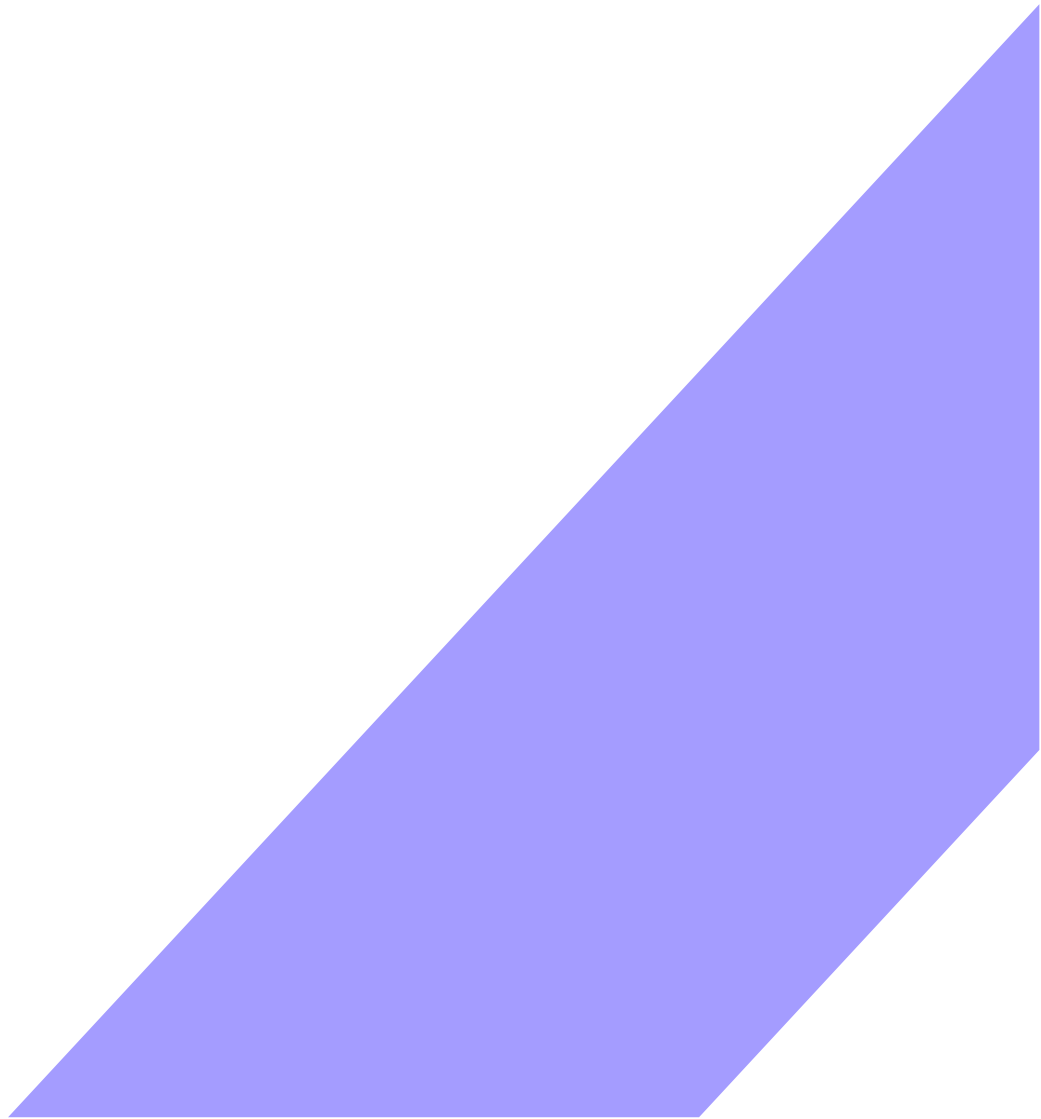


***Report on the
churches use of the Internet
2009-2010***



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Why is the Internet important for the Christian faith?

There are a lot of options available to the Christian who is trying to get the message of Jesus across to others. So why should Christians be bothered with the Internet?

In this article I'm going to try and explain why.

It's easy to be put off the Internet by talking about the technology that drives it. I've seen lots of eyes glazed over at the mere mention of technology. But technology is not the important part of the Internet. The technology is what drives the Internet, but the Internet is really so much more.

The Internet is, to put it very simply, a connection of people. The technology is important because it provides the means of joining people together but it is not what the Internet is all about. The Internet is about people.

The way that people receive information, and hence the way they make choices, is changing. The Internet is fast becoming the main source of information for people who are looking for answers. It is in the thought world that the battle for minds and hearts is being fought and the Internet has a great influence on the way people think.

In the past the way people think about the world has been shaped in ways other than the Internet, they have sought their information from other sources.

Traditional ways of getting information

Books

Traditionally books have been the way that Christians have sought to get their message across to others. Christians are book people. The bible has always played an important role in the faith of Christians and still remains the world's best selling book. Reports indicate that book sales are up - thanks to the Internet. However increased book sales are in fiction and what we might call 'light nonfiction' - these are books with more pictures than actual content. The more 'serious' books - the kind of books that might influence thinking - are in decline.

Here is a quote from an article that appeared in the Guardian in May 2009:

"The fat years of the printed word are over," says John Sutherland, the academic and author of several books on the history of publishing. "Even if books get dirt cheap, readers simply don't have the time or motive to invest in them. The old cultivated readership is not as solid as it was. The safe library sale

doesn't exist any more. There's been a loss of authority in the serious book." A former bookseller who is now a freelance literary publicist says: "There are plenty of good books going missing. Books that take five years to write. Publishers used to put them at the front of their catalogues. Nowadays the print runs are tiny for these books, about 2,000. Publishers say they can print more copies, but if they're printing 2,000 of something they're not going to get behind it. Because of publishers' falling profit margins, production values have gone down on some of these books. You're seeing paper that's turning yellow before it gets out of the shop. You've got publishers and literary agents blaming the bookshops and vice versa. You've got people going to literary festivals who'll pay £10 for a ticket to an author event but won't pay £20 for a history book."

Yet information sites on the Internet like wikipedia.org have seen exponential growth. Launched in 2001 they have risen from nothing to 1.5 million articles in 2005 and then a jump to over 3 million articles in 2009. With visitor traffic to match.

Newspapers

For many years newspapers were seen as being the main source of accurate information for most people. However the papers are in serious decline. Quoting from a blog article published on the Guardian web site on the statistics of decline:

"Consider first the overall daily national newspaper market. The monthly year-on-year drop comparing December 2008 to December 2007 was 4.5%. That compares with 2% (2007-6), 3.2% (2006-5), 1.7% (2005-4), 3.2% (2004-3) and 3.8% (2003-2). Clearly, therefore, the downward trend is accelerating.

I carried out the same survey for the Sunday nationals and the acceleration was even more marked. The decrease between December 2008 and December 2007 was 6.3%, far higher than the declines in the previous five years. (There was a 5.3% fall between 2005 and 2004 but the figures were skewed by the dramatic drop in sales of The Business, now defunct).

Now let's look at the daily sectors. The qualities lost 4.7% of their sales between December 2008 and 2007. This is by far the largest monthly year-on-year decrease over the five years. The middle market's 6.2% loss was far and away its highest (the next largest decrease was 3.3% (2005-4). As for the red-tops, the 3.5% fall was mid-range (the largest drop of 5.4% occurred in 2004-3 and there was a drop of 4.8% in 2006-5).

The relative stability of the red-tops' decline can be explained by the success of The Sun, aided by judicious price-cutting of course, in slowing the rate of its decline. The other three titles - Daily Mirror, Daily Star and Daily Record - have lost substantial sales at a fairly regular rate over the six years."

And from the Financial Times:

"The newspaper industry is collapsing, after decades of gradual decline. Unfortunately at this point, incumbents have few good options. No one knows the future, but my hunch is most traditional newspapers and weekly magazines in the US and UK will disappear, while others will hang on eking out minimal profits. A handful of survivors will continue to create economic value, probably limited to publications with outstanding quality, a clear point of view, and a distinctive voice (think the Economist, New Yorker, Financial Times, Wall Street Journal)."

Falling advertising sales have been blamed for loss of revenue, with this decline in revenue due to falling sales and advertising moving to the Internet.

Television

People love television! Surveys have indicated that in the UK adults have watched as much as 28 hours a week. It also seems that the number of people watching TV is remaining fairly static if not slightly improving according to figures released by BARB (Broadcaster's Audience Research Board).

However according to an International survey undertaken by IBM in 2007 it seems that people are spending less time watching T.V. and more time on the Internet so that in 2007 the figures had reached parity.

"The global findings overwhelmingly suggest personal Internet time rivals TV time. Among consumer respondents, 19 percent stated spending six hours or more per day on personal Internet usage, versus nine percent of respondents who reported the same levels of TV viewing. 66 percent reported viewing between one to four hours of TV per day, versus 60 percent who reported the same levels of personal Internet usage.

Consumers are seeking consolidated, trustworthy content, recognition and community when it comes to mobile and Internet entertainment. Armed with PC, mobile and interactive content and tools, consumers are vying for control of attention, content and creativity. Despite natural lags among marketers, advertis-

ing revenues will follow consumers' habits. "
<http://www-03.ibm.com/press/us/en/pressrelease/22206.wss>

Although a survey released by the National Statistics web site for 2006/2007 shows that in the UK there was still a gap in favour of television no one can deny that this gap is most definitely closing (these figures are for 2006/2007 and so by now 2009 the gap may well have disappeared).

There is also a decline in revenue for T.V. channels.

From the Financial Times (US):

"Broadcasters have marked 2009, their worst year in recent memory, by seeking a term other than "television" to describe the business of captivating couch potatoes.

An existential crisis is gripping TV executives, who now prefer to call their output "video". They face what newspaper executives witnessed a decade ago – big cash cow businesses in inexorable decline.

The consumption of broadcast media has fragmented across hundreds of cable channels, countless mobile phones, the YouTube broadcasting website, as well as TV's own digital ventures, such as Hulu and the BBC iPlayer. This all leaves the broadcast business at a critical moment.

As advertising – the industry's lifeblood – congeals, the threatened incumbents at the top of broadcast TV must redefine their businesses if they are to find growth once more.

In broadcasting, "we have an ad-supported business model that does not work," Chase Carey, chief operating officer of News Corp, said last month. "In the future, advertising will not pay all the bills," Gerhard Zeiler, RTL's chief executive, added last week.

Globally, broadcast TV advertising will drop 13 per cent this year, and decline 1.5 per cent through 2013 to \$116.2bn, according to PwC.

In the US, spending is forecast to fall 9 per cent this year to \$44.7bn as marketers move money into the areas of internet search and sponsorship. TV subscriptions, meanwhile, will rise 6.4 per cent through 2013 to reach \$199bn, reported Veronis Suhler Stevenson, the private equity group.

“The business is in decline,” said Jim Rutherford, managing partner of Veronis Suhler, the private equity firm. But “we’re not forecasting it will go away entirely”.

Still, recent events in broadcasting are disturbing, with expectations of a 15 per cent decline in annual “upfront” ad sales for the coming US programming season, and networks withholding more inventory than usual in the hope of commanding higher prices when the economy improves.”

According to a report on the BBC website online advertising has now overtaken T.V. advertising. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/8280557.stm>

T. V. is on the decline.

Radio

Seems to be heading in the same direction as T. V.

So what is the problem and why should this concern the church?

The situation is that the Internet is fast becoming the main source of information for the world. All the older forms of spreading information are dwindling while the Internet continues to rise. Those who market ideas are talking in terms of viral marketing, social marketing, opt-in marketing, etc. All terms relating to the way the Internet works.

This creates a problem for any group seeking to present its ideas to others. The traditional ways will still remain, though in a much more limited way, whilst the Internet takes precedence.

Of course some will want to say that the Internet is a fad - like all fads they will settle down and everything will return to normal. Those who think this way fail to understand what is truly happening. Things will not go back to what they were and although the technology that drives the Internet will change the central concept of a worldwide connection of people will not.

The problem is also a challenge. The problem is that the church needs to influence people in the way that they think. Although faith is not all about thinking it cannot be denied that thinking is an important part of faith - in particular for Christians. We may like to try and hide in a postmodern world and argue about the meaning of words but we actually claim that our faith is historical. That there is a point in time that an event actually happened and which now inspires us to follow the historic figure of Jesus Christ.

If we are to make any progress in making disciples, and I believe this is a fundamental part of what God asks of us, then we have to take the way that people think very seriously. We simply don't have the luxury of withdrawing from the world in the hopes that somehow, some place, it will suddenly come to understand the Christian point of view.

Christians need to be active in shaping the world view of people. Too often we feel we can only respond to the prevalent world view and step back from trying to influence it.

Sadly also those who have tried to influence world views end up sounding like clanging gongs as they seek to dictate behaviour with appropriate quotes from the bible. We cannot quote the bible in the hopes of influencing people whose world view doesn't accept the authority of the bible in the first place. The Internet has also proved to be a good place for Christian sabre rattling with many sites dedicated to aggressive, in your face, bible punching. Sites which do more to upset people than change them even if their intention is good.

Granted much of the way people think is still in the hands of those who educate societies thinkers. Universities are still very important places for world views to be established. It is in the University that future leaders, journalists, artists, etc have their world views formed. But this is beyond the scope of this article suffice to say that more and more Universities are using the Internet for research and spreading ideas.

It is also true that despite University involvement much of the information on the Internet is not produced by the experts with the best education in particular fields. Anyone with a little technical know how can build a web site and promote their ideas to others.

Anyone visiting a Christian web forum will soon discover the problems that are faced by many Christians. Forums are flooded with those who are Christians but have major questions, and with those who are out to discredit Christian faith.

Is the church interested in the Internet?

Although many churches and Christian organisations have web sites, few seem to take the web seriously. Church (and some Christian organisation) web sites are, in the main, put together by enthusiastic amateurs. Many church web sites still run on free web space even though it is possible to have business quality hosting for just a few pounds a year. There are many church web sites that never get updated or simply disappear leaving links to "site cannot be found" message.

Christian organisations often don't do much better than local churches. Web sites that are hard to use, ugly, and out of date are common. It is also not unusual to find sites that try and make use of every new technology going and end up confusing users.

There is also a distinct lack of web sites that offers a Christian viewpoint from the main denominations.

Despite it's major role in shaping world views it might appear that the church is not really interested in the Internet, but this may not entirely be the churches own fault.

the UK church faces big problems with the Internet:

a) the church in the UK is an ageing group where the majority are not really interested in the Internet (possibly because of technology boundaries). Despite the so called "silver surfers" being of interest on the Internet the majority of older people do not understand the Internet. But then why should they?

b) most of the information that church goers get about the Internet is from newspapers and T. V. Unfortunately this leads to a very skewed view of what the Internet is and what it is for. Headlines about child safety concerns and virus' that can grab your bank details paints a very bleak picture of what the Internet is. Few people in churches seem to understand the scale and impact of the Internet, or the opportunity that is there for the church.

Even those leaders in the church who use the Internet often only ever report their concerns. So we get sermons about how social networking is a danger for young people who are seeking to form deeper relationships. They are correct in their assessments but it is sadly just another reason for those who don't really understand the Internet to feel concerned about Christian usage.

This is less of a problem for Christians in the U.S.A. where there is greater church involvement. However I don't think this should be an excuse for the U.K. church to sit back and hope that the church in the U.S.A. will do all that is necessary.

The local nature of the Internet

Many people also fail to understand the local nature of the Internet. On the surface the Internet is a world reaching opportunity. However the 'great big wide world' view is not the full picture.

People in the UK think differently to people worldwide. What appeals to a user of the Internet in the UK might seem odd to someone from another country. Building sites that focus on a 'great big wide world' view is not always what is needed. To change thinking in the UK you need sites that appeal to UK people.

Churches in the UK must not be content that there are many sites in the English language about the Christian faith. We need to build sites that are UK focused.

If you are reading this page from another country then these points also apply to you, simply substitute UK for your own countries name.

If the church isn't interested then others are

It doesn't take long to discover web sites that attack Christianity. Google analytics reveals that whilst search interest in Christianity on the Internet is declining search interest in atheism is on the increase (see the analysis here). Of course there could be many reasons for this change but I believe it does reveal a trend that the church should be wary of.

Every day Christians may well be reading web sites that will knock their faith. The strong of faith will be challenged but the weak might well be distressed. Questions are then likely to be asked of clergy who are ill prepared to respond (some issues are quite complex and need a lot of research to give a reasonable response - sadly I've heard stories where clergy respond to questions in a patronising way because they obviously don't have a clue how to respond to the challenge).

I have had many conversations with those who are searching for answers to questions that have been posed by anti-Christian web sites. I have read appeals from people researching the Christian faith who have almost been convinced only to discover a site online that seeks to knock the faith they were seeking.

Here are some good examples of the kind of thing others will read from the Internet:

SFGate Website (<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/gate/archive/2006/04/14/notes041406.DTL>)

Here is a blog that is not for the sensitive (<http://chillinatthecabstand.wordpress.com/2008/03/25/why-god-is-an-asshole-part-i/>)

about.com - atheist section (<http://atheism.about.com/>)

From the UK's leading atheist (?) (<http://www.bowness.demon.co.uk/christ.htm>)

Leaving Christianity site (<http://sites.google.com/site/leavingxtianity/home>)

And so I could go on ...

Christians could of course ignore these sites and hope that somehow the problem will solve itself - or perhaps God will shut them down. However my experience is that God is not stopping these web sites and that he requires us to answer them.

An opportunity that only comes along once or twice every thousand years or so

The rise of the Internet is as significant (and some would argue more so) as the printing press.

This is not a fad or something that anyone can afford to simply play around with. This is possibly the most significant development in the history of mankind and is certainly the most significant development since the printing press in the world of information. It is now possible for anyone with an Internet connection to gain access to the thinking of both great thinkers and amateur thinkers alike.

People do understand that some thinkers have greater authority than others but they are also willing to listen and engage with the thinking of anyone.

It is also true that people trust well built web sites more than ones that are put together badly.

The church has an advantage over many other organisations seeking to make use of the Internet because it already knows how to network. The church has always been a network and so understands the concept. The Internet is just technology that helps to facilitate networks. The great advantage of the Internet is that in places local networks will connect to bigger networks. This will give a the church access to people on a scale it has never been able to before.

The Internet is very cheap to use. It is possible to reach people on a massive scale for a relatively small amount.

Over 50% of Internet users are under 45

Internet users under the age of 54 account for 75% of total Internet users. In the UK nearly 80% of the population now has access to the Internet (according to internetworldstats.com).

It is significant that the majority of Internet users are those who are missing from churches. This is not because being on the Internet is more fun than being in church but because these have been the hardest group for the church to reach.

I'm not going to explore the reasons for the churches failure to reach these groups but it does suggest that the Internet offers a big opportunity for finding people in this age group.

If the church is to reach this group then the Internet would appear to be a prime place for mission.

However the problem is that the majority of church members are in the age groups that do not use the Internet as much as the missing 75%. This means that the church is likely to feel that the Internet is of less importance and will, perhaps, be less interested in using it for mission.

Not all that is done in secret is bad

The Internet is an ideal way to promote a change of belief because it is so anonymous. You can explore things on the Internet that you wouldn't want your friends or relations knowing that you were doing it.

This gives Christians a great opportunity to overcome the embarrassment factor of exploring the faith. People can explore whilst they are free from the pressures of having to conform.

For those of us from a fairly easy going white European background perhaps we will just be saving face but there are people from other backgrounds for whom exploring Jesus can result in bullying and family rejection.

The Internet enables people to explore what would normally be taboo.

The Internet is not just about knowledge

In this report I have focused on knowledge but that is not the only way in which the Internet can be used.

Many people are using the Internet to keep in touch with old friends and to find new ones (I once heard the Internet described as one big dating agency).

In an age where relationships are becoming more and more virtual perhaps there is a place for an organisation that believes passionately in the importance of real relationships.

However just saying this will do nothing to address the problem and practical help is required.

What can be done?

I am going to suggest some things that the church could do address the situation.

- ✓ Commitment from all denominations to Internet mission.
- ✓ A coordinated approach between the denominations
- ✓ More Christian 'authority' web sites either sponsored/produced by mainline denominations or an approval scheme (e.g. denominations lend weight to a site with official approval)
- ✓ Online ministry - both lay and ordained
- ✓ Research into Internet mission
- ✓ Greater use of the Internet for Christian education
- ✓ Christian leaders to encourage online Christians
- ✓ Every local church to have a 'professional looking' web site and every local church to be encouraged to be committed to Internet mission
- ✓ Every Christian agency/organisation to be encouraged to consider the Internet as of prime importance

Some of these things may well already be in place without me knowing about it. However even if they are in place it appears that the strategy at present is not really working.

Conclusion

The Internet is not going to go away. It is already having a big impact on the way people think and this influence is set to grow.

I personally remain unconvinced that the church in the UK has understood a) what the Internet actually is or b) how important the Internet is. Of course this is also true of many businesses so the church is not alone. There are some notable exceptions to this and many of the denominational main web sites are excellent.

Christian web sites in general have improved but there are still too few quality web sites. It seems sad to me that one of the most popular Christian web sites in the UK is one that pokes fun at the church. It still feels to me like the church is playing at the Internet.

Churches need to take a pro-active role in the Internet and not see it as an optional extra that might enhance other work being done.

The Internet is not the answer to all the churches problems but it is an opportunity that the church should be grabbing with both hands.

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Christopher trained and served as a Methodist minister at Wesley College in Bristol. He left itinerant ministry in 1999 and has since been exploring ministry online.

His ministries have included:

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