![Gospel, Society & Culture logo]

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Part 1:

Living in a Technology-Driven World

**"Whatever happens,
conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."**

Philippians 1.27

Technology is ubiquitous and is having a major impact in the world we live in. If, as Christians, we are to influence society and culture for the gospel we must understand and use the technology and tools of the times effectively. The Church has always embraced technology: from the papyrus, printing press, piano/organs, guitars and drums to microphones, computers and video projectors. The arrival of the Internet has heralded a new world of information and communication technologies (ICT) like email, blogs, websites, social networking and texting that present significant opportunities but also pose major challenges. As Christians, how do we embrace and steward technology well in all areas of our lives? Can we make informed decisions on technology? How do we think and act Christianly with regard to these advances?

A biblical perspective on technology and the Christian

God created people in his own image and has instructed humankind to fill the earth and subdue it.

> "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.
> "God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."
> Gen 1:27-28

This has two implications with regards to ICT. Firstly, we are made in the image of the magnificently creative God, and so we, his image bearers, have an innate ability and desire to be creative. The inventiveness of those in the ICT industry is a result of this creative drive in people. Secondly, since people are instructed to fill the earth and subdue the earth, it is also quite natural that humankind will seek ways of using technology effectively and developing tools that increase our capacity to interact with each other and God's world. Examples of these include automated manufacturing, management information systems, mobile phones, and digital cameras.

However, people have rejected God since the Fall (Genesis 3). Paul describes the condition of those who have rejected God in Romans:

> "Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done."
> Rom. 1:28

In verse 30, Paul goes on describing them: "they invent ways of doing evil". ICT is not immune from the active rejection of God, and from people using their creative ability to invent ways of doing evil. It is not surprising then that ICT is used in evil, negative ways. For example, some apps are not simply neutral, but inherently dangerous, such as those that use mobile GPS to locate people in their immediate vicinity for the purpose of beginning casual relationships. Other websites actively target unsuspecting children and adults with pop-ups. The use of technology in these kinds of ways is deliberately evil. ICT can be evil and can be used for evil.
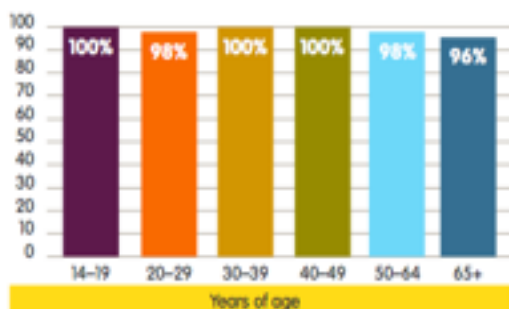
Internet use in Australia

- 96% of households with children under 15 years of age have access to the Internet at home, as compared to 78% of households without children under 15 years of age.[7]
- 77% of households have broadband Internet access[7], while 84% of Australians use mobile phones to access the Internet. Yet only 1 in 5 websites are mobile optimised.[8]
- Between April-June 2014, Australians downloaded one million terabytes (ie one exabyte) of data via broadband, and 38 thousand terabytes via mobile data[7] - a tenfold increase in 5 years.
- Of the 200 social media platforms worldwide, Australia has 13.8 million users of Facebook; 4.8 million users of Tumblr; 4 million users of Instagram; 3 million users of Twitter, Blogspot and LinkedIn; and 1 million users of SnapChat. The largest age-segment of users is 25-34 year olds.[8]
- 89% of Facebook users watch video content via its links.[8]

Frequency of internet use in Australia

"How often do you access the internet?"

53%	More than five times a day
33%	Everyday
5%	Most days
5%	A few times a day
1%	About once a week
1%	Less often than weekly
1%	Never

Proportion that access the internet by age and gender

| 14-19 | 20-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-64 | 65+ |
| 100% | 98% | 100% | 100% | 98% | 96% |
Years of age

98% of males access the internet

99% of females access the internet

99% of Australians access the internet

Base: All contacts (800) Q. How often, if at all, do you access the internet – either on a computer or on your mobile phone or other devices such as an iPod or iPod Touch?

Christians have been freed from the control of sin by the death and resurrection of Jesus. In Romans, Paul says:

> "Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness."
> Rom. 6:13(NIV)

Being free from the power of sin, Christians have the obligation and ability to offer our selves as instruments of righteousness, even in our use of technology. Apart from the obvious evils of technology, there is a range of more subtle ways that ICT can be harmful to the believer. It can displace the real and the good with the virtual and the noise. An example of this is that Christians could find themselves spending more time with their virtual relationships, rather than their real ones – choosing these for their lack of face-to-face encounters to mask their true selves. Christians could also find that their hunger for constant information feeds from the Internet beginning to distort their Christian worldview and mindset. Paul says:

> "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things."
> Phil 4:8 (NIV)

Unregulated use of ICT in the believer's life could make this command difficult and lead to an 'Internet-filled', rather than a 'Spirit filled' believer.

ICT however can be good and be used for good. As an example of this, studies by Pew Research Centre and Barna demonstrated that 83% of congregations surveyed indicated that web sites and the use of email have helped the spiritual life of their congregations, in some cases creating stronger relationships within their communities as they re-established ties with former members, and in some cases, expanded their missions on a global scale.[1]
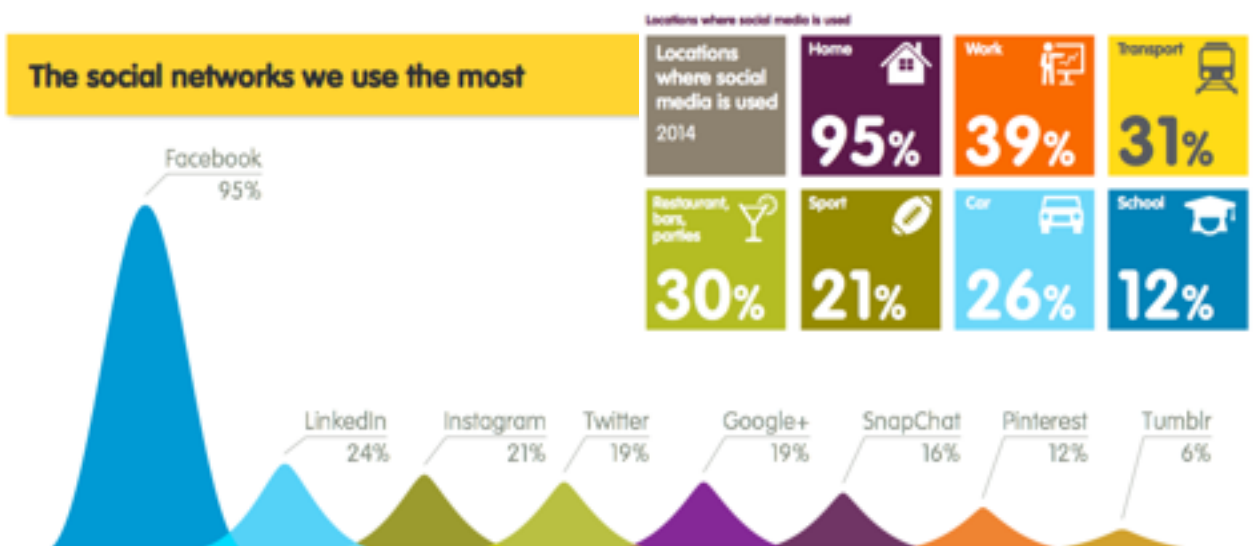
How often we use social media

Frequency of using social media network

2014
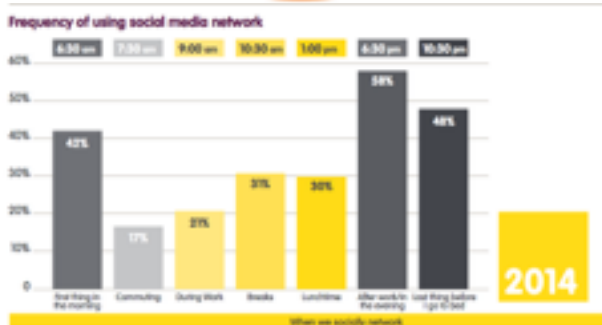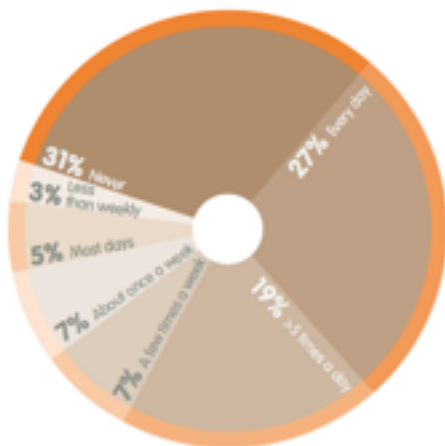
A secular perspective of technology in the world

While many thinkers argue that technology is not neutral[2], society today accepts ICT with an inherent 'Baconian justification' (i.e. knowledge is power) that trusts it to eventually solve all our problems.[2] This is called technicism. This is akin to scientism that holds that human reason can provide a complete understanding of man and nature. Technicism relies on the achievements of scientism to provide the secrets of nature that can be used to control nature and achieve power, and itself feeds consumerism.[3,4] It does this by its very nature of needing constant upgrade and update, and also by providing a constantly available market. These are powerful constant forces. We live in a time when new technologies become available even before the previous ones have been understood. Increasingly individuals need to choose which technologies they will engage with from the vast array available and, like in all of life, we need to exercise discernment in our choices.

Technicism is …
"… the pretension of humans, as self-declared lords and masters using the scientific-technical method of control, to bend all of reality to their will in order to solve all problems, old and new, and to guarantee increasing material prosperity and progress."[5]

Reappropriation is …
… the cultural process by which a group claims words that were previously used in a certain way and gives them a new meaning. From social media we get meaning to words such as 'like', 'friend' and 'viral'. You are probably familiar with 'google it', 'tweet it' and 'share it', too.

On the flip side, technology has transformed communication and the way we live. Technology has helped us store large amounts of information with ease. We now store files on computers rather than in endless rows of filing cabinets, and e-mail documents instead of using 'snail mail'. We even access the Internet without cables using wireless networking technology. Mobile phones and tablets enable us to communicate faster and has enabled greater political awareness. The influence of social media on our ever-evolving language alone is just one illustration of this. A whole host of words have become so commonplace that they are now accepted language usage. A few interesting words that have their origins in technology are blogosphere (the collective word for personal websites called blogs), troll (someone who creates conflict online by starting arguments or upsetting people) and buzzword (a word or phrase that is fashionable at a particular time or in a particular context). Even some acronyms have made the transition into everyday speech e.g. 'lol'. Besides adding vocabulary, technology has reappropriated words and, in a way, the people who engage with social media are quite literally creating new words and giving new meanings to existing words e.g. like, friended, viral, google it, tweet it, share it, feed and hashtag.

Technology can be good and bad

Online tools do two things: expose and enable. Technology can expose a person's tendencies, but it can also enable a person to communicate with more people in more ways without being constrained by time and space.

Technology has made us more efficient and productive, but at the same time can also just help us waste time. Facebook, for example, is a popular way of keeping in touch with family and friends often bridging time, space and generations. Australia leads the world in time spent on social media sites - 29% of which is spent on Facebook. Time spent on Facebook is not necessarily wasted time. Interacting with people can contribute positively to life. Social networking however can be demanding and distracting – there are time costs in creating content, responding to questions (sometimes too quickly and without reflection) and following 'friends'. At the same time it can be pervasive, and can result in information overload, not only from the volume of information available but also from having to critically evaluate this information to discern what is reliable, good and useful.

Social networking can make it more difficult for us to develop meaningful relationships. It does not have to replace real-life relationships but for some people there is the danger that the more they communicate through social networks, the more they isolate themselves and become unable to sustain meaningful conversations and generally uncomfortable in face-to-face relations. This has the potential to negatively impact mental health.

It is now also well recognised that technology can be an avenue for addiction. People who fall into addiction tend to neglect their duties and relationships in real life. They become increasingly incapable of coping with reality, preferring to flee to their own world to where they feel they have more control. Technology can feed and drive this addiction. The results of a survey of 1319 social networking users found that internet addiction could be a warning for depressive tendencies.[6] Even if addiction is not an issue, we need to be sure that technology does not draw us away from God, that we prioritise our undistracted quiet times.

We are called to glorify God in all that we do… including in our use of technology. Technology should be used to enhance our lives and real face-to-face relationships and interaction, not replace them. We need to evaluate technology and be intentional about how we use it and deliberate about the place that it has in our lives. As Christians we need to guard how we spend out time and be cautious of technologies that potentially draws us away from God and His kingdom while at the same time being wisely opportunistic about how we use it for the growth of the kingdom of God.

95% of Australian social media users are on Facebook

The typical Australian Facebooker spends more than 8.5 hours on site a week

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