Technology and identity

By Carol Howard Merritt
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Recently, I joined Edward J. Blum for a brown-bag lunch at Auburn Seminary on "The Material Church in a Digital Age." In our time together, we discussed how the digital explosion changes the ways in which we understand God, our communities, and ourselves. These are some of my thoughts from our discussion, as I focused on how the digital age forms and informs our identities.

Evolving extensions. Marshall McLuhan observed that technology becomes extensions of our selves. He pointed to the car as an extension of the foot. With the rise of the suburbs, we understand how the car has almost completely replaced walking. Likewise, the cell phone becomes an extension of our ear, and we can hear people on the other side of the globe with our devices. Tweeting becomes an extension of our mouths, as the quick quotes broadcast to our followers. When we livestream, we have an extension of our eyes. Search engines like Google or cloud storage becomes an extension of our memories.

What does this have to do with church? Our bodies do not only extend when we travel, hear, speak, see, or remember, but they also extend in worship. The question of our extensions goes to the heart of what many of us are struggling with in our practice. When Eric Elnes livestreams worship at Darkwood Brew, what is the nature of our communion and community in that space? Can worship become an extension of our selves? What do we lose or what do we gain in the process?

Altering avatars. Jaron Lanier, suggest that our basic, human architecture is changing and Web 2.0 has a dehumanizing effect. He points to research that says a tall, thin avatar helps us have a more positive self-esteem. I experienced this when I did a book "signing" at a church in Second life. I don't know my way around that virtual world, so Kimberly Knight constructed an avatar for me. It looked just like me, but my skin was flawless, my legs were extended and my body was thin. As a five-foot-tall curvy person, it was a strange feeling to watch myself walking around like I belonged on a runway rather than crouched in front of my computer.

Do we think about how these avatars affect us? Are we turning our identities into commodities as we learn to "brand" ourselves through websites and social media? And how are avatars impacting our youth? What about an emerging generation who constructs their avatars along with their own understanding of themselves? What about a generation of children who have easy access to pornography? How does this affect a budding sense of sexual identity?

Ersatz identities. As a parent, I felt it was important to encourage my child to interact with technology at an early age. She was drawn to it, so we navigated the world of the web together as I tried to make sure that she was as safe as possible. We make sure that our kids are protected on the web by making sure that they don't give out any personal information, like names or addresses. And so children begin to create online identities that are intentionally different from their flesh and blood realities. They also generate things—books reviews, fan fiction, caricature art, friendly communities, filtered photos—all under counterfeit identities.

We expect this from children and we teach them the art of constructing different identities, but then, at some point, we consider it dishonest. We become angry when we read a blog about a lesbian woman in Syria and we find out he's a [white guy from Virginia](). When does it become unethical? And what are we teaching our children when we tell them that they are only safe as someone else?

Analyzing anonymity. How is anonymity affecting our relationship with our communities? We know that there is a certain freedom in anonymity, as men and women are able to speak against their abusive environments or find a voice in oppressive systems. But [studies]() have also shown that anonymity can dehumanize and increase cruelty. We see this on a regular basis on the Internet. Somehow, when our identities are hidden from one another, incivility, aggression, or cruelty can heighten. Looking at this theologically, is the image of God somehow distorted in our online interactions? As people of faith, should we be concerned about anonymity on the Internet if it has such a dark side?

Criticizing creativity. Part of the excitement of the Internet is that our creativity gets an immediate response. We can put a blog post up and it generates immediate energy—praise, criticism, or controversy can erupt if the post goes viral. But, as [Scientific American reports](), reader comments affect what people think—negative responses have adverse consequences on the reception of the work, even if the responses are completely without merit. Blog posts are not the only work up for

critique. A one star Amazon review from someone who says she never read the book carries the same weight as the five star reviewer who poured over the book.

What happens to a society's ability to create when everything is seen through the lens of the critical? What happens when we are always one-step removed from the creative work? What are we doing to the artists in our society, to those who work as co-creators with God?

I have to agree with Lanier. I believe that technology is changing the nature of our selves. Yet, when I travel among different religious communities, many leaders focus on whether they ought to be on Facebook or not. I'm worried that our theological imaginations have not kept pace with our technological developments and I hope that in the decades to come, we can begin reflecting theologically on how our identities evolve.