An Evaluation of the Use of Technology in the 21st Century Nigerian Church

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Abstract

The world is a global village and everything is becoming highly advanced. Gone are the days of telegram and letters as major means of communication, one can easily send or receive information as fast as possible now. In amazement one may ask the question of how the world will look technology wise in the decades to come. This implies that technology in this generation is improving greatly. Though the advancement of technology in this age (21st century) is felt globally, this does not exclude the church and its effects (on the Nigerian church especially) cannot be ignored. This research presents a discourse on the evaluation of technology on the 21st century Nigerian church.

Introduction

Research, discoveries and experiments have imbued the world with a greater value and have led to improvement. With the advances in technology globally, many people live longer, better, healthier, cleaner, even more comfortably than some decades back. The benefit of technology is not vague and the judgment of it being good or bad is absolutely relative. Technologically, many are strongly of the opinion that life is very much better than it used to be in the past. Thus, taking into cognizance several aspects of advancements like communication devices, phones, radio, audio visuals, modern medicine, transportation among others, there has been great progress. The fact that advancements in technology has brought a new face to the world cannot be denied and its effects cannot be sidelined either. From a religious perspective, Churches all over the world now host television programmes and millions of people can be reached by them at the same time. Platforms for reaching out have enlarged due to this continuing scientific development. In other words, the 'strong breeze' of technological advancements is felt even in the church. Therefore, this research presents a discourse on the use of technology (with a keen look on telecommunications) and its implication to the 21st century Nigerian church. Technology can make church more enjoyable, but to some people the use video and new technology is often used to manipulate the sentiments of viewers. So there are both positive and negative characteristics to technology use in churches. Social media can definitely help to bringing people together but it can also segregate them and virtual relationships may flourish while few genuine relationships develop as a result (McAdams, 2016).

Technology: Definition

Technology can be defined a number of different ways. Whenever the word 'technology' is mentioned many people think of electronic gadgets. Meanwhile, electronic devices are only a part of the family of technology. In other words, technology in its real sense does not only mean

electronic appliances or communication gadgets. Thus, a number of definitions need to be examined. Technology is a technical language, applied science, a scientific method of achieving a practical purpose, the totality of the means employed to provide objects necessary for human sustenance and comfort.[1]

Ken Funk of Oregon State University uses the term "technology" in five different senses.

- The rational process of creating means to order, transform matter, energy, and information to realize certain valued ends.
- The objects devices, systems, and methods resulting from this process
- The knowledge that is created by and drives the technological process.
- A subset of related technological objects and knowledge.
- Technology is all of the above plus the developers and users of technological objects and the worldview that has emerged from the technological process.[2]

Technology is a universal achievement and trend that cannot be prevented from influencing the church and this inherently informs the next discourse of this research work.

Technology and Christianity

The truth cannot be denied; advancement in technology has given Christianity a right to be heard and to reach the world extensively. As times goes by, there have been advances in Christianity when there are advances in technology. In many cases, the Church has been one of the first bodies to benefit from technological advancements; for example as projectors place the words on a screen this ensures everyone can sing along. Technology allows people to interact with the gospel in a profounder way. This has impact just as Gutenberg's printing press did.

In the middle of 1400's Gutenberg set up the printing press and published the first mechanically printed Bible. The printing press enabled ideas to flow rapidly and in large quantities to very large audiences. Also, William Tyndale translated the Bible into English and had it printed and distributed in the early 1500's. Besides, during the same period Martin Luther was printing booklet after booklet in order to give details his views to an interested Europe. He also translated and had printed the Bible into German.[3] However, in the same way that the 500-year-old Protestant Reformation, was assisted by the printing press and its birthing birth of the King James Bible, changes fashioned by modern technology have the possibility of bringing down the church as it currently exists.

> When Bible study can be done on Facebook as easily as in the church basement, and a favorite preacher can teach lessons via podcast, the necessity of physically gathering each week in the same place with the same people turns remote…Young Christians "have come to expect experiences that appear unscripted and interactive," the Christian demographer Dave Kinnaman told the Christian magazine Charisma in 2009, "that allow them to be open and honest with their questions, that are technologically stimulating, that are done alongside peers and within trusted relationships (Belief Blog, 2011).

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[1] Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary: Retrieved via internet assessed on 15th October 2018.

[2] Funk Ken, *Definition of Technology* (Oregon State University: Retrieved via on 15th October 2018).
[3] http://www.bibletopics.com/biblestudy/81.htm (Accessed 16th Oct, 2018).

Blaise Pascal, Isaac Newton, and Samuel Morse were scientists who apprehended Christianity and the Bible in the highest regard. What motivated them was a confidence in the "rationality" behind the universe and the "goodness" of the material world. In addition, around 1957 Billy Graham started World Wide Pictures as a complement to his Billy Graham Crusade organization. Billy Graham Crusades, reaching millions of people by means of television, this would not have been possible without the aid, help and support of technology.[4]

Also, Word Publishing Houses continue to publish Christian educational works that are distributed globally. Wycliffe, the Bible translation people, believes that it is possible to translate the scripture into every known tongue and languages within 50 years or less, largely because of the use and abet of technology.[5] Summarily, technology has been helpful to the church in a number of ways:

➢ It has greatly magnified the voice of those preaching the gospel. Instead of reaching hundreds or even thousands when preaching a sermon, ministers now have possible audience in millions.
➢ It has enriched the gospel by providing more information to more people in a shorter amount of time. In other words, it saves time and works move faster.
➢ It has increased the number of channels of distribution of the gospel.
➢ It has provided helps for the encouragement, strengthening, and edification of the believers through technology tools and advanced electronic discipleship material.
➢ It aid Christians in reaching out to a distracted world, by using familiar tools.

Comments on Technology in Christianity

Many critics of modern technology have probed deeper in commenting on the effects of technology on the church. Jacques Ellul, for example, claims that technology has positive and negative effects on the church.[6] He also explained that technology develops a dynamic of its own. Neil postman observes that technology has displaced tradition and culture, to our great harm. It is quite possible to see how technology has displaced the traditional culture of Christianity, especially in the way that worship and church work is conducted.

More so, John MacArthur says, traditional methodology-most noticeably preaching is being discarded or downplayed in favor of newer means, such as drama, dance, comedy, side-show histrionics, pop-psychology, and other entertainment forms.[7] He also points out that the Church believes it is in direct competition, not simply opposition, to the world and must, therefore, use the world's own methods (technologies) to attract the attention of the lost and, in many cases, the membership of the church.

Additionally, Borgmann believes that technology is the defining element of the society. It has produced a culture of self-orientation that is designed to procure a comfortable and individualistic

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[4] Dale B. Sims, *the Effect of Technology on Christianity: Blessing or Curse?* (Broadman Publishing), 5.

[5] Paul Flesher, *Technology and Christianity* (published by Powered Blogger, 1999), 8.

[6] Timothy J. Demy, *"Technology and Theology: Reality and Hope for the Third Millennium,"* in Issues 2000 (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 47.

[7] John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church becomes Like the World,* (Carlifonia:Cross Way, 2001).

lifestyle.[8] Current thinking trend is that when scientific explanation appears, God is dissolved. And scientists claim that if you stop explaining simply by saying that it was "done by God", then you are exhibiting lazy thinking. There are a number of ways in which technology has negatively affected Christianity. It has no platform for helping create stronger generations of committed Christians.[9] Technology has created a worship experience of isolation and entertainment rather than one of reverence and participation. It has been allowed to redefine and reshape Christianity to fit into the mold of our culture. technology provides distractions that draw believers away from the main message of Christianity, the idea of those two immortal things, the Word of God and the souls of men, coming together to make a difference in this world.

Christianity is not a religion of rule by the anonymous consensus of philosophy. Technology brings consensus, coherence, and conformity to cultures, but Christianity requires conformity to God's standards, not technology standards. Rather, it is people who, as free moral agents, give themselves over to the leadership of the Holy Spirit.[10] Conceivably, the greatest danger of technology is its capacity to distract believers from God and His kingdom. In its incredible capacity to realize the lower good of the human and non-human creation, technology can divert believers from the highest good.[11] There are also diverse views such as:

> You see the church now doing more with technology," Cudworth said. "With the apps, we can pull up scriptures, videos, conference talks and all sorts of resources on our iPads, smartphones and electronic devices. Even missionaries are using iPads in the field." Cudworth said she sees how technology has been abused in the church and even in classes. She said members need to think before they act and have to be smart about incorporating technology at church. She said she encourages people to use technology to use church resources, such as the church's apps, but to resist the temptation to use it for other means during church meetings. "I would hope that we could trust ourselves with the technology," Cudworth said. "Even with missionaries now with the electronic devices in the field, part of that is to train them on how to handle the technology and be efficient with that blessing we have been given to enhance our gospel study." Cudworth said she believes it's important for members to use social media and smartphones to spread the gospel to members all over the world, since many of the church leaders have adopted this use of technology. (Hernandez, 2017)

Technology and the 21st Century Nigerian Church

The addition of technology to the church ministry is without question very impactful, but at what cost? From the previous premise of this research, it is clear that the overwhelming influence of technology on Christianity cannot be denied. Technology has been a great tool in powering the message to salvation to the different parts of the world, Nigeria included. In view of the discourse

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[8] Borgmann, Power *Failure* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 10.

[9] *The Effects of Technology on Christianity:L A Blessing or a Curse,*https://www3.dbu.edu/Naugle/pdf /The%20Effect%20of%20Technology%20on%20Christianity2.pdf

[10] Steve Hewitt, *foreward to Christian Cyberspace Companion: A Guide to the Internet and Christian Online Resources*, by Jason D. Baker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 13.

[11] Ken Funk, *Technology and Christian Values* (Oregon State University), Christian critique of technology.

of this research, a part of technology among others is most taken into serious consideration as it affects the Nigerian Church in this dispensation, and that is the handset.

Many pastors, instead of going to the altar armed with pages of notes now take their laptops, android phones, tablets and iPads, among others. It is true that there are lots of apps on the gadget. Meanwhile, the percentage of believers who use a gadget only for church use in Nigeria is very low. Therefore, the use of the gadget as a substitute for the hard copy of the scripture inherently gives room for distractions in the worship service. Even members in the church are not left out. Worship services are to supposed to be moments of reverencing and honoring God but it is vice versa in the Nigerian Church today. It is amazing to see during worship services, church members surfing their social networks like (Facebook, 2go, twitter, snapchat, Instagram accounts, among others).

The taking of snapshots during service in the Nigerian Church is another issue; members taking snapshots in the church; distracting themselves and other in the course of posing to make their styles admirable. Although some of them claim to utilize the electronic Bible on their phones in the church; it is important to note that some other things can pop up in the cause of surfing the so called bible on the 'phone', even on the pulpit. In other words, it is logical to say that 'electronic Bible' is a key to using one's gadget in the house of God. This is because even someone who doesn't have a Bible application on the phone claims that the Bible is the main reason for operating the phone.

The culture of switching off one's phone is dying gradually in the Nigerian church, with all sorts of activities needed to be sorted out on the phone; this consciously ignites the need to frequently operate phones in worship services. Since, the usage of phone is beyond making calls it means that its ineffectiveness in service cuts across all other functions it performs. The fact that people should not totally switch off their lines while in the church is not really a bad idea (probably because of serious and urgent issues which can happen to anyone), yet it should be silenced. The silence in question does not only mean in the profile mode but it also has done with the general use the communication gadget.

Uncontrolled addiction to technology can lead to alienation of some church members from others. It is noteworthy that in the 21st century Nigerian church, if one does not have an iPhone or iPad, such person is not in tune with the current trend. One of the reasons people now come to church is to flaunt their newly upgraded or purchased gadgets, some of them use it to intimate, show off and brag to people in the church. As a result, several members are affected and hamper the growth of the church and the purpose for which it was established. The research discovered that undue importance is keenly attached to these gadgets in the Nigerian church today. This kind of materialistic behavior should never be a part of the church. With the advancement of technology, many believers fall into the trap of being distracted from God,[12] right there in the worship service, even on the pulpit. On the other hand, technology allows churches to better communicate with their members, especially those living far away from the church.

In addition, social media consumes the time of many believers, many are totally distracted while in church, their minds travel far and then near; some will even be left on for hours, so to utter prayers will be difficult, and eventually they may fall asleep. Many Christians spend more time sharing Whatsapp sequence messages than spreading the word of God. In the 21st century Nigerian church, some pastors have abandoned programmes like Bible study, visitation of

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[12] Barna, *"Christians Embrace Technology,"* The numbers for the American population are fifty-five, sixteen, and eight respectively.

members have been replaced by Whatsapp meetings and groups socializing on their phones. The question of the effectiveness of this paradigm shift remains; can the induced platform actually serve the purpose for which it was meant to do? Can serious issues be serious discussed on these platforms? Can counseling be effective in this regard? Will the church be able to meet the needs of her members as at when due?

It is the norm now in the Nigerian church to see parents enjoying the message while the young ones sit behind them and beside them, engrossed in the usage of their communication gadgets. It seems the Nigerian church has lost its modes of checks and balances in this regard. Technology and its advancements though superb, is making the Nigerian church lazy; some Christians no longer take their Bibles to church because 'the word of God will be projected on the screen'. These statements are viral 'my phone is my Bible', 'everybody is doing it', 'even our pastor make use of his phone on the pulpit'; but it doesn't make it right. It is clear that this research is not condemning technology or technological advancement as it is but the reflection of its abuse and excess in the 21st century Nigeria calls for a serious attention.

In current era technology has proven to be a great addition to the church and it has given an inordinate boost in enhancing the devotion experience of believers in especially protestant churches as projectors powering the words on screen guarantee everyone can sing along. Technology is also a boundless instrument in promoting the message to salvation to the entire world. Numerous pastors, instead of going to the altar with liturgical books now take their technologically advanced tablets and iPads with them. However, Christians must be careful not to spend more time on Whatsapp messages rather than spreading God's word. We can also argue that technology advances church agendas and it can mould, but not fully restore, a sinful world. No technology can solve the wolrd's genuine problems. Technology can in ways help people live better and more fulfilling lives that allow them to make best use of their abilities. From a church perspective there is also an significant advantage of social media when it comes to advertising church programmes and looking for support from stakeholders for a wide assortment of outreach programmes.

Conlan-Donnelly (2015) asserts that there are also churches using other technology like video to connects theology students with academics globally via web broadcasts. Many churches now produce professional videos on Bible passages and some offer lectures online to help overcoming obstacles to faith.

> Even though video is becoming increasingly favored by organized religion, it's hardly the only technology being adopted worldwide. The Church of England recently announced plans to outfit all 16,000 of its churches with Wi-Fi, while San Antón church in Madrid not only offers free Internet access but also boasts a confession app and broadcasts live streams from Rome. According to Slate, Christian podcasts are also an attractive option, as they greatly expand churches' audiences. Many religious leaders are taking advantage of the medium to recap Sunday sermons or cover the types of topics that might never make it to the pulpit (Conlan-Donnelly, 2015).

Conclusion

It is clear that Church services aren't being conducted in the way they were in the past. Nowadays, there are efforts to adapt and attract new members, and so many churches have incorporated contemporary worship and technology to involve the younger millennial digital generation. Having examined the value of technology to the universe and the church; it is important to be careful of

the element that one uses in the evaluation. Technology should be explicitly evaluated with reference to its role in the understanding of right and wrong. There are clearly advantages:

> For churches, the benefits of digital giving are clear, including access to new donors, easier accounting procedures and the steady cash flow of automatically recurring payments. It also allows churches to connect with a wider circle of adherents: A Christian in Seattle can listen to weekly sermon podcasts from a megachurch in Texas — and now he can easily donate from afar, too (Conlan-Donnelly, 2015).

However, the research suggests the need to look beyond the mere instrumental value of technology in realizing valued ends to examine its role in directing thoughts and actions of believers in the 21st century (especially the Nigerian church) toward and away from the highest good. Regardless of all the good that technology produces, possibly, its greatest danger is not in the bad that it brings about, but in the good that it diverts us from. The research submits that technology advancement is one of the best things that has happened to the world but the church (the 21st century Nigerian church especially) should be careful and cautious in the use of it so that it won't turn to a distraction. So while

> Mark Zuckerberg suggested that Facebook could replace the church. He argued that his technology platform could create a sense of community the face of falling church membership (Gravity Leadership, n.d.)

Nonetheless, we should be discerning and carefully evaluate the possibilities of technology so that we can perceive the great limitations and crippling side-effects it may have when it is used extensively in churches.

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