

Cosmic shifts

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 16, 2000](#) issue

If you were around any of the years in this chronology you probably didn't notice—I didn't—the instant effect of the following:

1944—first automatic, general purpose digital computer;

1951—first commercial use of computer, Univac;

1954—first practical silicon transistors;

1959—Texas Instruments invents Microchip;

1964—IBM sets up the first big operating system, OS/360;

1969—first commercial on-line service, CompuServe;

1969—beginnings of the Internet, ARPA-NET;

1975—Microsoft founded by Bill Gates and Paul Allen;

1981—first IBM personal computer, MS-DOS;

1984—Apple develops Macintosh PC with a mouse;

1989—development of World Wide Web begins;

1990—laptops (I did notice that right off);

1992—general release of www. browser;

1994—Netscape Communications, dominant browser.

I learned all this from *USA Today*, which learned from almanacs and encyclopedias. Now, in the earliest days of 2000, something else happened. It's summarized by the *Economist* (January 15): "For once, superlatives and the hype seem justified. The \$150 billion takeover of Time Warner by America Online is not just another record-breaking deal. . . . It is . . . an 'inflection point'—one of those events that have the

potential to change the competitive landscape so fundamentally that nothing can be the same again.”

Apparently the implications for broadcasting and narrowcasting, for social glue and public ethos, are enormous.

Why bring up all this talk about the role of the Internet and Big Mergers in respect to human capabilities, responsibilities and fear? Here’s why:

The other day a rabbi asked me for a list of the religious thinkers, social philosophers and theologians who have made sustained efforts to understand all these technological milestones in the light of religious traditions. He didn’t care how long the list would be; he was ready to take this issue on in a sustained way.

The list was short. In fact, it was nonexistent. This does not mean that no one has given any thought to it or written on it. Quentin Schultze’s article in this issue shows that he, for one, has given lots of thought to the topic. It may be that I have a dim bulb to shine in the corners of the theological world. Maybe the last time there was this kind of cosmic shift, the invention of movable type and the printing press half a millennium ago, theologians didn’t ponder it, they just used it—as we use computers and the Internet and the instruments of huge mergers.

I need help, to answer the rabbi. Please, send us names of theologians and other religious thinkers who have had something to say on such subjects. We’ll pass their names on to readers, and maybe even have some of them say something on these pages. Oh, you can e-mail your answers to main@christiancentury.org