

# THE IMPACT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ON PERSONAL IDENTITY

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**FOR OVER A THOUSAND YEARS, EUROPE WAS SHAPED BY A STORY.** That story was the Bible and, as Lesslie Newbiggin reminded us in *The Bible in Transmission*, Spring 1997, it conferred on European civilisation something unique: “an interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor within history”. He went on to say that the mind of a society shaped by Christian storytelling helped provide answers to those questions of identity every person asks: What is the meaning of my life? Where am I going? What choices are available to me?

We no longer live in a society shaped by a story, but in a turbulent world continuously shaped and reshaped under two main influences: information technology and the search for identity. (This, in fact, is a vastly simplified summary of Castells’ seminal trilogy that offers a sociological analysis of the “Information Age”.)

The effects of these two influences pervade every area of life. People experience the effects as a change in the sense of identity derived from vocation as jobs disappear or are transformed; as the opportunity to “choose” different identities, both through the facilities of the Internet and by the “lifestyle choices” made possible through IT-driven consumerism; and as the shadow of a data-image that can affect certain choices, for example whether a mortgage can be obtained.

These are just three examples, but each has implications for the way we, as Christians, view our society and our role within it. I will look at each in turn to highlight what I believe are some significant issues surrounding the impact of IT on personal identity.

## IDENTITY AS SEEN BY OTHERS

“What do you do?” people ask, as a way into understanding who you are. Work has been one of the primary ways of relating to, and acting in, society. As such, it has become tethered to personal identity. It is understandable then, that we might bristle at the question if we have been made redundant, are not in long-term employment, are doing multiple jobs to make ends meet, or have chosen voluntary work in the home or elsewhere. We may think this is what I am doing for now, but it isn’t really me.

Jobs are changing at an accelerating pace as corporations invest in IT as a management tool that will enable them to grow and compete in global markets. For their employees, work is often transformed or relocated. The result for many is an identity crisis.

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The link between the Christian identity and work has its origins in the sixteenth century, when Luther asserted that being a “full-time Christian” was not the preserve of priests, monks and nuns. He argued that service through work – in which he included, for example, motherhood – was just as much a Christian vocation.

Luther’s radical idea, helpful and appropriate at the time, sits less comfortably in today’s society with its volatile job market. Someone may train for a specific job that they see as their vocation – but if the job vanishes, how can it be understood as a Christian vocation? The job role is no longer a reliable source of identity; we need another way to shape it.

Volf, in his book *Work in the Spirit*, suggests that our identity is better understood as those attributes in which we find ourselves particularly able, i.e. our giftedness. The charismatic gifts are therefore a better model for the Christian perspective on work.

Then the answer to the question “What do you do?” is about the contribution we bring to individuals and organisations. It is not the job or the position that characterises us and gives us identity in relation to others, but what we can give to it. If we follow this route to shaping identity, affirming each other into individual giftedness takes on a new importance.

#### IDENTITY AS SEEN BY US

Internet communication offers opportunities to “play” with identity. Fantasy and role-play, both natural and important functions of child development, are fostered by adult chatrooms and virtual reality. Hidden behind the screen, a participant can adopt whatever characteristics they want, and the particular quality of the experience calls forth new parts of self or – as commentators say – new multiple selves. And why not, they argue, provided it is not for illegal purposes (as when a paedophile masquerades as a child) or does not cause multiple personality disorders.

In her book about the psychology of computer use, one such commentator, Sherry Turkle, extols the virtues of having multiple selves – in other words, having an identity composed of many invented selves through which one can cycle, selecting and assuming as appropriate. This does not mean simply exploring different facets of personality. Rather, it is presenting, through new communication channels, whole new sets of characteristics. Unconstrained by bodily presence, one can choose, for example, age, sex or ethnic origin.

Turkle’s criticism of sticking to a single identity is that it produces “strong pressure on people to take responsibility for their actions and see themselves as unitary actors”. What a striking antithesis to Newbiggin’s description of the Bible story.

Other sociologists, including the Christian writer, David Lyon, describe other new kinds of identity. There is, for example, the consumer self that shops for an identity, making continual lifestyle choices about clothes, goods, neighbourhood, peer group, leisure and entertainment, and church. A variation on this theme is the expressive self, which separates itself from the surrounding influences and says, in effect, “If it feels good, then it must be the real me.” This version of self retains a sense of personal story, but is disassociated from group norms such as morality.

All these kinds of self – multiple, consumer and expressive – have one thing in common: they deny a single identity with moral responsibility. Moreover, individuals are diverted from their own, personal stories. Counsellors say that many of the people they meet do not know what to do next in their lives; they have so many paths to choose from that they feel paralysed. Each person needs to understand his or her own story, seeing the past in order to apprehend the present and so move forward to the future.

If these are some of the consequences of the prevailing culture, then the Church’s task is to retell and relive the Bible story in a way that enables Christians to develop strong, integrated personal identities.

New technologies have some other more subtle effects on the way we shape our identities. Consider, for example, how mobile phones might cause a shift in a relational identity. “Why doesn’t your father get a mobile phone so he can call for help, instead of you ringing him all the time?” seems a reasonable suggestion. But it contains a hidden temptation. Instead of calling and thereby expressing love and care for him, I might be inclined to leave him alone, assuming he is fine until he calls me. In the relationship, his identity is altered from parent to dependant.

As another illustration of this type of effect on a parent-child relationship, I talked recently to a man whose mother constantly contacted him via his mobile phone. Consequently, he felt he had never left home. She was unwilling, he had said, to let him grow up and leave.



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► In both these cases, the effects are indeed subtle, but they have implications for our moral selves, and explicit biblical themes apply. Are we to act as if the ethical principles in the Bible are unimportant, or do we examine the use of technologies in respect of them?

Even subtler, perhaps, is the way that information technology elicits and emphasises certain aspects of self, especially articulation and assertiveness. While these are not necessarily undesirable in themselves, we might also ask how the fruit of the Spirit will be evident in email communication and chatrooms. How will gentleness and self-control – more often evidenced by presence or action or even silence – be made visible here? Our communication technologies create a climate that favours different fruit.

#### IDENTITY AS SEEN BY COMPUTERS

“Hanging around with prostitutes and tax collectors” was a description of Jesus used by the Pharisees. Based on that evidence, they made their deductions about what kind of person he was. This use of partial evidence and faulty deduction is still with us today – and programmed into computers. It is inherent in credit agencies: those databases that are consulted every time a person wants to borrow money, open a bank account, or get a mortgage. From the information provided – name, address and financial credentials – a computer calculates whether someone is a good or bad risk for a lender. The credit agency computers are programmed so that “good” people are those who borrow and pay back on time. If you have never borrowed, you are a bad risk. And if you happen to have the same name or address as someone who proved a bad risk, their credit rating might become yours. Such computer-based decisions can have enormous effects on people’s lives and their options for the future.

These data identities are built up by systematic monitoring in many corners of our lives. With credit agencies, the data is drawn from a wide range of sources, including financial transactions, credit card payments, bank account spending patterns and requests to borrow. Lifestyle patterns also form data identities. There are a few large services that collect and analyse these patterns using forms people complete either voluntarily or as part of other applications. CCTV, car number plate recognition and mobile phone zones all monitor our geographical movements; our TV watching patterns are recorded if we have digital television (this was one of the main reasons for its introduction). The corporations, whose goods and

services we use, tend to act like Big Brother. They seek to build up identities for us in order to optimise their services and enhance their competitiveness.

Corporations use data analysis to send junk mail, such data analysis may be a trifle annoying. It is also used to predict what might happen in the future which could have powerful and potentially devastating consequences. Insurance companies requesting DNA analysis, or fraud services predicting from their categorisation that you might be a risk – this type of use could result in people paying more for services or being refused jobs. Clearly, there are protective boundaries we should seek to implement in law.

#### BUILDING INTEGRATED IDENTITIES

As I write this, I am struck again by the way in which the issue of personal identity is bound up with the roles of child and adult. If we believe that becoming a mature adult in the Christian sense is about becoming a responsible actor in history, then we have to face up to the fact that much of our present culture seems to entice us to continue playing as children.

If, as Newbiggin reminded us, the uniqueness of the Bible lies in the way it tells a story to produce responsible actors in history, what should we be doing in this, our IT-dominated world to become those responsible actors? I think the answer lies in Christian formation: in the community of faith that sets our norms and from which influential men and women emerge. That does not necessarily mean people who will perform on a large stage, although they will be included. “Small” acts are also important, their significance often being unappreciated, as when the unsuspecting Ananias met Saul. Similarly, it includes those living lives of simple faithfulness and grace that change the social mood around. In what ways, then, can churches or communities of faith help each person discover their action in history?

The risk, I suggest, is that many people are subsumed into their church story – and that may fragment identity in the ways we have described, either sequentially (“today my identity is in this kind of church”) or in parallel (“Monday life is totally different to Sunday life”).

The challenge for the Church, therefore, is to model integrated identity; to enable each individual to find themselves in relation to Christ as revealed through Scripture and in the context of this world; to help them

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understand their own story and find themselves on a path to wholeness.

Such communities of faith would be affirming places in which we identify, support and build each other's giftedness. They would also help us to build moral selves, knowing responsibility in all the roles we have. This would include having places to discuss, for example, the use and effects of new technologies, such as mobile phones and email, as well as being willing to fight injustice resulting from the use of technology, such as a wrongful computer-generated decision affecting a member. They would seek to honour all the characteristics displayed by the fruit of the spirit at the same time as observing and noting in each other the challenges to our identities. ■