Lost in the digital cosmos: Trying to ask the right questions

by Quentin J. Schultze in the February 16, 2000 issue

Writer Jon Katz recently said that news coverage of the Internet lurches “from one extreme to the other.” Either the Net is “a dread menace or it’s a Utopian vision.” Journalism, he concluded, “has been asleep at the switches,” because the Net is “not simply a story about technology, but it’s a revolutionary change in the society and culture.” As a result, journalism “is in the sad position of having to play catch-up, if it can.”

Perhaps the church is playing catch-up as well. Denominations are perplexed about how to use the Net wisely. Most congregations seem divided about new technologies. Religious periodicals are waiting for the dust to settle, hoping to learn from the success or failure of mainstream media in the digital world. Christian colleges are sauntering into the electronic age just in time to hang on to students who would otherwise follow the technology to schools that promise laptop computers and port-per-pillow networks in dormitories.

Meanwhile, many large parachurch groups are blasting into cyberspace without a clear understanding of the long-term financial costs and organizational demands. Mesmerized by fund-raising potential, they hope to tap into Silicon Valley cash. They smell the fragrant surpluses from successful initial public offerings, stock options and equity stakes. One successful player in the Valley said recently that he wants the church to compete in the big leagues of cyberspace with the “Yahoos” of the world.

Is the church catching up or getting further behind? Do we even know how to define “ahead” and “behind”? To paraphrase Abbott and Costello: “Who’s on first.com?”

Walker Percy contended in *Lost in the Cosmos* that humankind has lost the connection between reality and perception. Our ability to associate cultural symbols with ultimate referents somehow evaporated over time—a kind of linguistic devolution, perhaps.

Movie critic and historian Neal Gabler, in his fine new book *Life the Movie*: *How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, locates the source of Percy's lament in Hollywood moviemaking. Gabler says that we are witnessing "the triumph of entertainment over life itself." Ironically, his thesis is anchored largely in an electronic world of film and television, while part of the world now travels at breakneck speed into a future of bits, bytes and techno-boosterism.

I, too, am lost in the computerized cosmos. But I have an idea about some of the questions that the church should be asking. Maybe if we can discern the right questions, we can begin to unravel the digital complexities of contemporary culture. Then it might be possible to offer a few sane suggestions for congregations, denominations, parachurch organizations, religious media, seminaries and colleges. So here are 20 questions to post on each of Bill Gates's many doors. (At the rate his behemoth company is buying up digital rights, he will probably own this essay someday, anyway.)

1) *What is digitalization doing to community life*, *including congregations*? All the hubbub about "virtual communities" seems to reduce community life to "common interest" and nonincarnational interaction. Wendell Berry anchors community in moral trust and geographic place. I am not willing to reject the value of cyberspace for helping the church to build community, but can we really have community without real location and authentic relationships? We seem to be using the concept of community too loosely and superficially.

2) *Who gets to participate in discourse about the digital future*? Cyber-gurus are celebrating the "democratic," "inclusive" and "liberating" character of digital technologies. They may be overstating the case.

Why are so many people around the world excluded from the network—effectively excommunicated because they lack the technology or the expertise to use it? Few African Americans are inside Silicon Valley's power structure. Anthony Walton wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* that the "glittering cybercities on the hill, the latest manifestation of the American Dream," actually "shed the past and learn to exist without contemplating or encouraging the tragedy of the inner city." In *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, Albert Borgmann says that "the technological culture is the largely unspoken but pivotal issue of liberal democracy."

Within religious institutions we also find remarkable gaps in cyber-authority and cyber-participation. Not all laity are excluded. But the new technologies might be subverting traditional ecclesiastical authority and empowering only selected dissenters within religious institutions. Or they could be cementing existing institutional structures and cloning Silicon Valley's culture in the church. Which people should we invite to the conversation? Here's a thought: Could it be that we are excluding the bread-and-butter membership in favor of a new group of techno-prelates who just happen to agree with denominational officials? Paulo Freire's high-touch experiences with Brazilian literacy programs might teach us how to enfranchise digitally illiterate people in developed societies.

3) *What is aesthetically pleasing in a digital world's spiritual vision*? The church has always tried to sacramentalize the faith for real people in an everyday physical world. Christian aesthetics dignifies the ordinary. Will the church capture this sense of spiritual beauty in a cyber age? Is *Wired* magazine our aesthetic model? What about the fancy new industrial "campuses" where high-tech kids work for their video-game money and where executives display their postmodern art? Where should we stand with church architecture, hymnody, liturgical elements and the like?

To put it oddly, are we still in the entertainment mode of the auditorium or have we moved on to the minimalist world of Dilbert? Maybe the church needs a gifted cartoonist to illuminate the aesthetic plight of congregational workers who are increasingly staring at computer monitors in their corporate-style cubicles. The electronic media celebrated hype and hope. Information culture seems to enjoy poking fun at hypocrisy and hubris. The cyber-aesthetic is critical and informal. How should the church respond?

4) *What are people's liturgical expectations in a multimedia world*? Perhaps we are moving from liturgy as "integrated show" (the electronic era) to liturgy as "fragmented experience" (the digital "surf"). On the other hand, the growing interest in liturgical renewal seems to reflect a taste for personal and experiential worship. Could digital media revitalize participatory liturgies? One serious seeker sent me an e-mail note requesting information about how to participate in the sacraments online.

5) *What do people "hear" in a digital world*? If Marshall McLuhan was right, aspects of the spiritual life are disappearing from the church's religious radar. Changes in the dominant media invariably alter our sensorial perceptions. How will pastors and

evangelists reach high-tech people who might be tone-deaf to particular ideas, doctrines and theologies? What is “liberation theology” for baby boomers and Generation Xers who are capitalizing (literally as well as figuratively) on online stock trading and e-commerce? What do computer-gaming kids hear in the world around them—apart from the ping and pong? I doubt that they easily hear the rhythms of nature or perceive the heavens declaring the glory of the Creator.

6) *What is the newly emerging balance among Christian traditions*? The visual, emotional TV culture paved the way for the rise of the charismatic movement and the growth of neo-Pentecostalism. Perhaps the textual orientation of cyberspace will reinvigorate the literate modes of Calvinism and other confessional groups. Menlo Park Presbyterian seems to be packing in the Silicon Valley crowd. Do attendees want doctrine? Maybe Eastern Orthodoxy will have its day in the court of cyber-opinion. After all, some people call this the multimedia era.

7) *Can digital technology revive cross-generational communication in Christian institutions*? The church has adjusted itself almost thoroughly to the ways that the entertainment industry has carved out products for each three-year “generation.” Seniors in high school hardly want to share a church education class, let alone a mission trip, with freshmen. Many congregations have a Balkanized “family night” with special videos for each church segment. Now computers offer “individualized instruction” for each church niche. The church looks more and more like a mirror of North America’s fragmented consumer markets.

The faster we extend religious culture across geographic space, the more it seems to dissipate through time. Canadian scholar Harold Adams Innis created a theory of communication based on each medium’s bias toward time or space. He argued that we cannot have it both ways: our communication will tend to support either cultural permanence through time or cultural continuity across geographic space. McLuhan later put a positive spin on Innis’s dire warnings, heralding the Global Village and posthumously becoming the patron saint of *Wired* magazine. Gates’s new book, *The Speed of Thought*: *Using a Digital Nervous System*, cashes in on McLuhan’s romantic, quasi-theological vision of humankind’s power to overcome space and time. Can new technologies really help us to integrate the various subcultures and demographic breakouts that constitute the church? Or will they worsen our generational fragmentation?

8) *What is effective church education in a wired world*? New technologies always provide opportunities for the church to reassess its educational mission and techniques, although the surrounding culture tends to dictate how the church will respond. Common-sense thinking says that churches should rev up their newfound techno-gadgets, from DVDs to computer software. Perhaps the technology could actually shift education back to a shared enterprise, in which congregants prepared and produced rather than merely consumed church education.

The church is invariably tied to what happens in public and private education, learning many of its educational habits and sensibilities from the schooling establishment. So where are the schools headed? How will the schools' rhetoric and praxis shape what happens in the churches? Should the religious community be dialoguing with educational researchers?

In general, the educational establishment seems to be adopting variations on the "technological sublime," believing in the value of teaching without walls and instructors. Some of the emerging educational gurus claim great strides in "teaching content" through the Net and other distance technologies. Maybe so, but what content *cannot* be measured? What about teacher-student relationships and mentoring, serendipitous as well as prefabricated learning, interpersonal dialogue and discipleship? Could the right digital technology work synergistically with traditional modes of teaching to produce the best of both worlds?

9) *Will cyber technologies further integrate the church into mainstream consumer culture*? To put it differently, what is holiness in a postmodern world filled with e-commerce and what Daniel Boorstin calls "consumption communities"? If anything, digitalization seems to dissolve distinctions between sacred and secular. Cyberspace itself is filled with many options for religious identity, but they seem to be void of clear propositional and cultural distinctions. One major exception is online cults, such as the Hale Bopp Comet community in San Diego that committed mass suicide in 1996. Cyberspace seems to be encouraging both consumerism and a plethora of anticonsumerism movements.

10) *Does digital communication tend to strengthen or weaken people's religious commitments*? Cyberspace seems to divide and unify culture at the same time. Some Christian institutions are using new technologies to revive and reengineer themselves—to recapture their mission and to recommunicate that mission to themselves and to the world. In fact, the simple task of creating a Web site has

forced some churches and perhaps a few denominations to ask themselves who they really are. At the same time, the new technologies have made it far easier for congregants to investigate other, online religions.

11) *Does the cyber world favor religious popularization over tradition*? The rapid growth of Web sites devoted to reclaiming traditional church documents, historical practices and classical literature of faith is extraordinary. Harry Plantinga's Christian Classics Ethereal Library (http://ccel.org) is publishing online and on CD-ROM thousands of noncopyrighted Christian documents, from St. Athanasius and John Donne to C. H. Spurgeon and Dostoevsky. Various church traditions, including the Anabaptist and the Roman Catholic, have established remarkably helpful digital databases of information about their past and current beliefs. But the majority of popular Christian Web sites seems to be lost in the digital ether, with no sense of their own location in religious time and space. They reflect the entrepreneurial spirit of popular religion—pragmatic and creative, even if historically disconnected or theologically unsophisticated.

12) *What kind of witness is the church in digital culture*? To put it more starkly, what does the world think of Christian faith as expressed in cyberspace? We now know what happened with the televangelists. Many viewers acquired a festering, lingering distrust of the church, especially Christians' forays into politics and fund raising. The most popular religious Web site, the Gospel Communications Network (http://www.gospelcom.net), banned both fund-raising and politics when it began in 1995. Should the rest of the digital church go the same route? What would an authentic Christian presence look like on Web-TV, DVD or the Net?

The problem, of course, is that digital media are highly varied, and the church will not be able very easily to limit its witness to one time or group. Cyberspace, in particular, seems to foster the cacophony of Babel more than the rhetorical precision of Mars Hill.

13) *How might we use new technologies to reinvigorate religious dialogue rather than merely to exacerbate mass media's tendency toward monologue*? All the hoopla about online chat aside, there might be some opportunities for enlivening discourse among seminary students and faculty, within congregations, across denominations and perhaps even between different Christian groups around the world. Here's a cosmic thesis: the most interactive technologies, and the most dialogic uses of technologies, offer the greatest potential for both evangelism and

community. Therefore, in a digital age we must address not only the role of high-tech monologue, but also how to reinvigorate interpersonal dialogue, where authenticity and trust merge into incarnated relationships. Without a counterbalance, high-tech religious communication could disenfranchise high-touch, lay-driven ministry. Transmission is not the same as communication.

14) *Will digital developments help the church recognize and reclaim its God-given responsibility as a caretaker of Creation*? Gabler's critique of entertainment culture argues that North Americans create their lives in the image of popular culture. Fair enough. But perhaps entertainment offers a particular vision of the relationship between humankind and the Creation. In the electronic milieu, we tend to become watchers of Creation—what novelist Jerzy Kosinski once called "videots." Maybe digital media could empower religious groups to become producers of shalom. In any case, our relationship with the physical world will now be mediated through digital technologies, for good and for bad.

15) *What kinds of regulatory policies would best serve church and society*? The current telecommunications frenzy is based largely on a "high" communication policy that values rapid, long-distance transmission and devalues local, slow, dialogic communication. In fact, it's getting cheaper and easier to consume digital messages from afar, and comparatively more expensive to make a telephone call to a friend one town over in a different area code. Do current regulations favor international media conglomerates at the expense of local, traditional and distinct cultures?

Some postmodern critics suggest that the digital landscape may be little more than a seductive buzz of messages from no one in particular to everyone in general. Is this what society and church want or need? If not, what kinds of regulatory standards could also facilitate a "low" policy that respects existing cultures, encourages critical discourse, values history and empowers even religious institutions? The church has an enormous stake in both how the telecommunications market functions and who determines communications policy.

16) *How can theological education use the new technologies wisely*? So far I see little wisdom in most of the rhetoric about educating seminarians for the 21st century and creating effective distance-education programs. Not that these are bad goals. But seminaries first have to determine appropriate educational uses of new technologies. How can different media forms be combined synergistically? Which

technologies will produce long-lasting impact rather than short-term techno-sizzle? Seminaries face tremendously important stewardship issues because there is only so much technology, money and expertise to go around. Wisdom is sparse.

The current gap between ministers and most seminaries on this issue is like the Grand Canyon. Pastors generally seek practical advice, whereas seminaries are part of an academic enterprise with its own culture and agendas. The gap between lay leaders and theological institutions is probably even more staggering. What should seminaries be teaching about contemporary culture and technology? Where is the historical and—dare we say it?—theological wisdom about media technology? How can seminaries address the synergistic value of print, oral, electronic and digital culture for proclaiming the gospel, building the church community and educating the clergy and laity? In a digital world, we may all witness the collapse of formerly compelling distinctions between high and low culture, theological education and spiritual formation, and theory and praxis. Perhaps these kinds of Enlightenment distinctions have run their course. What do we have to offer in their stead—beyond the knee-jerk glorification or condemnation of technology?

17) *What are the most compelling forms of communication in a digital universe of discourse*? Some observers have suggested that electronic and digital technologies are fostering a new kind of oral culture—reviving the place of discussion groups (e.g., coffeehouses and salons). In fact, growing numbers of digitally savvy people seem interested in reading books as well as surfing the Net. To begin to get a handle on these developments, we should probably relisten to Ivan Illich and Parker Palmer, among others.

Digitalization seems to have revitalized an interest in many earlier forms of communication. Adult writing groups and reading clubs are springing up in digital cities across the continent, and reportedly in other high-tech areas such as New Zealand and Australia. Perhaps we are not amusing ourselves to death, contrary to what Neil Postman argues. Clearly the shibboleths about the “death of print,” the “end of reading” and “the decline of young people’s ability to express themselves verbally” are oversimplifications at best. If anything, we seem to be in the midst of a kind of symbolic renaissance that is resuscitating as well as transforming many kinds of human discourse.

I wonder if theologians ought to be teaching partly with novels. If pastors ought to be seeing more films to expand their visual-narrative repertoire. If Christian

publishers ought to be searching seriously for the next generation of essayists and story crafters rather than putting so much emphasis on Bible-study tomes and self-help books. Walker Percy subtitled *Lost in the Cosmos* "The Last Self-Help Book." How can we open up God's Creation to more real God-talk and less noise and especially less self-talk?

18) *How do religious groups learn about each other in this digital cosmos*? Religious stereotypes exist in a mass-mediated world. As Walter Lippmann said in his groundbreaking book *Public Opinion*, humans act in the real world on the basis of the perceptions created increasingly for us by the media's pseudo-environment. Now cyberspace is creating new pseudo-environments that mediate between religious groups. Virtually anyone with a theological axe to grind or a stereotype to promote can have his or her stage in the digital limelight. The Net empowers the kooks and well-intentioned fanatics as well as the charitable people who are quick to listen and slow to speak. Some Net enthusiasts rhapsodize about the coming of McLuhan's Global Village, when in fact the fractures and fissures among religious groups are as strong as ever.

Perhaps the digital changes are also opening up new opportunities for cross-denominational collaboration. In a world in which different groups are one hyperlink away from each other online, the church might be able to foster fellowship and coordinate projects across the ethnic, racial, geographic and denominational canyons.

19) *Is the church uncritically adopting the public rhetoric about the so-called "digital revolution*"? Cyberspace creates a fine line between science fiction and popular theology, especially eschatology. Surely the millennial spirit has captivated many believers. Are Christians also carriers of the misplaced utopian rhetoric? Is the church even one of the major purveyors of what James W. Carey calls the "technological sublime," and what Jacques Ellul called "la technique"? Perhaps we face a new kind of religious syncretism that combines digital fever with the worship of Creation.

At the same time, we should question knee-jerk criticisms of cyberspace, especially when we baptize secular critiques with quasi-theological rhetoric. Revolutions are never wholly good or bad. And new media forms never replace older ones. Printing did not replace conversation, and electronic media did not eliminate printing or in-the-flesh worship. Cyberspace will not eclipse the Eucharist or destroy Protestant

hymnody, although it might frustrate a lot of liturgists and composers!

History suggests that the real revolution—if we should call it that—is far more subtle and profound: new media forms change how people use earlier media forms. If I am remotely correct, people in a digital world may read, preach, converse and publish more or less differently, but they will not refrain from these earlier practices. We might learn to read aloud instead of just silently, to write oral sermons instead of academic lectures (and there is a difference), to illustrate our lectures with slides as well as blackboard scribbles, and to dialogue with students instead of just lecturing. But we will not stop communicating through earlier media forms.

Instead, we must figure out new ways of building collective religious identities and nurturing spiritual disciplines, “using all of the means reasonably at our disposal,” to paraphrase Aristotle. We are intimacy-seeking creatures, predisposed to reach out to others and to learn. We forge new media today as we have always done as part of the unfolding of God’s Creation.

20) *What other questions should Christians be asking about the digital cosmos*? Where do we go from here? Is there any hope for the church to seek wisdom both in and about the new combination of media at its disposal? Our task is to forge an intelligent middle ground between the “dread menace” and the “Utopian vision.” The Fall hangs over cyberspace like a silicon shadow. Shall we look for grace?