The internet: in whose image?

Leader's notes for a discussion about the place of the internet in our lives

Background reading

The internet: in whose image? This report to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 2011 is downloadable from the [Church of Scotland website](#) or free through the post from the Church and Society Council. (phone: 0131 240 2276)

Bible readings

- **Genesis 1:26**
  All that was made was made by God and we were made in God's image to look after all that was made.

- **Luke 4:5-7**
  The Devil offered Jesus everything in the world if he simply worshipped him.

Discussion

This process is simply to stimulate discussion about the influence and the opportunities that the internet brings to all our lives. It's not directed to a conclusion. Instead, its objective is to help us ask questions about something that shapes all of our lives, our thinking and even our language.

Read the two bible verses.

If we are not careful the internet can become the mountain top from where Jesus saw all the kingdoms. It seems that the internet can connect us with all the world and it will provide all we might want. At that digital mountain top we are being tempted away from Jesus. Yet when you read the passage from Luke, it's extraordinary that the Devil should offer Jesus ownership of all that God has already decided that we should look after - remember that the humanity arrived on the afternoon of day 6 to be given the task of looking after all that God had made and saw was good.

What the Devil is suggesting is that the world is for us to use, not for us to look after for God. And it's the same with the internet - it can draw us into a world where we put ourselves before God, making choices that are destructive to us and to others or it can give us a new understanding of the world so that we can better look after it for God. What will be our choice at the mountaintop that is the internet?

Begin by asking each participant, individually or in small groups, to answer the following questions:

1. Can you remember when you first used a computer? To do what?

2. Can you remember when you first used the internet? To do what?

3. Can you remember when you first started to use internet activity as verbs: i.e. "I will google it" or "I have emailed you"? What made you aware of that change?

Read this paragraph:

During the past ten years the Internet has become an unremarkable part of the lives of most people in the UK. The Office for National Statistics showed that the number of households in the UK with an Internet connection expanded by 1 million every year between 2004 and 2009. In 2008 there were over 16 million households with Internet connections, half of them broadband. Around 23.5 million adults and over 76% of young people aged between 16-24 use the Internet daily. People use the Internet not only at work, but also at home, predominantly to send and receive emails (87%) and to find information about goods and services (84%). This technology is now part of our lives and it is so pervasive that we hardly stop to think about it whenever we use it.

Then ask these questions of individuals or small groups:

4. In what ways has the internet changed or influenced your daily living?

5. How does that make you feel? Why?

Read this paragraph:

The Internet did not spring miraculously into our offices and homes. 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. As the technology assumes a critical mass in the wider society, ordinary users increasingly shape and define the interaction between the technology and society as a whole. The internet has become something which is both defined by, and increasingly comes to define society itself.

Further questions:

6. Do you feel you have to resist the influence of the internet in any way?

7. Does the language or activities of the internet used by others make you feel excluded?

Read this paragraph and then the quotation:

As Christians, we are called to live our lives responsibly, following the teaching of Jesus. Although most of us are not directly responsible for the design of digital technology, we all use it and we should therefore be aware of the role that digital technology has in shaping our culture. Like any other technology, it has the potential to affect our lives in detrimental as well as positive ways.

> *"We are assured that the world is becoming more and more united, is being formed into brotherly communion, by the shortening of distances, by the transmitting of thoughts through the air. Alas, do not believe in such a union of people. Taking freedom to mean the increase and prompt satisfaction of needs, they distort their own*

nature, for they generate many meaningless and foolish desires, habits, and the most absurd fancies in themselves. They live only for mutual envy, for pleasure-seeking and self-display." [1]

8. What does this quotation refer to? (Answer: the invention and effect of the telephone!)

Another quotation (from the 2011 General Assembly Report):
We are called to love our neighbour and the stranger; ours is a connectional faith made real in the quality of our relationships with others. Social networking sites like *Facebook* not only integrate photographs etc. in one place, but give users an opportunity to "have their say" and comment on everything that is being collectively shared. Inevitably, what is being shared is not only information, but pieces of the lives of people. Social networking sites allow individuals to place information about themselves to be read and accessed by anyone within their network of online friends. In terms of personal visibility, *Facebook* can be seen as the equivalent of having excerpts of your life published in *Hello* Magazine. Through the sharing of wedding pictures, holiday snaps, pictures of home improvements, pets, etc, the lives of ordinary people are showcased on a digital platform for every online friend to contemplate, admire and comment. They also form part of the collective memory of the Internet.

9. In way ways can the internet be a positive force in maintaining and nurturing relationships

10. In what ways does it create dangers for relationships?

Concluding reflections

The internet is a reality in human living. Our life as a church is to proclaim the gospel in that place of human living.

11. In what ways could

   a) you individually and
   b) your congregation

make use of the internet in practical ways to witness to the life of faith and discipleship that is our core?

God of all things, we know that when we think we see all that the world offers and are tempted by its glittering call you are there to lead us in your way. But yet we know that there can be no "no go" areas for you – even those digital places that are both real and virtual, for there, for many, is where life now is. Lead us into those places so we can witness to your way, so we can lead others from the mountain top of temptation to the safe haven of your kingdom   Amen

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[1] Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 1880