

Digitality and the Global Context of the Church

Some reflection notes for CALL conference, March 2022

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We have seen in the work of Christine Hine and Manuel Castells among others that digitality and a networked society is the new normal for global society. As Hine puts it – we this means digitality is embedded, embodied and everyday. As Couldry and Hepp argue, the importance of digitality and media is increasingly important having been left out of previous discussions such as in Bergman and Luckmann.

If we follow the basics of contextual theology, (see Bevans, Donovan, Walls, Ward), then this is the basic context for our own pursuit of *missio dei* – the task of the church is to seek to be present where God is on mission; to be present within culture to bring salt and light; to be ambassadors of the kingdom.

The UCL Global Smartphone Report argued that the smartphone

- Disrupts distance (globalising the world, bringing global voices into our conversations, cutting across political boundaries to allow us to hear the voices of the oppressed and the marginalised)
- Disrupts proximity (phones in restaurants, atomisation of social situations as people read their phones, potential decline in non-smartphone based interaction)
- Are our new home – here is finance, shopping, connection, gaming, viewing, entertainment, provision, education. We have no need to go anywhere else to engage with life (???)

So, digitality is the new context for the mission of the Church and the well-being of humanity. We need to ask how we incorporate digitality into *missio dei* in a way that focuses on the development of pro-human tech rather than tech which contributes to the exploitation of human resources such as in the gig (/platform) economy.

Such explorations need to include strong conversation about the nature of truth within a digital age. Autocratic states and many tech companies use tech to exploit and build power for the state or to bring more revenue (and hence power) to the company. Indeed, our data draws a lot of attention with govts increasingly willing to sell anonymised citizen data to companies. As we have been warned, if something is free, we are the product – we/our data is being farmed and exploited. Note that when Facebook takes your data it can resell it to as many companies as it wants. You are being sold to thousands of companies. Block cookies now!

Indeed, states like China use such data to impose close surveillance on the public under the guise of punishing criminals. But the social circle system surveils everyone and has the potential to limit personal freedom. It may well be that the recent outlawing of online church in China is connected to the state's desire to surveil local churches and do face/gait recognition on those attending – this is much harder through zoom or other online methods of attendance.

There are bigger questions as whether FB et al. are altering who we are, what we believe, what we think through the manipulation (active and passive) of our social feeds. So my own research has noted a shift towards moralistic therapeutic deism within the use of the Bible online – a shift away from classical propositional models – a shift from John 3:16 (type verse) to Jeremiah 29:11 (type verses). Of course, this is a minute shift compared to the unstoppable development and expansion of Western progressive society which may well lie behind Russian anxiety about its own conservative stance and therefore aggression against Ukraine as a proxy of the West.

Indeed, going back to truth, we see in the current invasion the use of ‘desinformatsya’ – not only by Russian but by other autocratic-leaning states such as the UK/China/Trump’s America. In this model, we are presented with a deluge of counterfactual statements and counterfeit evidence in such numbers and force that it is impossible for the media to deconstruct all of them – the classic hallmark of gaslighting. As with all fascist regimes, media will be used increasingly to gaslight the population and tech tools and companies such as Facebook and Twitter will be key warzones against the truth.

Social media could help to address this (see my brief article at: <https://www.premierchristianity.com/opinion/can-social-media-win-the-battle-against-russias-dezinformatsiya/6186.article>). We see this happening in Ukraine, esp in the person of President Zelenskyy, through the use of multiple, swift, geolocated and date stamped photos/posts which broadcast the reality on the ground. Russian media is now having to debunk this media by creating its own versions of Ukrainian posts. But these are poorly done. Tech companies could also help – note the shift in IG policy to allow statements of violence against Putin and Russian State which has led to the blocking of IG in Russia. Is the shift in policy ethical?

How do we counter the use of digitality – we’re back to Orwell’s 1984 where electronic media/digitality is clearly seen to be a weapon of the states vs the people.

AuroraAI and Next Mannheim do offer welcome glimpses of how tech can be used to push forward human flourishing.

What role might the church play:

1. To actively play a role in providing pro-human ethics in tech development. Such activities are often easier for national church bodies, e.g.
 - Catholic Church and publications such as Laudato Si
 - EKD policies around return to church tax
 - Finnish church material around confirmation
 - Finnish Bible Society and Bible for Millennials
 - Church of England contribution to House of lords report on AI – Ten Commandments for Pro-Human AI
2. Querying the Terms
Artificial Intelligence is neither artificial nor intelligent. See Kate Crawford “Atlas of Ai” and others. Mostly machine learning programmes coded by humans with human

biases. Intelligence needs sentience. Brains are not computer networks nor analogous to them. The human nervous system as a whole provides sentience/intelligence and uploading the structure of a brain will most likely fail to replicate sentience. We always need to remember that computers never 'know' what they are doing, they do not 'think', they do not 'judge' – they just run programs.

3. Explore how to stop tech from destroying us (accidentally or through intentional programming). How do we guard against exploitative programming, autonomous weaponry, gig economy. How do we develop a tech economy focussed on humanity (and other sentient animal life?) created in the image of God? This means negating arguments of humans being biological machines.

There is plenty for the Church to contribute to the digitalization process.

Finally God. Where is God in tech, in digital? We believe in a creator God and designed arks, tabernacles, temples, whose son was a carpenter, whose Spirit equips the church with gifts, tasks, professions. God is a technologist. So just as God is in all, over all, through all, so God is in tech, over tech, through tech. God himself is a creative, sustaining, empowering technologist, who makes use of technology through the Bible, throughout history, to empower *missio dei* and *missio ecclesiae* and to promote (human) flourishing. The church's role is to make the world an even better place by making the most of digitality and embedding gospel values more and more at the heart of digital culture.