

The Internet Missionary Society Of 2020

The Internet began to affect our lives in 1994 with the creation of the World Wide Web and the Mosaic web browser. Shortly after that Christians began to share their faith with others in cyberspace and Internet evangelism and cybermissions was born. In this article I would like to jump another thirteen years down the track and look at what Internet evangelism and cybermissions might look like in the year 2020.

The Internet is rapidly moving from the personal computer to the cellphone and it is predicted that the number of Internet users will go from the current 1.14 billion to over 3 billion by 2010 (just three years away) mainly due to this growth of Internet-capable hand-held devices (e.g. cellphones, PDA's and the Blackberry). Indeed Microsoft has just announced Phone+ - an initiative to bring TV (as well as everything else) to your cellphone. Hand-held devices will soon have really useful screen sizes. The latest Popular Science magazine (May 2007) showcases a five-inch Polymer Vision flexible screen that "rolls-up" inside the unit. By 2010 this flexible screen will be larger, in color and be capable of handling web browsing and video. Of course your hand-held device will also dock with your wide-screen digital TV, your laptop or any other viewing platform. The included video camera will be augmented by higher processing power and bandwidth to enable quality video conferencing from your lounge room.

So we see that highly sophisticated content will be downloadable to 3 billion personal handheld devices by 2010. The personal communication device will be how people interact with friends, family and colleagues and the first place they turn to find out information about the gospel. It will be the main way people accept information into their lives and therefore the main way that we will have to communicate the gospel. The hand-held device would allow streaming video (or text or audio) of gospel presentations. Enquirers would be able to contact the mission agency on the Internet, or by SMS (text), email, fax, VOIP (voice over internet protocol e.g. Vonage, Skype) or by normal mobile or landline voice call.

Progress in information technology is exponential. The famous formulation of this known as Moore's Law is named after Gordon Moore of Intel who observed (in 1965) that the number of transistors on an integrated circuit for minimum component cost was doubling every two years. This has largely held true since then and processing power per thousand dollars is now doubling every twelve to eighteen months. If this continues all the way to 2020 (thirteen years from now) the first glimpses of artificial intelligence will be taking hold in our lives.

Tech guru Ray Kurzweil (inventor and author of books such as *The Age Of Spiritual Machines* and *The Singularity Is Near*) uses this exponential curve to predict that a super-computer will emulate human intelligence sometime around the year 2013 and that a \$1000 computer will emulate human intelligence in 2029. Previously difficult problems such as image recognition, speech recognition, handwriting analysis and language translation are rapidly being solved. A prototype of a translating telephone that automatically translates between English, French and German was unveiled in San Francisco in April 2007 and a DARPA software project translated between English and Arabic at the level of professional translators. Some have predicted that before 2015 cellphones will contain automatic translation software (probably at first in a dozen or so major languages) and that soon after we will be able to use our personal communication device to talk to practically anyone in the world. This of course will revolutionize the task of missions!

Highly specialized artificial intelligence programs (called "narrow AI") will be able to do common customer service functions and sophisticated computer generated personalities known as 'avatars' will

interact with users and act as a type of virtual salesperson. These avatars are capable of being programmed with the hundred (or more) most common questions that enquirers ask. They will be endowed with a patient and understanding artificial personality and be able to lead enquirers through the plan of salvation and even through some basic pre-baptismal follow-up lessons. We are on the verge of it already in communities like Second Life where believers are already witnessing to Christ - as their computer-generated avatars. Sitepal.com already provides customizable avatars for websites, and the Genesys IP Contact Center is already using avatars to handle customer service queries for CartaSi - the Italian credit card company. By using avatars and information technology our Internet missions agency could reach tens of millions of enquirers annually with the plan of salvation and then connect them with local churches in their area. So the evangelism department of our missionary society in 2020 may well consist of six geeks, a server farm and four hundred of these computer generated avatars! Each avatar may well share the gospel with a different cluster of unreached people groups. Of course there will still be plenty of room for face-to-face missionary activity such as worship, baptism, communion, counseling, exorcism, small group bible study and the use of spiritual gifts.

The rise in technology will also mean that average users can become sophisticated content creators who can make their own video, audio and text presentations of the gospel. Thus proclamation will become many-to-many as new believers excitedly share their testimonies and experiences of Christ. As video-conferencing becomes commonplace these believers will naturally bring each other together into small groups and virtual churches online. Distance education and TEE (Theological Education by Extension) will be revolutionized and technology will allow a missionary to inexpensively conduct large-scale training by video while being simultaneously translated into dozens of different languages. Pastors and community leaders will be able to be trained without being removed from their ministry context. Touch interfaces with symbols, voice recognition and improved interface usability will make it easy for non-literates to use technology and to benefit from it.

The power of technology to proclaim and inform needs to be matched with the power of the local church to disciple and mature individual believers. Hopefully technology will augment the process of discipleship and free many Christian workers to focus on being one-to-one mentors. The gospel will of course remain the same but how it is delivered, who is communicating it, and the means of responding to it will be profoundly changed.