The Challenge of Cyberculture
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SUMMARY

The massive spreading of technology has produced a new type of culture, i.e. cyberculture. It has a bearing on the whole of present-day life. According to Postman, cyberculture has been changing everything. Cyberculture is a multifaceted world comprising of different tools and options. Evangelical culture has traditionally been a book-oriented culture whereas cyberculture is much more inclined to the use and abuse of images. How does a biblical worldview interact with the challenges of cyberculture? Answers are still in the procress of being formed and this article asks questions and raises issues that should be borne in mind if one does not want to passively absorb complex, yet unavoidable cultural trends.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die gewaltige Verbreitung der Technologie hat eine neue Art von Kultur hervorgebracht, die Cyberkultur. Diese wirkt sich auf das gesamte gegenwärtige Leben aus. Laut Postman hat die Cyberkultur alles verändert. Cyberkultur ist eine facettenreiche Welt, die aus verschiedenen Werkzeugen und Möglichkeiten besteht. Die evangelikale Kultur ist traditionell eine auf das Buch ausgerichtete Kultur gewesen; im Gegensatz dazu neigt die Cyberkultur viel mehr dem Gebrauch und Missbrauch von Bildern zu. Wie geht eine biblische Weltsicht mit den Herausforderungen der Cyberkultur um? Antworten auf diese Frage befinden sich noch im Anfangsstadium und dieser Artikel stellt Fragen und wirft Probleme auf, die man im Kopf behalten sollte, wenn man komplexe, aber unumgängliche kulturelle Trends nicht passiv absorbieren will.

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RÉSUMÉ

L'expansion massive des techniques a produit un nouveau type de culture, la cyberculture, qui affecte actuellement toute la vie des gens. D'après Postman, cette cyberculture a des répercussions sur tout ce qui fait notre vie. C'est un monde aux multiples facettes utilisant différents outils et offrant diverses options. La culture évangélique a traditionnellement été orientée vers le livre, tandis que la cyberculture est bien plus portée sur l'usage et l'abus des images. Qu'est-ce qu'une vision du monde biblique a à dire quant à cette nouvelle culture ? Les réponses en sont encore à l'état d'élaboration. Le présent article pose des questions et soulève des problèmes auxquels il faut prêter attention si l'on ne veut pas absorber passivement des tendances culturelles complexes et en même temps incontournables.

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My generation began to "toy" with the *Commodore 64*, a machine with a paltry 64k RAM and no hard disk which read data from a tape recorder. We were among the first who wrote and printed our final dissertation by means of a PC and *word processing* software. Let us also recall the debate relayed by the media which followed a much advertised reprint of 1984 – the futuristic, political, fictional novel which George Orwell had published quite some time before, in 1948. Orwell's year had come about at last and much speculation was being exchanged on the accuracy of his hunches and prophecies. Today, 23 years since then, very few associate "Big Brother" with an oppressive regime utilising technology in order to control people's lives and consciences. To most, Big Brother is more suggestive

of shows attracting a high viewership, the gaudiness of what TV companies provide or, worse still, the pneumatic vacuum of contemporary youth culture. Yet, things need not be this way! The intertwining of technology and lifestyle, social ethics, individual conscience and tyranny deserves more attention and altogether more in-depth reflection.

Although technological progress, thanks to its exponential growth rate over the last 200 years, has led more than one thinker to worry and reflect on foreseeable consequences, most people have adjusted to being more or less excited users of technology and ask no further questions. Nevertheless, the ever more intrusive and pervasive introduction of machines capable of speeding up and simplifying many human activities has triggered a momentous debate among those who, being concerned with past history, are all too aware that no technology is "neutral", and any innovation in such fields has always acted as a catalyst for social and cultural change.

Computing technology, having given rise to cyberculture (aka. "digital society"[1]), has sparked an enduring debate which straddles academia, the political scene as well as "popular" media (cinema, the press and television).[2]

1. The Influence of technology on social life

Archaeology documents that the development of human civilisation proceeded in relation to the introduction and refinement of technologies which had a profound impact on our lives. A few examples suffice to show how the introduction of selected new technologies has produced unforeseen effects in social life.[3]

The origin of the mechanical clock dates back to the period between 1100 and 1200, when it was put together to regulate the daily life of Benedictine monasteries, announcing the allotted seven times per day which were set aside for prayer. Those times were signaled by the ringing of the monastery bells, and mechanical clocks provided the technology for adding in the precision of this rite. Obviously, it soon appeared that they could also synchronise and regulate other human activities. By the mid-14th century, they were routinely utilised also by craftsmen and merchants as "the mechanical clock had made regular production possible by standardising working hours and product specifications". Hence, the cradle of capitalism may be found in Benedictine monasteries,

at a much earlier date than the forming of Max Weber's Protestant ethic! Besides, the transition of clock regulation from religious observance to commercial enterprise occurred in 1370, when the French king Charles V pronounced that the citizens of Paris were to regulate their private lives, as well as trade and productive activities, by the 60-minutes-spaced ringing from the bells of the royal palace. All churches in Paris were also expected to synchronise their bells with the royal ones, regardless of the scheduling based on canonical hours, thus subjecting spiritual urges to material interests. We have here an example of how a newly developed tool may enhance the status of an institution at the expense of another.[4]

Because of this, N. Postman notes that "it is not possible to restrict the effects of a new technology within the limits of a given range of human activities. Technological change does not add to nor detract from the resulting total. It is ecological… and triggers total change… A new technology does not add nor subtract, it changes everything." And, to clarify further, the same author adds:

> Fifty years after the press had been invented, old Europe was not "the same Europe plus the press", it was a different Europe. Once television had been introduced, the US was not "America with TV added": television had reshaped political campaigns, life at home, schools, churches, industries.[5]

These observations, however simple, force us to think more in depth, to resist swimming with the tide or letting ourselves be passively conditioned by technological advances.

A first step requires becoming aware of the "ecological" effect induced by new technologies upon social change. Obviously, at this early stage, we are not expected to evaluate whether the technology being considered is "friendly" or "inimical", but rather to understand technology's potential for transformation. Great care should be taken not to underestimate its potential, knowing all too well that, generally speaking, new technologies are prone to bringing about disruption on account of their low cost, ease of operation and widespread dissemination. In no way should what goes on under the name of cyberculture be underestimated.

2. The variegated world of cyberculture

Coming to the point: what is cyberspace, or cyber-

culture? Cyberspace is "the dimension created by machines".[6] It is not a physical location, but rather a "virtual" space identified by means of networked computers and documents being shared by them. Hence, it can only be accessed through computers with either cabled or wireless networks. A cybernaut is anyone who navigates or contributes to developing this world. Therefore, cyberculture may be broadly defined as the *world consisting of humans and machines where documents and images are created by computer interaction*. This is the world of the internet and the services it provides. Some of the most popular services are listed below:[7]

> World Wide Web: the global network where businesses, organisations and the general public display their own "sites" with "pages" which can be perused or copied for a variety of purposes: government bulletins, sport events, art, popular TV shows.

> E-mail: used to exchange messages (e.g. with friends) without having to resort to envelopes or stamps.

> Usenet newsgroup: they are similar to e-mail, but messages are posted on any of thousands of thematic bulletin boards, for those who share a common interest to view them.

> Chat rooms: similar to phone calls, but voice sounds are replaced by lines being typed on a keyboard.

> Instant messaging (Skype and other brands serving the same purpose): it establishes real time communication channels between two or more people simultaneously connected to the internet, enabling them to speak, play games or share files, images, musical compositions.

> Mailing lists: they are "discussion groups" with or without a moderator filtering contacts; communication makes use of e-mail messages sent to all those who agree to subscribe to a list.

> Video-conferences: based on audiovisual cameras, they enable real time communication across the internet among groups of people.

> MUDs (*Multiple User Dungeons* or *Domains*): found in web sites devoted to games or other structured activities, usually with several persons interacting among them.

> Blogs (web log): consist of web pages placed under the control of an individual who maintains them for discussing particular topics with other people, or recording aspects of her/his per-

sonal life; while external inputs may be screened by owner, viewing is normally open to all.

> You-Tube: a gallery of audiovisual, freely downloadable files made available by their producers.

> Podcasts: allow (usually at no charge) automatic downloading of texts and audiovisual files; most popular contents are news, radio broadcasting and journals.

> Wikipedia: an encyclopaedia online open to contributions submitted by the general public; its contents carry no copyright restriction; translations into other languages are allowed as well.

In spite of its youth, cyberculture has penetrated the globe at an extraordinary speed. Some of the factors which account for its success are: the spreading of telephone networks and computer use, the array of services made readily available which offer information exchange of all kinds, learning opportunities, entertainment and escape from daily routine. Its expansive momentum was sustained by ease of access, low costs, a communicative style based on conceptual straightforwardness, speed of search and retrieval operations, the unbounded scope of contacts available and last but not least the virtual guarantee of anonymity. We thus understand why today's "digital society" is comprised of those from every social, cultural and age group.[8]

3. Evangelical ethos meets cyberculture

But does cyberculture pose a threat or does it yield opportunities for the evangelical ethos and for the mission assigned to the church? I believe that any hostile attitude towards cyberculture is misplaced and impractical,[9] on account of it representing such a large part of the world we live in. Moreover, I feel that cyberculture challenges us in a manner not unlike Goliath did in King Saul's days (cf. 1 Sam 17), a challenge we cannot pretend to ignore. However daunting our Philistine giant's fierceness may be, we should remember that the peril looming before individuals, families, Christian and Evangelical churches is not "new". It is simply more harmful and potentially destructive, but not intrinsically different from tests endured by the generations preceding us.

The similarity lies in the fact that technology (and especially "new technologies") can easily be deified because of its potential to fulfill primary needs, the ability to perform important psychological functions, and its promise to address common expectations and hopes.[10]

In this regard, let us consider the so called "new dependencies" phenomenon. Many of them (e.g. *Internet Addiction Disorder*, mobile phone dependency or cellphone-mania, *Virtual Sex Addiction*, or being addicted to video games and electronic gambling)[11] are fed, thrive and multiply due to an ever growing number of technologies on offer, aimed at promoting an individualism bent on the immediate satisfaction of one's private pleasures. The novelty in these cases stems from how bodily, physical relationships with others lose value and are in most cases re-orientated more towards the machines themselves than those who are operating them.[12] However, in spite of the prominence assigned to pornography, paedophilia, violence (which do exist in abundance online),[13] we should not turn a blind eye to the effects that may materialise in the long term as a result of other, apparently less troubling factors.

Let us turn our attention to how time is to be employed in a considerate and enriching manner. Traditional evangelicals set aside time to reading and studying Scripture, which is accompanied by meditation and prayer. Beside the time spent listening to and holding a dialogue with God, the best Protestant traditions have embraced the "family cult" which the Puritans practiced at least twice a day (in the morning and evening). With the advent of digital society, time management is hampered by intrusive interferences; yesteryear's television was quickly followed by a welter of other electronic means of connection (phones, faxes etc.) whose information flows are hard to contain by those wishing to allot time for themselves and their family. Those of us who are particularly "curious" of this technology risk being "shipwrecked" or wholly disoriented and confused due to our lack of cultural and epistemological maturity which is necessary in order to evaluate it. Cyberspace may appeal to us as an easy escape from our responsibilities in regard to our family life as well as caring for our neighbours. In short, time allotted to cyberspace is taken away from God and our community (family, work, church, the needy and non-believers).

Lastly, let us consider the disruptive impact of digital technology on learning and communication. Even in this sphere new technology is affecting a profound change. Clearly, however, views differ. While some believe that the communication model set by blogs and the interaction they raise within the blog-sphere open new avenues to collective knowledge and yield fresh opportunity for progress in a wide array of fields,[14] others are far more sceptical and dread the long term effects of the hacked, synthetic language (by necessity limited to superficial exchanges) which has become prevalent on the internet. It is generally acknowledged that the attention span of the younger generations engaging in a "discourse" does not exceed ten to fifteen minutes, and that they encounter serious difficulty in understanding a written text. The cause of this is most often attributed to a "culture based on images" which, in my personal view, is the greatest danger in that it weakens the role assigned to verbal communication set in a spatio-temporal dimension. The "people of the Book" cannot survive in a society which deprives words of their meanings and relevance. But such a world is a "Paradise" to the "people of the Image", or really to any form of paganism which, after the model of ancient pantheism, makes God indistinguishable from creation.[15] This is why evangelical Christians, families and the whole Christian Church are being challenged, today like in the past, by an idolatry which, despite its new forms, remains as pernicious and destructive as ever for religion and the biblical ethos.

4. What will our lives be like in the age of cyberculture?

A time of threats is likewise a time of choices. Parents, educators, ministers of the Gospel and social workers are saddled with heavy responsibilities. We need to understand this world ever more in depth, studying its characteristic traits without giving in to the temptation to recoil before it. In other words, we must come in contact with it while staying alert, critical and endowed with a "healthy mistrust".[16]

We must develop the means to identify the new forms of those ancient mechanisms and dynamics whose "temptation" is set to ensnare the human souls travelling through cyberspace. It is necessary to discover why this world is so adept at feeding the individualism of those who look for immediate personal gratification while shunning all commitment to relationships. Whatever findings are yielded by our research are to be shared with others, but with special attention to younger generations who appear to be most thoughtless and uninhibited in their use of the internet (this topic requires further in depth study from a distinctly Christian perspective).

We acknowledge that the primary arena for this education is the family, which can act as a true

socio-theological "laboratory" and whose operating tools are precepts and examples. It is therefore paramount that parents be provided with knowledge and skills tailored to the magnitude of the challenges outlined above. They should educate in a systematic manner, refraining from one-off corrections (prohibitions, setting of limits bound to be soon or later trespassed) but relying instead on a "well-defined worldview" deeply assimilated and then passed on to their children. A vision centred on a coherent account of reality, enabling the children to comprehend and interpret both the world and human experiences in light of biblical theism. Without this, the enormous amount of information conveyed by the internet will surely generate confusion of all types in the minds of those lacking the guidance of a Unitarian vision of the world.

Ultimately, human relationships based on non-mediated communication (i.e., those which accentuate verbal and non-verbal language forms and which are channeled through physical, as opposed to virtual, media) should be preserved, while pure, altruistic forms of affection are fostered.

Notes

1 G. GRANIERI, *La società digitale*, Rome, Laterza 2006.
2 A wide bibliography is found after the texts cited in this article. With regard to movie-making, I wish to recommend an attentive screening of two quite popular films: *The Matrix* (1999), by the Wachowsky brothers (in the first of the three Matrix films, Platonic philosophy is linked to biblical themes against a futuristic, hyper-technological backdrop while the risk that humankind can be enslaved by machines is assessed); *Artificial Intelligence* (2001) by Steven Spielberg, describing a future world with no morals, where the triumph of human individualism brings about the end of the human species. The latter film is of considerable interest due to the light it sheds on the impact that new technologies might have on feelings of affection and family life.
3 In this respect, one may recall the changes induced in everyday living as well as in wider economic systems (or for military purposes) by technologies based on wheels, metals, earthenware, agriculture, animal domestication, ploughs, writing and their further elaborations. The examples which follow are drawn from N. POSTMAN, *Technopoly*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri 1993, pp. 21, 31.
4 The press (developed in 1450 by Johannes Gutenberg [1397-1468], a fervent Catholic) was based on mobile types and was likewise instrumental in

spreading Protestant Reform ideas and undermining the monopoly of the Roman Church.
5 N. POSTMAN, *Technopoly*, cit., p. 24.
6 Cybernetics is the science concerned with the principles of making automatic machines (increasingly of the electronic kind) simulate the functioning of living organisms – particularly the human brain. Derived from Greek *kybernetichè (tèchne)*, i.e. "ability to steer, guide", it was so named by US mathematician Norbert Wiener (1894-1964).
7 For a more detailed listing, cf. A. SPADARO, *Connessioni*, Bologna, Pardes 2006. On *Weblogs*, cf. G. GRANIERI, *Blog generation*, Rome, Laterza 2005.
8 Let us caution however that we are still a long way from true "global, electronic democracy". Some governments – e.g., the Chinese one – fret about the risks of any unrestrained access to information and place restrictions on the use of the internet by their nationals. Also, an unbalance of computing literacy and technological know-how, coupled with the patched spreading of broad band infrastructure, separates towns from countryside, *élites* from general population. An interesting article on the "paradoxes" of the information age is found at: http://www.pol-it.org/ital/riviste/bollettino/barbera.htm.
9 I must admit that the snobbish attitude of certain intellectual élites *vis-à-vis* the "new technologies" has always irked me – above all because it very seldom happens that the same attitude is coherently kept whenever it dawns on them that the price to be paid is nothing less than marginalisation. However, the number of those who disparage the net and its services, and shun all efforts to become acquainted with it, is now rapidly decreasing. Happily, an exploratory, evaluative phase is replacing a former internet-phobic stance even among evangelicals. At least, now we will come up with satisfactory answers when people ask sensible questions.
10 Why is it that mobile phones are so popular with so many teenagers? One possible answer is that they lend themselves to valuable psychological functions: regulating at will the intensity of communication and affective ties (one may elect to be close to others and, instants later, prefer to be left alone; or apprehensive parents may use them to keep their children on a leash); offsetting feelings of solitude and isolation (due to their signifying permanent connectivity to others); living more intensively while keeping the outside world under control (thanks to countless technical features, mobile telephones regale us with the fantasy of being able to show up anywhere, at any time, or encapsulate reality in one or more snapshots…thus feeding an illusion of powerfulness that some stretch to full-blown omnipotence).
11 These phenomena have been scrutinised by the scientific community for some time. A good compendium of essays thereon is found in *Le dipendenze*

patologiche, cliniche e psicopatologiche, V. CARETTI and D. LA BARBERA editors, Milan, Raffaello Cortina 2005. Further material can be easily obtained from the internet.

12 Cf. D. GROOTHUIS, *The Soul in Cyberspace*, Grand Rapids, Baker 1997, particularly the chapter titled *Cybersex, Eroticism without Bodies* (pp. 91-104). On p. 97, Groothuis defines this phenomenon as based on "sexual activities disjoined from personal relationships."

13 It is practically impossible to pinpoint updated figures on the prevalence of internet pornography. However, data collected in 2003 suggest its order of magnitude: that year's turnover for the pornographic industry online was US$57 bln; 4.2 mln web sites (12% of total sites) dealt with pornography; daily, pornographic sites received an average of 68 mln hits from visitors (25% of total daily hits for the entire net). A research titled "Child Internet Risk Perception", published in April 2004 by ICAA (International Crime Analysis Association), reported the following findings based on a sample of 5,000 Italian children: 77% of those aged between 8 and 13 surfed the internet; only 26% of parents monitored them when operating on the internet; 52% of the interviewed children had unwittingly come across pornographic material; of these, 24% vol-untarily pursued the exploration of such material; 13% had been approached by pedophiles; of them, 70% did not inform their parents of such contacts; one quarter of those not reporting contacts to their parents justified their decision on grounds that "all in all, there was nothing wrong in having these contacts".

14 Such is the position held by G. GRANIERI, *Blog Generation*, Rome, Laterza 2005.

15 On this topic, cf. the excellent work by A.W. HUNT III, *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World*, Wheaton, Crossway 2003. Hunt, moving from the statement that "there is a permanent and irreconcilable tension between word and image" shows that Judaic religion was founded on divine revelation conveyed through written and oral words, and that it has always been challenged by surrounding pagan cultures bent on the cult of images (pp. 29-52).

16 In this regard, it is also important to acquire additional information on "filters" limiting the scope of net-surfing (two useful sites are at: www.ilfiltro.it; www.davide.it). At the same time though, let us not ignore that the best of filters won't fix this kind of problem by itself. More than relying on "mechanical fences", good principles need be internalised. They are the only effective protection likely to remain in place once artificial barriers have failed!