

The Challenge of Information Technology

1. Introduction

We are privy to the most powerful **information** that has ever been divulged. We have been **transformed** by the greatest Master of change known in history. We are **empowered** by the creative Spirit of the Architect of existence. We have glimpsed the **diversity** within the shrinking **global** village, which is His Kingdom: our promised inheritance. We have but one **focus**: a simple command to **communicate** this amazing truth to the world in word and in **service**.

We sit near the beginning of the 21st Century, at a time when Information, Transformation, Empowerment, Diversity, Globalisation, Communication, Focus and Service are the mantra of our business age, through which the World economy is driven. We sit richly blessed with the very ingredients of success, and yet we are afraid and defensive.

What is the cause of this fear and how can we overcome it?

2. A Communication Revolution

Over the last few years, the Information Technology revolution has brought change at an accelerating pace. The long-promised convergence of computers and telecommunications became a reality for many who caught the fever pitch of the World Wide Web, otherwise known as the Internet. A growing percentage of the population, politicians and business leaders especially, have started to glimpse what the so-called Information SuperHighway might bring.

The last few months of the 20th century saw a feeding frenzy as investors sought to buy instant entry to the millionaire and billionaire clubs, based on a new model of the economy in which gaining customers at all cost became vastly more important than profit. Whole economic systems were in danger of being overturned by models of success, which challenged basic understanding. In a dramatic about-turn, the pendulum started to swing back to the so-called old economy as the new economy dramatically overheated. Like many other recipes for instant success, this new world order proved to be built on sand. Instead of the billionaire club, there is now the 99% club, a not-quite so exclusive domain for those companies who have seen their candy-floss stock price lose 99% of its inflated, unearned and undeserved value.

Does this volte-face represent the end of the dreams spun around the Web?

Most certainly not! Out of the limelight in which these unrealistic expectations have been swathed, there is plenty of hard evidence that the revolution is alive and ushering in a new order. More than 1 in 20 of the world's population are Internet users. In the UK, that figure is one in three already, and rising fast. World-wide, the figure stands today at 300 million people, with growth conservatively estimated at around 25% per year. One in eight people in the UK is now employed in the related call-centre industry.

People in the technology world now talk about "dog-years". Things happen in the Internet world in one seventh the time they used to take. Over the coming years, it is expected that a quarter of the world population will be connected to the internet.

This is a huge rate of change, and the turbulence faced by those companies in the technology sector is just the early impact. The wild excesses will be ironed out as the irrational expectations subside, but there will be many more swings of the pendulum to come. Where we once saw speculation that companies based in the old economy would be wiped out in droves by these new fledglings, we now recognise the obvious fact that sound management and adaptability are two fundamentals of sustained development. The more robust and value-generating aspects of the new economy are being adopted by the mainstream companies alongside traditional practices, bringing irreversible but sustainable change.

3. The consequences of revolution

Like all revolutions, there are winners and losers, innocent bystanders and guilty manipulators as well as those who seek to do justice. There are wild swings of fortune with periods of relative calm and stability interspersed by frenetic and paradoxical behaviours.

Also, like most revolutions, there is a rebalancing of power. Something which was once the domain of the privileged few, becomes readily available to the majority. Once in possession of this valuable prize, what will the majority make of this erstwhile reward? Will the subject become as an immortal god when armed with this possession? Will the once rare luxury become devalued as a commodity item?

In this information revolution, this prized jewel is information turned into knowledge. Where information and knowledge was once the domain of the elite, the IT revolution makes it a commodity, available to all. The transformation of knowledge from a rare possession of the privileged into a commodity enjoyed by the majority brings its own turbulence. Enabling wide access to information brings a whole set of changes and challenges:

- new understanding and awareness, which challenges the artificial authority which hid behind dogma and superficial acceptance of raw, untutored power;
- a restoration of dignity for the majority who have previously been oppressed by the few, who exploited their privileged positions;
- heightened tensions as the well-being and stability of those in power is challenged, eliciting a harsh, fearful and irrational response from those seeking to preserve their vestiges of power;
- a new illiterate underclass of those who find themselves on the periphery in the new structure: those who cannot or choose not to draw on their new resources;
- new opportunities for movers and shakers to build a new power base for good or ill in the emerging society (for the unscrupulous to exploit and corrupt society as well as for the benevolent to do good).

I refer of course to the Reformation: a period fuelled by the printing revolution, which brought books to the majority. A period in which the church chose to be an early adopter making God's word readily accessible through the bible, rather than in the privileged hands of the priests. A period in which the church went through painfully turbulent times as its teaching and dogma came under the spotlight.

The renewal for the church was borne out of fresh theological thinking which could withstand the focus of the raised awareness. The renewed church had to earn afresh its role of leadership and sense of authority. It had to develop a new social outreach to deal with the casualties of the changing times. It had a new sense of outrage against corruption and exploitation. New leaders emerged with a message relevant to the times, and others cut-off from the new spirit withered on the vine.

4. The Consequences for Methodism in 2001

But the Information Technology revolution is here and now, not just in the Reformation. Dare we rise to the challenge of being an early adopter, recognising that with revolution comes pain and instability and turbulence, as well as new vigour, purpose and enlightenment, refined by the heat of the revolution?

In Our Calling, we have the structure to reflect on the demands and challenges we face. Here are some thoughts on a practical response to the IT challenge:

4.1 Worship

Those outside the church are increasingly bombarded with messages and entertainment which are slick and effective. Without being gimmicky, or changing its core message, the church must adopt a relevant vehicle to present the gospel in an attractive and alluring form. Professional use of technology as a medium should be integrated into worship (albeit occasionally) as well as all other aspects of communication and contact.

Not only must we adopt technology when appropriate as a vehicle to aid our worship, but our worship must also reflect the impact of technology. Our preaching can be more wisely informed through wider access to relevant and timely information. Our preaching should be informed by issues affecting society in which technology plays a major part. Our preaching must reflect theological wrestling in an informed age, and we must not hide from the growing challenge this might bring.

4.2 Learning & Caring

Young people encounter IT in every walk of life, and use it as an integral part of the learning resources at school. Unless junior church is equipped with equivalent technology, it will appear increasingly irrelevant and disconnected from "real" life. This will reinforce the unfortunate stereotype of the church. Junior churches must be equipped with modern resources which excite and stimulate young people and make them feel in a natural and homely environment.

The Internet is an unrivalled source of information for personal and group study. This rich resource should be readily available to all the church leaders as part of their background preparation to fulfil their responsibilities. A co-ordinated approach would allow the church to create a rich environment for

knowledge and experience sharing, where church members could tap into the in-depth knowledge of specialists covering the whole life of the church.

Community webcasting to housebound members could be developed to integrate them back into the worshipping life of the church. This could perhaps begin with community homes such as MHA. A greater sense of family could be developed in the church by encouraging the young technology enthusiasts to adopt and support those who fear the technology.

Much religious material on the Internet is of dubious origin, with focused activity from cults and extreme groups. The Methodist church could bring a mainstream perspective to the hosting of debate on matters of contemporary social, moral and ethical concern, as well as theology. The Methodist brand would allow us to seize the opportunity to convey a radical but authoritative position.

4.3 Service

One of the dangers of technology is the so-called "digital divide" between the technology haves and have-nots. Technological poverty is often linked to financial poverty, but is also caused by technophobia, lack of opportunity or deliberate self-exclusion and can be present even amongst the richest. We must respond to this new breed of underclass in the west with a social gospel in much the same way as we do to the illiterate majority in areas of the developing world. Ignorance arising from illiteracy leads to exploitation, against which we have a Christian responsibility to educate. The same IT resources used in Worship and Junior Church can be put to good use within the community to run awareness tutorial sessions, for education in the community, or for cybercafés as the basis for running social groups for young people.

Technology poses threats on which the church should voice an ethical position. Open access to information exacerbates threats to morality such as pornography and gambling. These need to be addressed coherently, and the church could provide real support for positive vetting tools, as well as applying strong political pressure to address these issues. Another threat, applying particularly to young people, is one of under-developed social skills, or even isolationism, amongst those who face society through the keyboard rather than face to face.

Whilst Christians are generally good at identifying threats posed by technology, the positive benefits are less clearly articulated. In contrast to the danger of isolationism, the use of teleconferencing and telecasting can improve social interaction reducing stress in the family by reducing the need for travel.

We must not forget that the enormous disruption in the workplace continues as working patterns change. Technology leaves its mark on the workforce, directly through redundancy, through stress caused by the fear of redundancy, and by the exploitation of managers who will capitalise on this fear. This disruption caused by technology demands a spiritual and moral response from the church in both social outreach and campaigning for justice.

4.4 Evangelism

The Internet is itself a direct form of outreach as each group within the church is able to create a public statement of its mission and activities. The church, circuit, district and connexional structure provides the ideal framework for structuring a WEB site hierarchy, allowing simple and effective navigation. The more sophisticated churches could generate and manage a "community portal", as a front door onto all of the organisations and aid groups in a locality.

Kathy Smith (Cornwall) has proposed the role of internet chaplain, through which a moral and spiritual dimension could be added to chat-room debate. The role of this chaplain in the virtual community would be much the same as an industrial or prison chaplaincy, or even the normal ministry in the physical community of a church. A sustained presence in this environment would earn the same degree of trust and respect as the more conventional ministry.

5. Conclusion

I have deliberately avoided discussion of the obvious benefits IT brings to administration. The threat and opportunity for the church lies at the heart of our purpose, and it is all too tempting to focus on the tangible. We have a story to tell, and the vehicle with which to tell it. The challenge we face is whether or not we can tell that story in a language which the world will see as relevant.

Just as in the Reformation, the IT revolution is:

- transforming our ability to communicate the Good News
- changing the nature of our mission field
- placing our Theology under renewed scrutiny.

How well are we facing up to ALL of these? God empowers us with all the ingredients for change, but most of all with the knowledge of His Love. Why are we afraid?

Author*Dr David Welbourn is a local preacher in the Ipswich Circuit and Head of Strategy for BT Business Services. David reflects theologically on his extensive understanding of the IT industry but the views expressed do not necessarily reflect any official industry position.*