

**Internet Evangelism &
Cybermissions**

And Their Impact Upon

How We Will Do Missions

In The 21st Century



by John Edmiston

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Introduction

William Carey wrote his famous tract about the need to “use means” for the fulfillment of the Great Commission, one such means in the 21st century is information technology. The changes in this area are so rapid and so profound that major thinkers such as Ray Kurzweil and Francis Fukuyama are saying that we stand at the verge of a major change in human nature, as vast increases in processing power propel us into a world of artificial intelligence, and a “post-human future” where many people are cyborgs with computers inputting directly into their brains or with body parts augmented by computer chips and other technological aids. The rate of change is so great that it is predicted that by 2013 a super-computer will have achieved a human level of intelligence, by 2023 that such a computer will cost only \$1000 and that by 2049 there will be a \$1000 computer with the processing power of the *entire human race* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljbl-363A2Q>) .

This is due to Moore's Law, named after computer scientist Gordon Moore who said that computing power / processing power will double about every eighteen months. Moore's Law has held true for over fifty years as technologies have changed from valves, to transistors to printed circuit boards and now to dual core and multiple core processors. There is no sign that Moore's Law is coming to an end and in fact processing power per \$1000 is doubling every year or so (which is even faster than Moore's Law predicted).

Missionary work is going to be profoundly changed by this (and is being changed even as I write). The Internet has become one of the main places that people ask their spiritual questions and is the natural place people go to seek private and personal information (such as medical, financial, sexual and spiritual information). With the use of hand-held devices such as PDA's, cellphones and Ipods the possibility for distribution of the gospel has become immense. The 3 billion mark for cellphone subscribers was passed on July 1, 2007, by the years end it is expected to be 3.4 billion plus. The 1.1 billion regular Internet users of today is expected to reach 3.3 billion by 2010 (just three years) as

cellphone use spreads and people access the web, email and music online using their cellphones and not just their personal computers. In 2010 a single Christian website, optimized for cellphone use, will potentially be able to reach over half the world's population. The missionary on a bicycle could become the missionary on the computer.

The rise in the use of English and of the top ten trade languages means that 81% of Internet communication is in just ten main languages: English, Chinese, Spanish, Japanese, German, French, Portuguese, Korean, Italian and Arabic (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm>). Other major world languages include Hindi/Urdu, Bengali, Russian, Punjabi, Javanese, Vietnamese, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, Turkish, Persian, Gujarati, Polish, Ukranian, Malayalam, Kannada, Oriya, Burmese, Thai, Tagalog, and Swahili. The improvement in handling non-English scripts and in translation software will make it relatively easy for a single missions agency to communicate the gospel on a one-to-one basis with the vast majority of the world's population. This is also being driven by the demands of trade and the human need to inter-connect. The rush to learn English means that China will be the world's largest English-speaking country in the fairly near future (2010 – 2015) though many may not speak it that well! India has a long history of the use of the English language and will also be accessible to English based attempts to communicate the gospel in cyberspace.

The vast increase in available bandwidth has made audio podcasts and video clips (as in www.youtube.com) part of the gospel armory. By 2010 (or before) we will be streaming full length movies to millions of the unreached. By 2015, at the latest, a camel driver in the remotest part of Uzbekistan will be able to open up a personal hand-held device, view the Jesus film, send in a response, and get an answer to his spiritual questions, in the Uzbek language, in seconds. In fact I am part of a Silicon Valley based group of Christians working on such a system at the moment. And this response can be to a text message, phone call, email, letter or fax – multiple methods of input and output will be available. The Bible, the plan of salvation, the basics of the Christian life, and standard theological works will be universally available in digital form. With improvements in printing technology and e-paper they will also be universally available in print.

Many people will seek their religious information online, make their decisions for Christ online and be followed up online. Some will baptize themselves (as happened with Muslim background believers), others will join cyber-churches, some will join online and offline bible studies, or worship in small groups with their families. For billions of folk the cellphone or PDA will be their main means of finding out about God.

In this emerging information age the power of databases has become immense. A friend of mine who lives in England went to shop online for the first time at Tesco (a major supermarket chain where he normally bought his groceries). After logging in on this first occasion "Peter" was presented with a tab called My Favorites. When he clicked on it he did not find it empty - instead found a complete list of all the things he normally bought at the store. Tesco had tracked his every purchase for years and so they knew what he wanted and when he would want it and had arranged his "favorites" for him as soon as he generated an online account. The power of databases means that missions agencies will be able to track millions of individual Christian enquirers and precisely meet their needs for spiritual information.

The job of the missionary will necessarily move from proclaimer/communicator to mentor/discipler as the purely informational needs are being increasingly met by the Internet. Information is only part of the equation of spiritual growth. Prayer, encouragement, and the impartation of anointing and power in ministry come through loving, interested relationships. The missionary of the future will be both high tech and high touch. I am not saying that there is no validity in the "missionary on a bicycle" approach, just that new means of communicating the gospel have become available and that this new means are powerful even beyond our wildest imaginations. According to my sources in Muslim ministry more Muslims are coming to Christ online than by any other method, and Campus Crusade predicts that by 2010 Internet evangelism will be responsible for the majority of its indicated decisions for Christ. The use of video and audio will mean that even non-literate or semi-literate people may now be able to hear the gospel in cyberspace, via their cellphones.

Why 21st Century Mission Agencies Need To Adopt Technology

The primary reason that 21st century mission agencies need to adopt technology is ***because the people they are trying to reach will have adopted technology and it will be their (the target group's) primary form of communication.*** As Prensky says (Prensky: 2001) people born after 1985 or so are 'digital natives' who naturally communicate with other via technology. When they talk to someone it is on a cellphone. When they watch someone it is on YouTube. When they write someone it is a text message or instant message (even email is now "old hat"). A large portion of their communication is technology-mediated communication, and with the inclusion of powerful processors on cellphones this communication is becoming computer-mediated communication or CMC. For digital natives a video game is part of the real world and having a presence in a multi-player role-playing community such as Second Life is perfectly natural. This is particularly true in some parts of Asia.

As John Naughton from the Observer wrote:

Just to put that in perspective, today's 21-year-olds were born in 1985. The internet was two years old in January that year, the same year as Nintendo launched 'Super Mario Brothers', the first blockbuster game. When these young people were going to primary school in 1990, Tim Berners-Lee was busy inventing the World Wide Web. The Palm Pilot was launched in 1996, when they were heading for secondary school. Around that time, pay-as-you-go mobile phone tariffs arrived, enabling teenagers to have phones. Napster and Blogger.com launched in 1999, just when they were doing GCSEs. The iPod and the early social networking services appeared in 2002, when they were doing A-levels. Skype launched in 2003, just as they were heading for university, and YouTube launched in 2005, as they were heading towards graduation.

Sure there are still 49% of people who 'only occasionally' use communications technology and prefer watching TV instead. For them technology is 'just too complicated' and they just want to push a button and see a movie. Yet in soon foreseeable future their wide-screen TV is going to be connected to the Internet and made interactive. They may not become content producers, but they will become content consumers and so the Internet will eventually reach everyone. The people who we want to share the

gospel with, will be connected to the Internet and be using it either actively or passively, as a communications device. So if you want to reach “Fred Smith” - he is going to be online in some way or form (computer, phone, personal communication device, Internet enabled TV etc).

In 2001 in the Philippines I tried to strike up a conversation with some college-aged nieces and nephews. But they were 'just too busy' – they were texting each other and they were all in the same room! One young lady was even texting her sister who was standing right next to her! The room was silent except for the clicking of keypads. 'Texting' was mediating speech even under normal circumstances! They were 'technology natives' and for them the most natural form of communication involves the use of technology. For many people actual 'face-to-face' conversation is seen as socially difficult. Now one cannot extrapolate too far from this one personal incident but it is illustrative of what many observers of socio-technological trends are saying.

The corollary is also that if you get on a bicycle and go down Main Street with a bunch of tracts hardly anyone will talk to you. Indeed in most developed countries it is no longer socially acceptable to knock on doors with a tract, or to take a bullhorn and preach outside the local cinema. The lost generally do not want to be personally approached by a zealous evangelist. Even inviting folk to a high quality Christian rock concert has its limitations, and very few will ever walk into a church! (And if they do no one talks to them). The lost are now increasingly immune to traditional forms of evangelism. The old means of missionary communication are effectively reaching less and less people, while the new media are becoming the sole means by which people receive communication that they deem to be credible. To get the message of the gospel into the world of the unsaved you will have to get into their computer, their cellphone, or their iPod – in other words you will have to engage in Internet Evangelism and Cybermissions!

So the main reason why missions agencies MUST develop an understanding of cyberspace is that the Internet and the devices connected to it will ***soon become the dominant means of personal communication on planet Earth.*** It is imperative that we grasp this.

Other Reasons

1. *Lower cost* – cost per online decision for Christ is generally less than \$5 per indicated decision for Christ and often less than \$1 per decision for Christ (this is based in my own experience and that of campus Crusade and other members of the Internet Evangelism Coalition). There is also a far lower barrier to entry and cost of entry and many of the main software tools are free or inexpensive and web hosting itself (at sites such as Dreamhost and 1and1.com) is now almost ridiculously cheap.
2. *Lower Risk* – this is especially true when it comes to reaching Muslims and other groups that are hostile to the gospel. While online ministry is not perfectly secure it is still more secure than almost any other kind of ministry.
3. *Wide geographical reach* – the Internet is not restricted to a local area (such as a church), broadcast radius (such as radio, TV), or a satellite footprint. In fact for a few dollars a month a missionary can minister in dozens, if not hundreds of countries.
4. *Both one-to-many and one-to-one* – Cyberspace enable both one-to-many communication such as a web page, video clip or podcast, and one-to-one communication such as chat, email, and instant messaging, and can also freely move between these. For instance a one-to-many web page can have an one-to-one email response form. Thus the gospel can be proclaimed in a one-to-many format and get individual one-to-one responses which can be properly followed up.
5. *Multiple formats* – other media are limited to one format, radio to audio, TV to video, print publication to text and graphics and so on. The Internet allows the missionary to use all media types – audio, video, text, graphics, animation, games , interactive forums, role playing games, imaginary worlds and so forth. The Internet can also connect with other communication devices such as telephone (via VOIP), SMS (online free SMS services), and fax (online fax sending and receiving services). So an Internet ministry has a much wider spectrum of means available to it with which to communicate Christ.

6. *Can reach entire language groups* – the Internet is post-geographical - where you are does not matter – only the language you are communicating in matters. A Spanish speaking evangelist can thus touch lives in Spain, the USA, Peru, Ecuador and so forth simultaneously. In fact our courses in Spanish are in a dozen countries and are co-ordinated by an Argentinian living in Townsville, Australia!
7. *Asynchronous communication* - the Internet is always 'on' - a YouTube video can be viewed at any time of day – not just on a certain TV channel at a certain time. Email can be read at the person's convenience. A conversation can take place on a bulletin board among different people in different time zones posting at hours that suit them. Communication does not have to be synchronous – radio programs, TV programs , face to face communication, and telephone calls require us to be 'in-sync' with each other. The Internet removes this requirement. A missionary can post an article on a website one day and go to sleep – while it is then read elsewhere by people at the time of their choice.
8. *Archived communication* – the Internet archives and preserves communication. Articles I wrote in 1995 are still being read and replied to today. This is unlike radio and TV programs which are generally not accessible after transmission. It is even better than most magazines and newspapers as few of these have their articles read ten years later. Thus a sermon that is preached in 2007 and is then uploaded to the Internet could still be touching lives in 2027.
9. *The power of collaborative networks of volunteers* – Major websites such as Wikipedia are run by large collaborative networks of volunteer contributors. This model can unleash the gifts of Christians who can go online and share Christ, teach Scriptures and so forth. In a large church only a very small percentage may get to 'do anything spiritual' but online nearly everyone can use their spiritual gift to some extent. Intercessors can pray for prayer points sent in, teachers can upload bible studies and teach online classes, evangelists can go into chat rooms and share Christ, and they can do this from home, in their spare time and be a blessing as part of a network of volunteers on a Christian website. Missions agencies can use their retired missionaries who know the language and culture (and are perhaps back home for medical

reasons) as coordinators so one missionary has a team of say 20 volunteers who work on sharing Christ with a particular UPG.

10. *The power of peer to peer ministry* - the Internet allows peer to peer ministry with enquirers or believers grouped into online discussion groups, bulletin boards, egroups and chat rooms. This takes a lot of the pressure off the missionary who can act as a facilitator for believers who may be scattered over a wide geographical area. The believers share their questions, answers and prayer points with each other. This is particularly effective with young people.
11. *The power of building knowledge in community for strategic purposes* – the Internet allows geographically dispersed experts to share knowledge and contribute to a strategic missions project. This gains leverage and allows good projects to be done more efficiently.
12. *Seeker driven* - the Internet is an ideal medium for people with questions as search engines such as Google make it easy for users to find highly specific information in answer to a query. A religion seeker cannot expect to get a timely answer to his or her specific personal question from a print publication, or radio or TV station but they can find an answer, in a few seconds or so, online. When people want information about sensitive issues such as health, sexuality, religion and politics they turn to the Internet. Religion seekers tend to go online as part of their searching process and we should be there to interact with them. Therefore the Internet is the medium of choice for seekers with questions and we should be online to help them.
13. *Ability to target particular niches* – as the Internet becomes far more sophisticated it has become possible to target people in specific areas (by zip code) with Google advertisements (for your church, your outreach or your website) or to design websites that target a particular demographic (e.g. Portuguese speaking 14-18 year olds, or German speaking seniors) and then to promote it with great accuracy to that group. This means that highly relevant gospel messages can be sent to those most likely to be interested in them.
14. *Tunnel and blast* – in countries with little Internet infrastructure the Internet can reach a handful of believers, who can then print out the material and share it with their friends locally. This tactic is being used to set up bible colleges in churches and prisons, with the curriculum

being downloaded from the Internet and then shared locally. Several tract ministries are also putting their tracts online in numerous languages so they can be downloaded by pastors and shared in that church's community. This ability to get quality print materials to people, for almost zero cost cannot be matched by radio, TV or other methods. It can also be used to distribute audio and video.

15. *The ability to explain complex concepts* – The Internet was originally designed for the impartation of scientific and defense information and this is still what it does best. The web can present complex text, graphics, charts and videos to explain a medical procedure, a science experiment, and data from outer space. It can also help explain complex theological problems and illustrate optimal techniques in church planting, holistic ministry, and aid and development. It is an ideal training medium and online theological training is now blossoming. Because the Internet has inexpensive feedback and collaborative possibilities it can enhance a purely informational presentation (such as a sermon, book, tape or DVD) with live online discussion. It has become commonplace for TV programs to say 'for further information see our website'. The website allows a much more in-depth look at the idea presented on the TV program. So churches, missionaries and pastors can refer during the sermon, to information presented online and thus develop concepts such as the Trinity, eschatology or ontology that may not be able to explained easily from the pulpit or even face to face.
16. *Non-profit giving is increasingly online* – even US presidential hopefuls are finding out that online donations and Paypal are now a major part of their funding strategy. In fact many non-profits such as World Vision receive a large portion of their funding from massive online responses to crisis situations such as the Asian tsunami. Missions agencies, which are finding it more and more difficult to get into churches, may find online giving by individual Christians to be a major source of funding.
17. *Less licensing needed* - the Internet does not need government licensing in the same way that a radio or TV station does or, as a newspaper may need. It is the most restriction-free form of mass communication and thus is one that missions agencies can with relative ease.

18. *Does not require the missionary to be in a certain fixed location* – a missionary who cannot be on the field because of health problems or visa difficulties can still reach his or her people group via the Internet. Also missionaries who travel extensively can still maintain a website.
19. *Very useful for pre-field preparation* - a missionary can chat with connected members of his or her people group online prior to going to that country. This can build useful relationships prior to arrival. Also a missionary can engage anonymously (online) with Muslims, Buddhists or Hindus to gain real experience of their viewpoint, and do so in relative safety, so that the missionary learns to handle many of the common arguments, objections and sensitive cultural issues prior to arrival on the field. This helped me a great deal prior to arriving in Mindanao in the southern Philippines. It could also be useful for helping short-term missionaries become more culturally aware prior to deployment.
20. *Enhanced credibility* - digital competence is a sign of personal and organizational credibility and is essential if 'digital natives' are going to respect the missionary or missions organization.
21. *Bypasses traditional denominational restrictions* – Many online practitioners started a website because they could not use their gift (teaching, preaching, cult ministry, evangelism) in a local church or denominational setting where the good positions are often tied up in an 'old boys network' or in complex ordination requirements. Missions is often on the periphery of denominational concerns and certain issues such as training for Two-Thirds World pastors is often woefully neglected. Internet ministry has given people a chance to use their gifts and to solve problems that were not being (and perhaps would never have been) addressed by more traditional forms of ministry.

Effective 21st century missions agencies will develop vigorous and well-funded departments of Internet Evangelism and Cybermissions that will their main avenue for sharing Christ with the unreached and for following up enquirers and new believers. These departments will synergize with the other departments involved in worship, prayer, pastoral ministry and holistic ministry. Agencies that fail to do this will find themselves less and less able to communicate Christ to the non-Christian world as the global population shifts to digital devices as the primary means of credible personal communication.

The Implications For Missions In The 21st Century

The traditional missionary will always have a place but will have to work alongside colleagues who are engaged in Internet Evangelism and Cybermissions. Increasingly the impartation of information will occur online and on personal communication devices connected to the Internet. Offline ministry will involve dynamic worship, the administration of the sacraments, healing ministry, spiritual warfare, discipleship pastoral problem solving, and community engagement.

The missional church will be able to engage its members between services by sending material to their personal communication devices and encouraging discussion on forums located on the church website. Giving can be via digital means as well as 'in the plate'.

One approach to blending online and offline aspects of ministry is 'multiple location' or 'multiple presence' churches such as www.lifechurch.tv which has 20,000 members meeting in 11 different locations around the USA. Each church receives the same message, broadcast from the senior pastor, while having local worship team and pastoral care Here is how it explains itself:

All experiences at LifeChurch.tv are comprised of the two primary elements: powerful worship and a life-changing message. Worship at LifeChurch.tv is led by a worship pastor along with a talented live band and the style is consistent with today's culture. All LifeChurch.tv campuses receive the same dynamic and relevant teaching messages each week via satellite broadcast from Senior Pastor Craig Groeschel or a LifeChurch.tv teaching pastor. A weekend experience lasts for one hour – you can always expect them to start and end on time. In addition, the local campus team will spend time engaging, connecting and doing ministry with the church body throughout the week.

The Rev. Yonggi Cho of Yoido Full Gospel Church in Korea uses a similar approach utilizing Korea's very fast broadband to the home, to broadcast services into home groups and house churches with donations being made online by credit card/ Paypal. And Menlo Park Presbyterian Church is aiming to invest some \$20 million in multiple location technology to solve their space problem and bring their minister's preaching (Rev. John Ortberg) to more folk in the Silicon Valley area. These approaches all blend sophisticated digital input with personal care and small group ministry. This allows the church to have both the small church feel - and the big church pastor.

This combination of high tech and high touch will also apply to missions. Internet enabled house churches, simple churches, cell churches and small groups is one such option. Church growth advocates are often enthusiastic about simple church models as allowing rapid multiplication by removing the barriers to growth associated with a physical structure (such as obtaining government licenses and raising building program expenses). However simple churches have a long track record of doctrinal variance and leadership problems and they often lack resources in areas such as women's ministry and children's ministry. A centralized website for a house church network can provide pastoral networking and encouragement, leadership development, doctrinal consistency, teaching outlines, videos, and ministry resources and allow people with gifts throughout the network to contribute ideas, information and resources to the network as a whole. Thus many of the advantages of a formal denominational structure can be provided, yet without the onerous administrative overhead. The website provides the sophisticated informational tools while the small group / house church structure enables deeper relationships, better discipleship and the development and practice of the spiritual gifts in a relatively safe environment. I am beginning to develop such an approach at

www.eternitychristian.com

A similar approach can also be applied to holistic ministry and to small scale aid and development in the Two-Thirds World. There is often a considerable amount of duplication and 're-inventing of the wheel' in such efforts which could be prevented by online sharing of global best practices in each area. The information and wisdom of many different organizations would allow each organization to operate optimally while preserving the efficiencies, cultural adaptability and close to the community feel of smaller grass-roots efforts.

Information alone seldom accomplishes much in the way of community transformation. However information connected to vibrant small group structures does have the potential to be transformative. This principle of informed networks of small groups bringing transformation is seen in the dynamics of the early church, in Wesley and the development of Methodist cell groups, and in the blossoming of the student missions movement through campus bible studies and prayer groups. Thus Internet enabled simple churches and mutually informed grass-roots NGOs may become a vital part of the

cutting edges of 21st century missions efforts.

Disintermediation is defined as: *The removal of an intermediary, or middleman, from a transaction or communication. An example is the option for a business to sell its product directly to consumers as opposed to retailers.*

The Internet is a powerful force that will disintermediate much of what is seen as standard in modern missions, for instance the traditional missions agency is removed as the middleman when:

1. Sending churches in the West communicate directly with churches and missionaries in the developing world rather than solely via the missions agency.
2. Donors give directly to national churches and aid projects that they have learned about online.
3. National pastors get their theological education online (without leaving their church and often for free) rather than at the approved seminary run by the missions agency.
4. A Christian wanting to reach the lost in 'country X' simply switches on their computer, finds people in that country, and shares Christ with them online rather than going through a long and arduous missionary selection process.
5. Prayer needs from the field are sent directly to intercessors without being vetted by the missions agency and prayer letters are sent directly to supporters by email without being typed up and mailed by the missions agency.
6. Visa applications and other government paperwork are done by the independent missionary online rather than through an approved in-country missionary agency representative usually assigned to do such things. Travel arrangements, health insurance and other administrative tasks (even finding housing) is also increasingly done online reducing the requirement of belonging to a missions agency in order to do such things in the target country.
7. Missionaries receive funds instantly directly from supporters via Paypal rather receiving funds than months later once they have passed through mission agency accounting and had an (often sizable) percentage extracted.
8. Projects tend more and more to be inter-agency efforts networked through an egroup than intra-agency efforts managed solely by standard in-house communication.

9. Missionaries independently select the group they work with based on information obtained online at websites such as the Joshua Project rather than being assigned their field of service by the missions agency.
10. Pastoral care and support of missionaries is done by the home church using VOIP (Skype), email and annual personal visits and often exceeds the pastoral care given by most missions agencies to their staff.
11. Bible translation is done by a person from that language group located in the USA or other Western country and is field tested directly on a website with comments from missionaries and national leaders in the target country - thus simplifying the need for expensive in-country bible translation programs managed by a traditional missions agency.
12. A large part of missionary orientation can be done online, including language learning and chatting with members of the ethnic group under consideration (see page 11 above).

Thus the Internet is empowering independent missionaries and small missions agencies and disempowering and disintermediating the larger agencies with their huge administrative overheads. It is also allowing the rapid rise of smaller indigenous missions agencies in the developing world. This is slowly but surely going to change the entire face of missions during the next ten years as Great Commission Christians realize they simply do not need to join a traditional missions agency in order to share the gospel cross-culturally in an effective manner. Fewer and fewer missionary candidates will line up to go out full-time with the major missions agencies. Instead fully committed Great Commission Christians will go as independent missionaries, or as missionaries sent by their local church or with 'mustard-seed' style small mission agencies consisting of a few friends with a common vision. A considerable number will catch the vision of Internet evangelism and share Christ from home, just using their broadband connection, combined with trips of just a few weeks long to make face to face connections on the field. Fundraising will be a major challenge for these smaller agencies and various tentmaking and business-as-mission approaches will be developed to assist with this need. Numerous indigenous missions agencies are arising and will arise and be empowered by the new technology.

Internet Cafes In Unreached People Groups

One example of how technology is impacting models of mission in the 21st century is the use of Internet cafes as self-supporting missions bases in unreached people groups (UPGs). An Internet cafe consisting of some 20 client computers is established in a suitable and secure location (such as the second floor of a building near a school, college or business district) and run by 2 or 3 indigenous missionaries who receive income from the operation of the Internet cafe as a legitimate small business. Relationships with non-Christians are established as clients come in regularly to check their email or surf the web. Additional services are also offered such as VOIP, webcams, CD duplication, computer classes and photocopying. The witness is low-key and aims to bring customers to faith in Christ and incorporate them in a local church, bible study or house church. These icafes can be economically set-up using a good server, donated recycled computers and thin-client technology which makes the older computers able to run applications from the server very quickly. The indigenous missionaries are thus able to establish themselves as a legitimate part of the business community and have a platform that enables them to come in contact with 100 or more local non-Christians each day for thirty minutes or more each. When these Internet cafes are properly run they have considerably boosted the development of church-planting movements among certain unreached people groups. Numerous missions agencies are now looking at Internet cafes as viable missions platforms and developing both non-profit educational computer centers as well as for-profit self-sustaining ventures. A microfranchise model for Internet cafes is being actively developed by a group out of Regent University to help ensure the financial sustainability of this model. This illustrates how technology can empower the development of indigenous missions and how business-as-mission plus technology can have a powerful role in the future of global missions in the 21st century. Part of the equation here is that many developing nations have numerous people (including local believers) with very good IT skills who unfortunately have no outlet for employment. Thus the IT sector has great potential for mission agencies wanting to set up businesses in the developing world.

Computers And Evangelistic Persuasion

The recent book by B.J. Fogg *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think And Do* argues that computers have six advantages over humans when it comes to the art of persuasion, they can:

1. Be more persistent than human beings
2. Offer greater anonymity
3. Manage huge volumes of data
4. Use many modalities to influence
5. Scale easily
6. Go where humans cannot go or may not be welcome

Dr. Fogg works at the Persuasive Technology Laboratory at Stanford University and focuses on how computers can be used to change human behavior in areas as diverse as quitting smoking, avoiding teenage pregnancy and personal hygiene monitoring.

This has a fairly obvious application to online evangelism! If computers are (or can be made to be) more persuasive than human beings could they be better evangelists? Could a computer scan a sophisticated database, decide exactly how an individual should be approached, then approach them to make a secure anonymous response to the gospel in the privacy of their own home, using text, video, and audio, and touching hundreds of lives simultaneously, in a nation that has strict laws forbidding conventional missionary activity? To really 'jump the shark' and be controversial – could a computer generated personality known as an 'avatar' be the ultimate personal evangelist? (I think we are at least a decade away from the computing power needed to do that at reasonable cost, but I could be wrong). If we think 50 years out, to say 2057, Lord tarrying, could computer-generated avatars have become a major asset to global evangelization? There is even an interesting hint in Scripture that artificially intelligent personalities may exist in the Tribulation and be used as part of the worship of the Beast: **Revelation 13:15 MKJV** *And there was given to it to give a spirit to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might both speak, and might cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.*

It is impossible to predict the methods we will be using for evangelism at the end of the 21st century and it may even sound foolish to try. However the mere exercise of doing so gets us to realize that many of the current methods of evangelism will be irrelevant by the time the children born today graduate from seminary - and that even the seminarian of today may be in for a mid-life crisis!

Immediate Technical Challenges For 21st Century Missions Agencies

It is not envisaged that missions agencies will design or manufacture communications technology or that they will even be involved in major software projects (such as automated translation software).

What is envisaged is that missionaries and their organizations will become very savvy users of technology. Missionaries and their organizations will strategically deploy communications technology and the Internet to achieve the Great Commission. The following immediate technical challenges include some areas where the problem has been solved but has simply not been implemented effectively and at scale in the Christian world:

1. Evangelistic presentations for mobile devices (cellphones, PDAs, etc)
2. Short (5 minute or less) video clips for YouTube that present Christ clearly
3. Evangelistic audio clips (5 minutes to twenty minutes) and online tracts
4. A mission-friendly CMS (content management system) perhaps based on Joomla or Drupal
5. High quality production facilities for evangelistic podcasting & video-casting
6. A high-bandwidth secure server cluster dedicated to serving missions media
7. Improving Linux Thin Server Protocol for Internet cafes & icafe management software
8. Secure evangelistic response and follow-up systems capable of coping with non-ASCII characters and with large numbers of respondents.
9. Good, open-source, text (SMS) to email gateway applications for crusade follow-up (an enquirer texts a question or response from their cell phone, this gets turned into an email that a pastor answers and the answer is then sent back to the enquirers phone.)
10. A website that lets ministries create their own Christian Internet radio station
11. Better online bible colleges and e-learning systems especially those that can handle Arabic and Asian languages and which allow much higher levels of user interaction and feedback.

12. Web-enabled house church and simple church networks and leadership training
13. Sophisticated websites devoted to facilitating holistic ministry and Christian aid and development.
14. The widespread adoption of effective online evangelism, particularly by local churches.
15. Far deeper and better contextualization of websites aimed at sharing Christ cross-culturally (not just translating a tract but putting it in the worldview and culture of the target group).

Organizational Challenges

The adoption of technology which transforms and disintermediates global missions is going to result in a new set of challenges for traditional mission agency structures. These will range from the incorporation of a department for Internet Evangelism and Cybermissions to the development of new criteria for measuring conversions, follow-up, discipleship, and the transformation of a people group.

How will supporters react to possible statements such as: *ABC mission established 5 cyber-churches in Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Pashtun and Bhojpuri language groups with 80,000 indicated decisions for Christ and 158,000 regularly attending online video worship services?*

It is currently extremely difficult to raise funds for cyber-ministry and it may take twenty years or more for many missions supporters to be comfortable with the notion of online decisions and cyber-churches. While cyber-ministry will be having a huge strategic impact, nonetheless it will probably not be well-funded. This will slow down adoption as missions agencies, while wanting to get better results, will not want to commit financial suicide and so will focus their efforts on more traditional ministries which have greater appeal to supporters. Hints of this are seen in many missions websites today which can be little more than 'web brochures' extolling the agency, with a large "Donate Now By Paypal" button in a prominent location.

The development of serious, well-funded and missiologically informed cyber-outreaches is an urgent priority. Some ninety organizations are doing high-quality Internet evangelism in the Muslim world because face-to-face evangelism carries so many risks. The fruit is already evident, and by many accounts the majority of Muslims making decisions for Christ are doing so online. Similar efforts need to be done for the other major religious blocks and cultural groupings.

Internet Evangelism and Cybermissions has not yet entered the mainstream missions curriculum. Only four courses exist and I am involved with three of them – lecturing in an online MAGL course in Internet Evangelism and Cybermissions at Fuller, running my own online course at Cybermissions.Org, and revamping the free Internet Evangelism Coalition course at webevangelism.com. The Billy Graham Center at Wheaton runs the only other course in this topic. If this area is to be taught in bible colleges and seminaries a textbook will be required, possibly as a joint effort by leading experts in the field.

A handful of very large organizations (such as Campus Crusade and various radio ministries) have begun to adopt Internet evangelism strategies and there are a host of small operators and lone website builders. Still others have adopted a certain aspect of information technology such as E-learning or multiple location churches. The full realization of the impact of the Internet of 21st century missions is yet to be felt and very few denominations or major agencies are planning to have an Internet Evangelism department. Tony Whittaker and the Internet Evangelism Coalition sponsor an Internet Evangelism Day in May each year and this is a small but valuable effort towards creating awareness. The fact that Internet Evangelism and Cybermissions is not happening in major missions agencies does not mean that it will not happen at all. There is a low barrier to entry and Christians, moved by the Holy Spirit, will start going online and sharing Jesus - and thousands are already doing so. Christians are 'gossiping the gospel' all over the Internet! Thus the proclamation of the gospel in the 21st century may well move away from the corporate giants of the evangelical world and into the hands of inter-connected independent small bands of believers who create gospel presentations in their own languages and then share them on the web, in chat rooms, and by video and audio and also developing presentations for the world of increasingly sophisticated mobile devices. I am not proclaiming the end of the corporate giants of the evangelical world, but I am saying that with the technology, tools and information available today the task of the Great Commission will increasingly move into the hands of indigenous believers equipped with broadband Internet connections.

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Marc Prensky

It's the 'digital natives' versus the 'immigrants' as kids go to work **John Naughton**
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