a democratization of the public through the empowerment of marginalized groups.

Ethical perspective: The building of **trust** in the new worlds of communication: Who is trustworthy, who is truthful?

3. Social Media as a Game Changer in Communication

In social media communication, **extraordinary, sensational** (often quantifiable), often **personalized** and, above all, **emotionalizing** and **polarizing** content plays a much greater role than in the "analogue world". A lot of information is perceived "**without context**", only as a (kind of) snapshot. The world cannot be interpreted „contextless“.

But: Via social media there is a reshaping of the construction of reality by algorithms that ensure a lot of "clicks" on the respective pages by keeping the **attention on the extraordinary**, scandals etc.

Finally, there is a selective control of the users' attention, which often distorts everyday realities, complex contexts, etc., serves to spread populist attitudes and proves to be problematic with regard to the self-image of many people.

3. Social Media as a Game Changer in Communication

The "emotionalizing" structure of digital communication:

- Platforms need the attention of their users. They are therefore concerned with stimulating as much communication as possible from their users and keeping them on their own platform as long as possible. A dynamic of attention is set in motion that focuses on acceleration. The result is a prioritization of personal, emotional and scandalizing content.
- The logic of "extraordinary", "improbable", „emotionalizing“ news dominates the reading/viewing and spreading of content. Therefore, "fake news" is also read and spreaded more frequently.

3. Social Media as a Game Changer in Communication

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3. Social Media as a Game Changer in Communication

Changes in the culture of communication:

- A new structural change of the public sphere through the commercialization of digital media:
- The competitive pressure of platforms, sites, etc. for calculating/generating advertizing revenue leads to an increase in the "attention economy", which consciously and specifically focuses on emotions/excitement.

Emotions are ambivalent:

- + Offers of orientation in a highly complex environment, which convey relief through "emotional" classifications.
- + Desire for "security"
- + Motivating effects for action: Compassion / empathy
- promote simple "solutions", often irrationalisms
- tend towards friend/foe logics.

3. Social Media as a Game Changer in Communication

Newly dominant are practices of measuring oneself and others (likes and more...), which leads to new forms of behaviour control. The system of evaluation/quantification is based on the generally trend towards optimization. The logic of measuring and comparing is dominating:

- Self-images of users,
- Idealized events etc. (everything is beautiful...)
- Shocking representations (disgust ...)

Aestheticization and eventization of the world view:

The results of these trends are:

"collective excitement" - „great irritation" (Pörsken).

Ethical demand: Democratic control of the content of platforms, and:

Effective self-control of the platforms against hate speech, fake news, etc. (not via AI)

Otherwise: Public sphere will develop problematically

4. The Problem of Economic Digital Monopolies

The Power of Data Corporations: "Friendly Monopolies"?

In terms of business ethics, the high degree of monopoly or oligopoly formations in the field of digital companies is the greatest challenge. A major cause of these monopoly formations lies in direct network and indirect feedback effects. Wherever there are the most contact opportunities or the widest possible supply or demand capacity, the best benefit can be achieved. Market leaders get more and more business, competing providers fall into a niche or disappear from the market altogether. Therefore it can be explained that Google, for example, holds a market share of just over 90% in search queries in Europe and Facebook dominates around 75% of social media communication in Germany.

4. The Problem of Economic Digital Monopolies

Users do benefit from the network effects, as many services/functions are ostensibly free of charge. However, the use of user data, especially for advertising purposes, is highly **problematic from a competition point of view**. On the one hand, advertising revenues on the internet are increasingly concentrated on a few large players: as a result, Google and Facebook/Meta now share more than half of online advertising revenues, with an increasing tendency especially in the expensive market for personalised advertising. In their communication, these companies also favour products from their corporate family and/or present them in a **non-transparent** way.

- Ethical challenge: Monopolies dominate the market of advertising!

4. The Problem of Economic Digital Monopolies

Problematic are

- the „dominated“ advertising market,
- the power of data over users (incl. "political marketing")
- the development of corporations into a "state within the state", trying to get power over the democratic authorities.



4. The Problem of Economic Digital Monopolies

- Therefore: A better platform regulation at EU level is necessary. Problematic and abusive behaviour by market-dominant platforms must be prevented. Thus, an EU platform regulation should be launched as soon as possible that prescribes various behavioural obligations, in particular concerning the use of data.
- In addition, there is political influence, indirectly by influencing the public's attention. Moreover, the influence happens in a direct way, e.g. when personalized political campaigns are supported using the "data knowledge" of digital corporations.

The control and the reduction of the digital monopolies' power is the greatest challenge for democratic societies!

Outlook

AI systems are a fascinating technology, it's ambivalent: It can facilitate labour, communication etc and it may provide excellent support for human actions. At the same time, the logic of digitalization processes in a way that promotes (or even causes) problematic developments.

Positive aspects of digitalization:

- more self-determination for (esp. aged and handicaped) people through assistance systems,
- freedom to organize labour (places and times) with regard to individual time management,
- communication can be facilitated and democratized
- information is more easily and freely accessible
- ...etc

Outlook

Freedom is threatened by

- trends towards control and standardization in personal life and in the world of labour
- unregulated organization and acceleration of work rhythms
- Systematic distortion of social communication
- Power dominance of economic monopolies
- ... etc.

The primacy of democratically legitimized political decisions must be demanded in order to set appropriate frameworks for a social embedding of digital technologies. Theology and churches should provide an impetus for this on the basis of their understanding of man and corresponding normative criteria.