Being human in the digital age – an Anglican perspective.

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“Reduced to the most basic level possible, there exist only three things: matter, energy, and relationship. And these relationships, whether between atoms and molecules, bees and flowers, or humans and God, are created, sustained, and modified by some kind of communication.” - William F. Fore

Introduction

In 2003, the Church of England published a book entitled Being Human. It considered the subject in the light of four themes: money, sex, power and time. Its introduction mentions, almost in passing, mass media’s profound effect on identity and community. Ten years on, and web 3.0 has rendered the traditional role of mass media almost redundant. Also there has been a tectonic (or perhaps tech-tonic) shift in the sources of and impact of money, sex and power. Where once companies such as Coca Cola and GlaxoSmithKline were examples of corporations with massive capital and global influence, now the creators and owners of digital companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google arguably have—both intentionally and unintentionally—more say in the way our world is developing.

The growing ability of anyone with access to digital technology to instantly connect, co-ordinate and collaborate with people anywhere—often for the cost of nothing more than a mobile phone subscription—means people’s attitudes to time, distance and power have also changed. Inevitably this means how they see themselves, their purpose and meaning in life, and their relationships with others, have also been profoundly affected.

This short paper cannot attempt to update Being Human. It will, however, echo that publication by using Jesus Christ as the best model of authentic humanness. It will also use him as a frame for considering some of the implications of digital technology on modern human beings made in the image and likeness of God. In particular, it will consider how the digital age can either help or hinder us relate to others, to God and to ourselves, as we see Jesus do in the Scriptures.

Community – Beyond borders

“Community is where our human existence takes place. Community is established and maintained by the relationships created by our communications. We establish our relative individuality within this community. The more we participate in community the more we become true individuals, and the more we participate in community, the more richly we participate in community. Community, the fulfilment of effective human communication, is essential to our becoming human.” - William F. Fore

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus was no distant deity, no desert father. Rather the Gospels show us a son, a brother, a friend, a villager, a Jew, a Rabbi, an Israeliite. Putting his supernatural encounters aside, most of his story is of meeting, of connection, of communication with human communities. Villagers asked: “Is this not the carpenter’s son?”; his disciples told him: “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you”; the sign on his cross informed onlookers he was: “The King of the Jews”. Part of Christ’s humanity was the very fact of his interaction with others.

It could be argued that those living in today’s digital age experience community like never before, and therefore have the potential to be more human than ever before. Thanks to mobile technology and social media, we are able to be an active part of many more
communities than the pre-resurrection Jesus ever could. People right around the world (because access to digital technology is not restricted to the West) are getting involved with so many more communities than any generation before them, and are reconnecting with traditional ones in powerful and restorative ways. People sign up to blogs, ‘Like’ pages, join groups and chat online, all to involve themselves with a topic or cause that interests them – regardless of the demography, location or even language of the members.

As an example, Derek vii has traditional familial relationships and is part of a work community. But he is also an active member of a global street photography community that connects and converses via the online photo site Flickr.com. He speaks about his online friends with genuine knowledge and warmth yet only occasionally meets some of them in person at an annual ‘meet up’ often in London, England. This is a community he would not have known before the World Wide Web.

As well as giving people a greater choice of communities to join, digital technology also allows people to connect with communities when previously they would have been prevented from doing so by disability or distance. One example of this is Saints Peter and Paul Anglican Church in Deddington, Oxfordshire, UK, which broadcasts its services via webcam, primarily to bring services to residents of the local care home viii. One resident described it as like having “the Church around us all the time”. The local hospital radio station, Radio Horton, also carries the audio of the church’s first two 10:30 Sunday Services of the month live as well as the Remembrance Sunday service. Worshippers in the Caribbean, Scandinavia and the United States have also followed along the online services.

Innocent Chiluwa writing in the Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture states, “The Internet Church also serves the interest of worshippers who worship exclusively online, e.g. Diaspora Africans) due to lack of availability of their local churches in their present immediate environments.” Yet, despite a clear desire for such streamed services, few Anglican churches offer people outside of their parish such an opportunity to join their community.

Christians are called to be reconcilers, to heal relationships and communities. A recent discussion about the impact of online social networks revealed that one speaker had reconciled with her estranged sibling after rekindling and nurturing the formerly broken relationship on Facebook. Another person, whose brother had stopped speaking to him, admitted using social media to get regular updates about key moments in his brother’s life. Anglicans often talk about creating a space where people can meet, and God can work. Digital technology can provide such a ‘safe space’ for difficult but necessary communication required to begin the journey to reconciliation.

Thanks to social media we could today rewrite the story of the Prodigal Son to better reflect God’s omniscience. How much more powerful would the story be if we read that after seeing photos and videos online of his son’s wickedness, he still runs to meet him.

Son: “Father I have sinned again you...”

Father: “Forget it. I’ve deactivated your Facebook account and signed you up for a new one. Your life away from me never happened. Welcome home.”

Community - Beyond the now

Before the digital age, unless someone had access to, or worked in the mass media his/her circle of influence was relatively small in terms of numbers and also in terms of legacy. (S)he was limited to influencing family, friends, work colleagues, the local community, etc. Before his resurrection, Jesus himself physically travelled from place to place so that his words could be heard, his miracles seen, and his presence felt. His answer to the challenge of being in all places at once, to widen his circle of influence, was to send...
his disciples into the world on his behalf, and then to send the Holy Spirit to all believers.

Internet entrepreneur Boris Veldhuijzen van Zanten has argues that social media makes human beings more divine. His reasoning is pretty poor, but he does identify the fact that we are now able to be more omnipresent, to speak into/be in many places at once—not unlike the Holy Spirit. Instant messaging and video meeting technology like Skype allows human beings to interact immediately with communities anywhere in the world with access to the same technology. The ability to leave voice/video messages, to post messages and images in chat rooms and on social media means that even when your physical self is disconnected, you are still part of, and influencing individuals in a community—not unlike God’s use of Scripture. Several years ago, a colleague of mine died. Her Facebook account—with its posts and photos remains active. Beldhuijzen van Zanten argues this kind of lasting digital footprint gives us a measure of immortality, and thus also helps to bring us a little closer to becoming a divine being.

While avoiding comparisons that amount to blasphemy, it is important to recognise that God has given 21st Century human beings a gift in digital technology that allows us to connect to others in a way that the apostles could only dream of. As Philip explained the Gospel to the Ethiopian before being supernaturally transported elsewhere, so one blog post can speak God’s truth to a human in Ethiopia, Greece, Australia and India simultaneously.

Jane Pleace, Anglican and Head of Communications of The United Bible Societies revealed that The Digital Bible Facebook page (originally established by Australian Anglican priest Mark Brown ordained for online ministry) now has a following of more than 9 million people. Volunteers post Bible verses and Christian thoughts daily, they monitor the page, respond to questions about the Christian faith, and have led some of the page visitors to Christ.

Identity

“When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” John 16:13-15

Digital technology has made a major change to the way people see themselves. For some people it has saved them from identity oblivion. Stephen Hawking has become a world-famous theoretical physicist, cosmologist, author and Director of Research at the Centre for Theoretical Cosmology despite having Motor Neurone Disease. In previous generations people with disabilities were often ostracised, ignored and/or abused. Now, thanks to computer technology that allows him to transfer head movements to words and then speech, Professor Hawking’s digitized voice has become instantly recognisable to many around the globe.

Many people have learned more about their ancestral identity after constructing family trees using information shared by other online. Digital sequencing of DNA means we can now unlock the secrets of what blessings and curses our forebears have handed down to us.

Human beings in the digital age can also maintain their identities as parent, child, sibling, or spouse if separated by distance. E-mail, instant messaging, audio and video streaming (such as Skype and Google Chat) services offered by agencies such as Anglican agency Mission to Seafarers proved to be a godsend to Philippino sailors around the world in the hours after a typhoon killed thousands back home.

Web-based distance learning is also helping men and women to flourish in ways they could never have before. Thanks to the Harvard Extension School initiative, those unable to afford a Harvard University degree can now take part in free online courses in
which they watch videos of the lectures on a range of topics. People who may never have finished basic schooling can now gain an online certificate of achievement from Harvard University. The Anglican Alliance is offering a similar online course to give Anglicans around the world certified skills in carrying out relief and development. Also the Bible Bible Project xii aims at equipping Christians to be Biblically literate disciples, both online and offline. Discovering new knowledge online changes how people see themselves: empowered, informed able, useful. The implications of such digital knowledge sharing is profound. In countries like China and Egypt, information about freedom and democracy in other countries have inspired individuals to claim the same for themselves.

As with any new innovation, there is a dark side to the digital age. Maintaining and understanding identity inevitably gets more complicated when human beings have to juggle not just only the traditional public/private faces, but also their online, global identities. The line between fact and fiction, truth and lies blurs. Some people succumb to the temptation to only present their ‘best’ self on Social Media platforms omitting some facts, fabricating others. Some people reject their God-given identities and intentionally pretend to be someone else online for nefarious and even deadly purposes.

Perhaps the biggest threat to spiritual wellbeing is when human beings choose to seek affirmation and ‘love’ only online. The most obvious danger is the easy access to online pornography via TV channels, DVDs and on websites that offer not only images and videos, but also instant access to live human beings. A more subtle and potentially insidious addiction for people online can be caused by the ‘Like’ button. In a cartoon based around a piece by comedian Marc Maron xiii about the Social Media Generation, he suggests that “emotionally we’re a culture of of seven-year olds...every status update is just a variation on a single request: WOULD SOMEONE PLEASE ACKNOWLEDGE ME?” He suggests, “All comments are then read as: “We see you, Marc. We love you, Marc. We care that you are there, Marc. Twitter and Facebook are my techno-parents sating the child in me.”

Jesus found his affirmation in his relationship with God: “Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?” Luke 2:49 (NIV), in his communities: “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” Matthew 12:48-49 (NIV), and in his purpose: “Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” John 14:16 (NIV)

Anglican priest, the Revd Dr John Joshva Raja who has taught on theology and communications in universities at both Bangalore in India and Birmingham in the UK firmly believes that the Church has role in teaching congregants (social) media literacy. Everyone should be able to understand the motivations of those who own and run communications platforms, be they traditional or new. He warns that there is also a risk that those with no access to technology will think considered, by themselves or others, as less than human. This is something that organisations like the World Association of Christian Communications xiv are working to counter.

Everyone should understand how they, as individuals, should root their identities in God while using—not being used by—digital technology to carry out their God-given mission.

**Intimacy – with others**

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord, they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”
Thought it's true that the news of Jesus’ works “spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee,” and many thousands heard him preach, Jesus’ connection with people was most profound in person. It has become clear that digital technologies allow us to connect with both new and existing communities, but for those connections to become genuine relationships people need to meet in person.

This is particularly true of the Anglican Communion’s Bonds of Affection. These are the relationships that many believe supersede the disagreements between Provincial Churches. A challenge that is difficult to overcome is how to engender the kind of deep relationships between Anglicans and Episcopalians around the world that cements these Bonds of Affection? While Anglicans everywhere share a common history, traditions and ways of worshipping, not being able to meet in person mean many of the members worldwide miss out on the kind of intimacy that is required for deep fellowship. Mobile phone technology, websites, vlogs, blogs, social media platforms and digital Anglican news delivery systems have all helped Anglicans around the world to identify themselves as twin citizens: local and global Anglicans. Nevertheless, the deepest relationships are formed when members of one Province meet with those of another.

Worryingly, it appears that we could actually be at risk of falling out of intimate fellowship with those Anglicans in our immediate community. Technology guru Sherry Turkle in her TED talk Alone Together xv has cautioned that “technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies.”

“Technology is seductive when its affordances meet our human vulnerabilities. And it turns out that we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Connectivity offers us for many of us the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. We can’t get enough of each other if we can have each other at a distance in amounts that we can control....Connection made to measure. That’s the new promise...

“We would rather text than talk. Online connections bring so many bounties, but our lives of continual connection also leave us vulnerable. Often we’re too busy communicating to think, too busy communicating to create, to busy communicating to really connect with people were with in the ways that would really count. In continual contact we’re alone together.”

This, of course, is one of the reasons the Church has been suspicious of the rise and rise of social media specifically and digital technology in general—the fear that digital technology is isolating and takes Christians away from the ‘real work’ of face-to-face evangelism and mission.

Nevertheless, as God saw fit to use the Roman Empire to spread Christianity around the world, the Church needs to recognise how ubiquitous digital technology is now and use it to God’s glory. And this is possible. Cyborg Anthropologist Amber Case says in her TED talk We are all cyborgs nowxvi:

“It's not that machines are taking over, it's that they're helping us be more human, helping us to connect with each other. The most successful technology gets out of the way and helps us live our lives.”
Intimacy – with God

It’s clear that, as with everything man-made, technology has the power to replace God in people’s affections. Sherry Turkle says in her talk: “People are compelled by the little red light on the Blackberry that tells them a message is waiting. I ask them why and they talk about their mobile device as the place for hope in their life, the place where something new will come to them, the place where loneliness can be defeated.” (My italics)

For some—especially young people—there is a risk of becoming increasingly emotionally dependent on their mobile device. In her TED talk, Amber Case says we are all actually cyborgs using technology to extend our mental selves.

The more people rely on keeping up to date with friends’ lives via social media and birthday reminders on their calendars, the more dependent they become on the phone or tablet or computer. This doesn’t mean people are better friends or family members. It just means that people are now hyper-connected. Our mobile devices enable us to be only one click away from anyone in our contact book, or our 2,000 Facebook friends, or the endless stream of people commenting on Twitter.

“People aren’t taking time for mental reflection any more,” says Case. “They aren’t slowing down and stopping [because they’re busy] being around all the ‘people in the [digital] room’ who are trying to compete for their attention...they're not just sitting there. And really when you have no external input, that is the time you have a creation of self, when you can do long-term planning, when you can figure out who you really are.”

For the Christian, that lack of ‘down time’ is a threat to prayer, to meditation, to connecting with God. If we are trying to be more human, we should instead emulate Jesus in that he “often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”xvii As T.S. Eliot wrote in his poem Ash Wednesday: “Where shall the word be found, where will the word. Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence.”

Purpose and impact

Jesus took himself of for solitary prayer early in the morning and late at night to, among other things, ready himself for the work he had been called to do. Though Anglicans do not believe we are justified by works, we do believe that “we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”xviii

Part of being human is having a purpose. Every human being who commits their life to following Christ has a calling to share Christ and his teachings with the whole world. At the 1988 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops from around the globe said: "Evangelism is the primary task given to the church." Just this month, Archbishop of York John Sentamu said very much the same to the Church of England General Synod.

Many of the facets of Christ’s ministry to “testify to the truth” of God and his Kingdom have, in some ways, been made easier in this digital age. We have already mentioned no longer having to travel physically to reach new communities with God’s message. It is possible to speak to someone’s situation and offer to prayer for them.
wherever they are. For Lent this year I offered my Facebook ‘friends’ 40 days of prayers. Several non-Christians asked me to pray for themselves, their friends or family members. People—one of whom lives in Australia—were touched that I’d thought to ask.

As Jesus embraced the culture and context in which he found himself, so are those Christians who intentionally spend some time in the World Wide Web. Some Anglican Communion bishops can be found blogging, tweeting, Facebooking, and more. A former colleague spent his evenings making Christian apologetic animations and posting them on the comments sections of atheist YouTube channels. Initial outrage turned to curiosity and then respectful conversation.

The Revd Sue Pegg said, “I recently carried out some research with twelve of the young people for my Ministerial Development Review as the effectiveness of Facebook in ministry. One question was ‘Does being a friend of Revd Sue’s on Facebook deepen your interest in church?’ All the young people said ‘Yes’. They also were unanimous in that if they had a problem they would first make contact by Facebook but then follow it up with a face to face meeting.”

PWDRF’s Simon Chambers quoted earlier also found that digital technology allowed him to pastor young people in need of support and advice: “While I’ll be the first to admit that online communication should never replace offline time spent in relationships, there are times when you can do things online that just can’t happen offline. One day, I was able to have three pastoral counselling conversations simultaneously [via instant messaging technology] - something you just can’t do in person! The other useful part of this conversation was that it was easier for two of the three young people I was talking with (at the time, I was a parish youth minister) to talk to me because there was no need for eye contact.”

In terms of teaching and learning, Christians and non-believers alike can switch on Christian cable TV stations (e.g. the Anglican Church of Nigeria recently launched its own channel) or access a myriad of sermon podcasts or videos online. E-books and other mobile devices mean instant access to key theological texts, to liturgy, Christian literature and, most importantly, Scripture. Tens of millions of people carry their Bible with them in their pocket thanks to Lifechurch.tv’s free YouVersion Bible app(lication).

There is little doubt that for those human beings whose ultimate purpose is to “fear God and obey his commandments” the digital age is one bursting with potential. In their bulletin *Digital Communication, the Church and Mission*, the CODEC Staff Team of St John’s College, Durham wrote: “There is something deeply incarnational about the digital age. At the beginning of Hebrews, the author tells us: *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe*. You could almost paraphrase that as: *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through papyrus and paper in many different ways, but in these last days, his Word is shown through the digital realm.*”

**Conclusion**

Being human is all about relationships—individual or communal. The deeper those relationships, the more human those involved become. The healthier those relationships, the healthier our sense of identity. The ultimate relationship, the most meaningful and most motivational is that with God.

The digital age offers us a chance to not only maintain our existing connections and restore broken ones, but to join new communities with people we otherwise might never have met. This, however, should be only the start of a relational journey, not the conclusion. Connecting online, even on a regular basis can be no supplement for face-to-face contact. That is when human beings offer themselves one another. Connecting online versus
meeting in person is a little like 1 Corinthians 13:12 “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

It is true that there is a risk of allowing the technology, the tools to dominate the person using them. However, for the Christian who finds their hope and identity in God, mobile devices, computers, and all things digital are a means to an end—sharing the Good News with those near and far.

Perhaps all of this is best summed up by the fact that it is said that the very first digital technology (a digital technology is one that combines 1s and 0s into more complex information) was the pipe organ: a key or stopper pressed is 1, released is 0. The original digital technology, then, was created to let human beings indulge in their most important relationship and worship their maker.

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i William F. Fore in his article “A theology of communication” from Media Development magazine, March 2011, p15
ii Being Human - A Christian Understanding of Personhood Illustrated with Reference to Power, Money, Sex and Time, Church of England Doctrine Commission, 2003
iii Ibid p16
iv Matthew 13:55 NKJV
v Mark 3:31 NIV
vi Matthew 27:37 NIV
vii Not his real name
viii Watch the BBC report on the initiative at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QO7Ppeq3UmY
ix In Chapter 23 “God Technology” of The Social Media MBA: Your competitive edge in social media strategy development and delivery, Ed. Christer Holloman
x http://www.facebook.com/digitalbible
xi http://www.edxonline.org
xii http://bigbible.org.uk/about/
xiii http://m.9gag.com/gag/a9d1151?ref=fb.s
xiv www.waccglobal.org
xv http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together.html
xvi Amber Case “We are all cyborgs now” at http://www.ted.com/talks/amber_case_we_are_all_cyborgs_now.html
xvii Luke 5:16 NIV
xviii Ephesians 2:10 NIV
xix In Digital Communication, the Church and Mission, the CODEC Staff Team of St John’s College, Durham, 2013