▶ Questions

- In the early days, when the Internet was the preserve of a small number of academics, there was a brotherhood of shared values but those days are long gone, and there is increasing pressure for external constraints. Given the tensions mentioned above and the global nature of the Internet, how effective can those constraints be, who should impose them and to what extent should they be there at all? The Internet has the capacity to do good as well as harm. How can the good be promoted and the harm controlled?

- Should the Church seek to explore the possibilities for an ethical code for software developers, manufacturers and all Internet users to promote the creation of innovative technologies, for the good of society? If there were to be a code of ethics for companies and groups that use the Internet, what should be in it?

- How effective can draconian regulations be for the control of, for example, illegal filesharing, when most of the hundreds of millions of monthly visitors to illegal filesharing sites see nothing morally wrong in filesharing?

- How has the Internet affected your life, your family, your work and your church? Can you imagine what it would be like if the Internet had never been created?

- Is the Internet part of an incredible technological revolution that will improve everyone's lives, or is it a Pandora's Box that we can never escape from?

- Should the Church be embracing Internet technology in its mission, or should it be wary of things which are potentially open to easy abuse?

- Does the 'disembodied' way we interact via the internet have implications for our relationships?

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The Internet: in whose image?

Responding to the moral and ethical challenges of the Internet

▶ Discussion Points
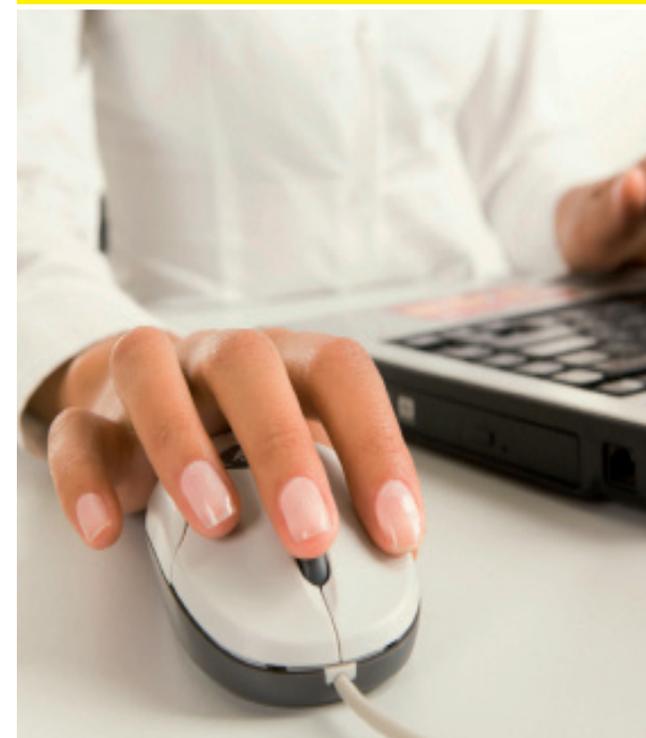
The Internet: in whose image? Responding to the moral and ethical challenges of the Internet

▶ The Internet is now an unremarkable part of our lives. It has entered our working spaces, our schools and our living rooms, even our hands in the form of smartphones, subtly modifying the way we do business, find information, learn, shop and entertain ourselves. However, the Internet did not spring miraculously into being. It has been created, shaped and developed by scientists, software engineers, hardware and software manufacturers, international standards organisations, professional bodies, governments, telecommunications multinationals, the military, hackers, universities, industries, entrepreneurs and investors. Each of these has goals and objectives, sometimes complementary but often conflicting, for design and use of digital technology.

▶ A Vision of the Unexpected

The Internet is a tool: indeed, it is arguably the latest in a series of technological revolutions, starting with the invention of writing, which have profoundly influenced the development of the world. The Internet may be used for good or ill. Tension is inevitable, since information 'wants' to be free and to be used to democratise and liberate; yet it is also immensely valuable and can be commoditised. To achieve the full potential of the Internet as a place of the free exchange of information and ideas, yet where the weak have protection, and also a place where economic activity may be carried on in confidence that contracts will be kept and people will not be cheated requires some level of regulation.

▶ Inherent Tensions

Given the international nature of the Internet, it is inherently difficult to regulate it at national level. And sometimes simply the 'critical mass' of Internet users can mean that the values of the would-be regulators are brought into conflict with those whom they would seek to regulate.

▶ Ethical standards:

This power shift to the public gives huge importance to the question of what standards of morality may exist or may be asserted.

Google's founders articulate the simplistic principle: 'don't be evil', but this can often more easily be said than done, and, in any event it begs the question of by which standards or moral or religious code 'good' and 'evil' are to be determined, especially in a world that extends beyond the political West and the economic North.

▶ Social Networking

Social networking sites highlight many of these problems. They can be engines of mass mobilisation and social change - as in the spread of the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions. Yet they also profoundly affect the way in which we communicate and interact - and can change the very nature of whom we consider to be our 'friends'. Such sites can be used for exploitation or cyberbullying, and can often mutually reinforce the values of small, marginal and often prejudiced or socially unacceptable groups.

▶ The Contested Self

The Virtual Self

We may construct virtual selves by creating avatars or Facebook profiles, but, everywhere we go, we leave digital traces. In a real sense, we are where we have been. The Internet can be unforgiving and unforgetting.

The Excluded Self

With the rise of e-Government (state activities being conducted through the internet) we are constructing a digital identity to interact with the state, and that may bring with it the concept of a digital underclass to whom government services (increasingly digitally delivered) are no longer available.

The Relational Self

This displacement and fracturing raises profound moral and theological issues. It may provoke alienation, for self or for society, or it may provoke moral and spiritual reflection about those who are marginalised because they do not have access to the Internet.

Christianity uses the language of the physical: the word became flesh. A virtual world which may lack the physical interaction to be found in Holy Communion, for example, raises questions which go to the root of the Christian understanding of humanity. Can faithfulness and love empower and transform a virtual world to make it part of the reign or kingdom of God? In other words, what would the Church look like in this virtual world? At the heart of the gospel is our relationship with other people and the relationship between humanity and God. These relationships are founded on the reality that God came to us in Jesus Christ. For some, the Internet reduces the importance of reality as it is a 'virtual' space, and one in which it is easy to adopt a different personality. But for others, the Internet is a new space pregnant with new possibilities for relationships which transcend distance and even the need to ever meet in real life, and consequently for new mission opportunities.

▶ Rising to the Challenge

The Internet like any other tool is morally neutral, but the uses we make of it and our choices in connection with it are not. Our uses of the Internet not only reflect, but may have the capacity to change society. Many and diverse are the currents which flow in the Internet, which is, in a real sense a conflicted space: conflicts between the impulse for freedom and the need to regulate, the human search for liberty and the urge of those wielding power to control, the struggle amongst competing mores, the intractable issues of real and virtual identity, the conflicted self, exclusion and, indeed our very understanding of the incarnational nature of our faith.

Like any other technology, digital technology has the potential to affect our lives for the good or for the bad. As Christians we are called to live our lives responsibly, following the teachings of Jesus. Although most of us are not directly responsible for the design of digital technologies, we all use these technologies and therefore we should be aware of the role which they have in shaping our culture, in order that we might engage creatively with the digital world represented by the Internet, seeking always to fulfil our calling to be leaven in the dough.