

# Internet Reflections

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The encounter between human beings and their technology is one that is regularly fraught with threat as well as opportunity. Human identity is seen to be a fragile plant when confronted with the potential of its creations for domination, be it benign or anarchic. In the past, a constructive accommodation has been achieved between humankind and its technological developments in communication and it is likely that the same will happen with current developments in electronic communication. However, in the process, they throw up opportunities for modest insights into aspects of interpersonal relations and their organisation, whether in virtual or in pre-electronic form.

The Internet can be regarded as a mirror in which human relationships are reflected, distorted and reconstructed. These reflections can expose weaknesses in aspects of social organisation that are customarily seen as beneficial or can expose limitations to the values a group is thought to espouse. In selecting the following reflections, it is convenient to characterise the Internet as falling into two different functional categories: as disembodied space and as shop window.

## The Internet as a Disembodied Space

The disembodied nature of the Internet has two aspects to it.

In the first place, the communication that it sets up between individuals has a flat structure; it is a web, rather than a corporate body. By contrast, the kinds of civic organisations that traditionally enable and promote citizenship in the population are often highly structured, with the functions of the organisation strictly distributed through its members. The metaphor of the functioning of, and interrelationships between, different parts of a body can readily be applied to such an organisation. Roles carry with them responsibilities and tasks are compartmentalised, so that, for example, the treasurer and the secretary observe strict boundaries between their remits, much as eyes and legs do in a physical body. The advantage of this demarcation of roles is that the organisation can capitalise on the specialist skills of its members. The downside is a territoriality that can impede communication and can lead to members feeling excluded from important decision-making.

Associated with such organisations are civic skills (Putnam 2000) such as minute-taking or chairing meetings. These skills are readily transferable, and people possessing them are well placed to be influential in civil society. Churches have frequently nurtured these skills in their members, and Putnam comments on this characteristic. In former Communist countries, it was noted that the churches were places not just where an alternative vision was kept alive but where an alternative resource of civic skills could be found when new leadership was needed.

As civic organisations weaken, and their associated skills become less valued, and less common in the population, the attraction of direct Internet communication, unmediated by a hierarchy of office-bearers, becomes evident. Whether organisations can function effectively with such a flat

structure or whether familiar roles and responsibilities will emerge among the participants of virtual associations is a fascinating question. However, for the purposes of this argument, the important observation is that the flat structure of Internet association exposes some of the shortcomings of traditional community organisations, as excluding those without the skills or the confidence to participate effectively within them. It also offers the possibility of widening participation beyond the previous range of activists.

One area in which inclusion can be increased relates to a second aspect of the Internet as a disembodied space, namely, that communication is possible without people coming face to face with each other. The dangers inherent in this situation are well known, with liaisons being established between adults and children which can lead to sexual exploitation. Less dramatically, people's fantasy lives can interact with each other in ways which can be educational but also have the potential to do psychological damage.

It is frequently observed that communication over the Internet is impoverished because it lacks the quintessentially human element of non-verbal communication, the body language and gestures that convey an extra dimension to the message of the words. However, that fails to account for the negative aspects of being visible to your interlocutor, which can sometimes be a barrier to civic participation.

For example, Coleman and Normann (2000) report on an on-line consultation into domestic violence carried out by the Westminster All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence. This enabled women who had lived with domestic violence to give direct evidence to the MPs in circumstances which protected their anonymity, but which allowed discussion and development of their evidence. Participants were recruited through women's groups, disability groups and Women's Aid refuges, and

their identity was kept confidential through the use of false names. Support was on hand from the staff of the refuges, and also from one of the Moderators, if women found the experience distressing at any time.

The consultation was greatly valued by over 90 per cent of those who took part. They felt that their story was listened to by far more people than would otherwise have been the case. Although there was disappointment that the MPs did not appear to be as engaged as the participants had expected, the MPs themselves appreciated the value of the exercise. Many of the participants welcomed the support they found among their own group and found the experience creative and healing.

For this vulnerable group, therefore, the face-to-face nature of natural communication can be a barrier to civic participation, and the Internet can be used creatively in this way to include such people in decision-making. This example shows how the new technology can reveal not only gaps in the reach of the democratic process but also weaknesses in models of participation otherwise given high positive value.

### **The Internet as Shop Window**

It is often hard to realise just how extensive the reach of the Internet is. Websites may be designed with a particular, local audience in mind, but that does not stop people with other interests, or living on the other side of the world, reading the information on them and drawing their own conclusions, which may be false, about the nature and purpose of the organisation. The Internet can be an excellent tool of publicity, but it can also be mercilessly revealing. How an organisation presents itself through its website therefore has to be thought through very carefully to ensure that it offers a valid impression of the organisation's values and purpose.

It has been noted that churches and congregations are organisations that have done well in preparing people for civic life. Moreover, the Scottish church tradition is one which has had no hesitation in contributing to civic and political debate and development (Storrar and Donald 2003). If traditional forms of civic engagement are changing, and the Internet is one of the ways forward, the question arises of how congregations are adapting to the challenges and opportunities of the new situation.

As Neal Ascherson's chapter records, it was decided to conduct a survey of the websites of a small sample of Church of Scotland congregations to see how they presented themselves. To what extent could they be said to be using the Internet creatively as a tool of engagement with the concerns of their local community? Did they simply give information about church activities for their own members? Did they give evidence of being concerned about activities in the wider community? What kinds of links did the congregations have to other websites?

Every eighth congregation on the list of Church of Scotland congregational websites (thirty-seven congregations) was sampled in June 2002 by Dr Heidi Campbell. Note was made of the structure and servicing arrangements for each website. Any information about the local community was noted and links were listed and categorised as to whether they were to other church-based sites, to community sites, to the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office, or to international organisations.

The websites varied tremendously and showed considerable individuality and imagination. Most of them concentrated on highlighting what was happening inside the congregation. Many of the websites did not appear to encourage involvement beyond their own congregational activities. Only 11 per cent listed information about their local community, and 19 per cent had no links to another site.

Analysis of the links that were offered indicated that most were to other church-based sites. Sixty-two per cent were linked to the Church of Scotland website and 46 per cent to other Church of Scotland weblinks, such as the local Presbytery. Thirty-eight per cent were linked to websites of other denominations or other religious organisations (such as Action of Churches Together in Scotland).

Links to community groups were offered in the case of 38 per cent of the congregations. These included the websites of the local council or community council, occasionally including a tourist guide or weather report. Some were to charities with a Christian origin, such as Cyrenians or the Children's Hospice Association Scotland.

Cultural links were noted separately, in the expectation that, since many church buildings are of historic interest, tourism might provide a connection with other community activities. Nineteen per cent of the congregations had links which were categorised as cultural, and covered links to Christian artistic sites as well as ones with a genealogical or historical focus.

Wider political engagement was identified by noting reference to the link to the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office (only 3 per cent of congregations) or to international sites. Thirty-two per cent of congregations offered links to international sites, with Christian Aid being the commonest link.

An email questionnaire was sent to the webmasters of these congregations, where they could be identified, to explore further how the congregation understood the purpose of the website and what effect it had had, or was hoped to have, on the congregation itself. Eleven replies were received, many of them capturing the evident commitment and enthusiasm of the webmasters themselves.

Most of the replies indicated that the purpose of the website was to provide information about the congregation, although one saw the purpose as that of providing access to

good-quality Bible-based teaching on-line. Some identified the value of the site in keeping former members of the congregation in touch with its activities, or keeping a link with students who had left to go to university. One had been set up to celebrate the church's centenary.

Asked whether the website had had a noticeable influence on the congregation, most indicated that it was too early to say. One congregation did notice an increase in the hits at Summer Club time, suggesting that this might be reaching younger people. They also noted an increase in non-members attending church, which might indicate an effect of the website, although they had not set out to measure this.

It was suggested in the questionnaire that having a website might alter the degree of face-to-face communication within the congregation, or encourage the congregation to have a more outward-looking focus. One reply indicated that the website was a talking point among the enthusiasts in the congregation and so had increased the face-to-face communication for this particular group, and another said that an aim of the site was to increase awareness of the missionary linked to the congregation. However, the suggestions did not resonate with the experience of other webmasters.

On the basis of the content and presentation of the congregational websites sampled, the impression is of churches more concerned with their own internal activities than with outreach to, or engagement with, the wider community. This is rather at odds with the results of the recent study on the social capital of Church of Scotland congregations commissioned from the Department of Urban Studies of Glasgow University (Flint, Kearns and Atkinson 2002). They found that the congregations they sampled (one-third of all congregations) were engaged, on average, in almost half of the social capital-generating activities identified in the questionnaire to which they

responded. There were differences between congregations, with those in poorer, urban areas showing more of these activities than those in other areas. Their study gives a picture of congregations reaching out to their local community, though not utilising as many ways of doing this as they might.

It is possible, therefore, that the potential of a website for increasing communication between a congregation and its local community has yet to be fully realised in many cases. At the time of sampling, only 245 websites were listed on the Church of Scotland site, and the correspondence with the webmasters indicated that they considered it still to be early days in exploring the value of this tool. It may also be the case that the congregations that were first to develop a site were ones with less interest in community issues.

If the Internet is becoming an important tool in civic activity, and if the churches wish to maintain a prominent role in this process, this study indicates that they have some way to go in developing that potential. In time, if they wish it, websites can connect them much more closely into the wider social and political concerns of their community. The opportunities are there for creative engagement both locally and on the national and world stage with people's pressing needs and hopes. How churches develop this tool in the future will be a telling measure of how they regard their civic responsibilities.

## References

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