

SECTION 1

PERSPECTIVES

What Are We Becoming with Our Technology? Implications for Religious Leaders



When the Editorial Board chose “Formation and Supervision in a Digital Age” as the appropriate theme for this first volume published electronically and available globally *because* of the Internet, we had no idea that *Social Network*, the movie about the origins of Facebook, would be nominated for an Academy Award as Best Picture of 2010; nor did we envision that social networking would be credited as one factor launching political revolutions in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries; nor could we anticipate fully the impact of this rapidly changing technology on how we shop, solve problems, or create and sustain relationships; nor did we anticipate the power of tweeting and blogging to bring down public figures, using the speed of the Internet to circulate questionable personal information. It is clear that we are in the midst of a social revolution the end of which is difficult to forecast.

There are many questions about the “digital age” that are not considered in this volume. We don’t, for example, address the problems of storing or eliminating unwanted email; who inherits our email property when we die is already a serious problem. There is very little in this volume about issues of confidentiality or how the fluidity of personal boundaries in social networks like Facebook or MySpace increase or diminish our capacity for intimacy in daily relationships. It is a revolution with enormous potential for both good and evil. How will the specter of predators using the Internet to attract victims affect the formation of online learning communities of trust? How will the digital capacity to determine communities of interest affect membership in religious communities?

This first section around the theme “Formation and Supervision in a Digital Age” presents several perspectives exploring the impact of information technology on living in general and ministry in particular. The critical issue with the new technology, Philip Hefner once observed, is not “what are we doing with our technology,” but rather “what are we *becoming* with our technology.”¹ The digital revolution has created a new culture with new language and seemingly infinite possibilities. The culture the Internet has created has changed how we think and interact even when our access to dig-

ital technology is limited. Therefore, eventually, not only how we supervise will change but the people preparing for religious leadership will be shaped by the technology itself.

The communication revolution spawned by the computer and the Internet mirrors the upheaval generated by the invention of the printing press. Like the printing press, digital technology is *changing how we understand authority*. That is the first consequence of the digital revolution that will affect formation and supervision of religious leaders. Universal access to information and easy dissemination of ideas alters yet again the boundaries between experts and amateurs. The digital self, as Robert S. Fortner observes in his essay in this section, “combines quite nicely with the post-modern sensibility that questions all authority.”²

Martin Luther used the newly invented print media to spread his ideas widely and quickly. As a result, an unknown monk from Wittenberg, Germany became a revolutionary icon and spiritual authority overnight. *If you have a blog, you can be an authority*. Someone I know slightly may write a blog on her Facebook that intrigues me because it is cogent, relevant, or clever. She has no credentials and is not endorsed as an authority, but what she writes confirms my own opinion and so I give her authority by passing on her blog to many of my friends, for whom she may become an authority, and then trust what she writes merely because of my recommendation. I may next discover that a number of my friends have shared the same blog with others and I am inclined to giving my blogger friend even more authority. One foolish blog entry by her may cause her authority, and perhaps my own by association, to be lost as quickly as it was won.

Social media tools like Facebook, blogs, and tweets are redefining our expectations of privacy. Very personal information is exchanged without thinking much about the consequences of public exposure. It is, after all, impersonal technology that makes it happen. This sharing gives the appearance of intimacy without either physical or emotional presence. Eventually, we will need to learn how to balance between the benefits of openness or transparency and the security risks of broadly-shared information that is difficult to retrieve once it is in cyberspace. In the meantime, *we are left more isolated and vulnerable than we expected by these ‘connecting technologies.’* This is the second impact of the digital age on formation and supervision. We will need to establish new criteria for evaluating the fluidity of personal boundaries in social networks that inevitably affect the willingness to be appropriately vulnerable in formation for ministry.

The increasing speed of digital technology is the third challenge for ministry formation. Instant access and a faster Internet speed can make life easier and the expectations of merely human religious leaders harder to embrace. Speedy digital gadgets reinforce the expectations of an “instant” society, where five-second delays at an intersection can be an occasion for rage. We are not likely to wait to buy something we need or want in a store if the check-out line is too long. Waiting begins to seem like powerlessness, helplessness, and passivity. Even so, preparation for religious leadership of any kind, in any context, needs to include attention to patient waiting as an essential quality of leadership. Religious leaders need to wait because congregations are often slower to change or try something new than the people who lead them. Walking with people through the long, slow process of dying and grieving requires ministers who can live at a pace different than the speed of a digital technology that is vying for domination in our lives. Embracing Paul Tillich’s observation that “we are stronger when we wait than when we possess”³ is challenged by the speed of a digital age.

In the first essay, Richard Nysse, a biblical scholar who has been a practitioner and proponent of online teaching for more than a decade, argues that the digital revolution in teaching and learning should be understood in terms of language and culture more than in generational difference. In his review of some literature, Nysse borrows a distinction from Marc Prensky and invites us to acknowledge that most formation directors or pastoral supervisors are “digital immigrants” who need to learn from “digital natives” for whom digital languages, and the culture they create, are second nature.⁴ He insists that the contrast often made between the “virtual” and the “real” is a false dichotomy. In order to enter into the emerging digital ecosystem, Nysse encourages us to do what we have always done in times of change: accompany human beings on the journey, listen carefully, ask critical questions, and be willing to be surprised.

The essay by Stephanie Paulsell explores two themes that have consequences for ministry. The ways in which technology is affecting our capacity for sustained attention, contemplative thought, and deep engagement is the first. If it is true, as neuroscience studies suggest, that digital activities are rewriting the neural pathways in our brains, these religious practices may be changed as an unintended consequence of digital technology. The second theme Paulsell develops takes its cue from Jaron Lanier’s book *You Are Not A Gadget*. She calls for more humanistic forms of technology that do not force our lives into a grid devised by a Harvard sophomore, but will rath-

er preserve our individuality and our capacity for sustained relationship, purposeful, meditative attention, and the disciplined practice of worship, prayer, study, and service.

We are grateful to Robert Fortner and *Word and World* for allowing us to reprint his essay. Since reading the essay, I have had several occasions to observe his distinction between ‘analog’ and ‘digital’ conversation. Because so much information is available to us in sudden bursts of disconnected data that we can combine and recombine at will, it is easy to imagine words or sentences as discrete entities that can be dropped into a conversation discontinuous with anything that has gone before or comes after. Fortner is correct in observing that “none of us would be quick to give up our digital lifelines.”⁵ Even so, religious communities that value continuity, consistency, constancy, and collective wisdom will be challenged by a digitally-formed culture that promotes convenience, speed, access, freedom, interactivity, and technical sophistication.

With John Coleman’s review essay of Jacques Ellul’s *The Technological Society*, we continue a practice of revisiting a classic text begun in the last volume. Coleman finds this book, written 60 years ago, amazingly contemporary. Here is a quote from Coleman’s review that is worthy of reading twice: “No one, then, so brilliantly unmask[s] the technological mind and its ability to lure us into a kind of blind acceptance and complacency in its ascendancy as Ellul. No one so well details that technology is not neutral or that, while made to serve humans, actually subverts that hierarchy, so humans are subverted to it. No one so well helps us see that technology is rarely neutral in its effects.”⁶

Each of the essays in this perspective raise serious questions about the impact of digital technology on human life in general, and faithful religious living and pastoral supervision in particular. The intent of these first essays in a volume devoted to exploring “formation and supervision in a digital age” is not to reject the amazing gains of technology or promote a “Luddite” response to modern culture dominated by those gains. Our intent is simply to raise questions lest we lose sight of the human and examine closely what we are becoming because of digital technology.

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Editor

NOTES

1. Philip Hefner, *Technology and Human Becoming* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 9.
2. Robert Fortner, "Shifting Sensibilities: Some Consequences of Digital Technology," *Reflective Practice* 31 (2011): 39.
3. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 151.
4. Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants": <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/prensky%20-%20digital%20natives,%20digital%20immigrants%20-%20part1.pdf> (Last accessed March 10, 2011).
5. Fortner, "Shifting Sensibilities," 41.
6. John Coleman, "Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society* Re-Visited," *Reflective Practice* 31 (2011): 46.

The Internet is certainly a new 'forum,' understood in the ancient Roman sense of that public space where politics and business were transacted, where religious duties were fulfilled, where much of the social life of the city took place, and where the best and the worst of human nature was on display. It was a crowded and bustling urban space, which both reflected the surrounding culture and created a culture of its own. This is no less true of cyberspace, which is as it were a new frontier opening up at the beginning of this new millennium. Like the new frontiers of other times, this one too is full of the interplay of danger and promise, and not without the sense of adventure which marked other great periods of change. For the Church the new world of cyberspace is a summons to the great adventure of using its potential to proclaim the Gospel message. This challenge is at the heart of what it means at the beginning of the millennium to follow the Lord's command to "put out into the deep": *Duc in altum!* (Luke 5:4)

John Paul II

"Message of the Holy Father for the 36th World Communications Day" (Sunday, May 12, 2002). Available online at www.vatican.va.