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Cyber/Digital Theology: Rethinking about Our Relationship with God and Neighbor in the Digital Environment

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ABSTRACT

The digital age with its multifarious technological developments, especially those pertaining to the Internet, has created many changes in human society—from the way we work and go about our daily activities to how we relate to the people and things around us. These changes are significant enough to warrant thoughtful, systematic reflections and analysis regarding its cultural, sociological and theological impact on our lives. This paper attempts to do so with respect to the theological implications of the Internet, particularly in regards to human relationships with God and with one another. While philosophical, spiritual and theological inquiries could be made in regards to any or all religious traditions, this paper chooses to focus only on the Catholic Christian tradition. In addition, references to the Asian context are made in order to highlight the effects of the digital age on theology in the Asian cultural and religious milieu. The kind of theology discussed in this paper, for lack of a better term, is called "cyber/digital theology," which requires some explanations to be clear what this really means. Although the terminology as well as its content remains in a formative stage, cyber/digital theology is an area worthy of more systematic study. This paper addresses the need for such an effort and proposes that the digital age provides new ways for the faithful to search for God, to envision one's relationship with God and with neighbor, and to enter into these relationships.

Keywords: digital age, cybertheology, digital theology, cyber/digital theology

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There are a number of terms being introduced in theological discussions that reflect the nature of the contemporary age, and they may not always sound familiar or immediately self-evident to the listener. These terms include “digital theology,” “theology in a digital age,” “cybertheology,” “theology of the Internet,” and others. While none of them have received acceptance as the official term for what they aim to convey, they all point to an important reality that needs to be addressed: the nexus between theology and the modern age of digital communication and Internet technology. This article is not concerned so much with making a case for any particular terminology because a consensus will eventually come about in due time. It, however, aims to reflect on some theological matters that are provoked (inspired) by the new digital milieu in which terms such as digital age and cyberspace, which once sounded like descriptions of futuristic and otherworldly phenomena, now reflect a real and pervasive reality in human life. Thus, Christian theology which deals with the deepest issues and aspirations of humanity cannot fail to consider the effects of digital technology on the important dimensions of human lives, particularly one’s relationship with God and with fellow human beings.

It must be stated at the outset that the forthcoming reflections are but a modest effort to contribute to more systematic studies in this area, which Lynne M. Baab says “remains in its infancy.”¹ Indeed, a word search of “digital theology” on Google only produces a few entries. Similarly, conducting a search using the keyword “cybertheology” renders only about a dozen entries, more than half of which are book reviews or references to Antonio Spadaro’s book *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet*, published originally in Italian and subsequently translated into English. The same search on Amazon renders two entries, Spadaro’s work and a thesis by an Indian scholar Peter Singh entitled simply *Cybertheology*, published in 2009. Spadaro himself lamented in his book about the lack of resources and having to stare “at a blank computer screen with no idea about where to begin or what to write”² when he was asked to give a theological speech about religiosity and the Internet. The Jesuit priest and writer found a wealth of information regarding the pastoral dimension of the Internet—its

¹ Lynne M. Baab, “Toward a Theology of the Internet: Place, Relationship, and Sin,” in *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, and Futures*, ed. Pauline Hope Cheong et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 2012): 277.

² Antonio Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014): Kindle edition.

benefits and risks, its utilization as an instrument of evangelization and so on—but systematic theological reflections were few.³

It is also important in this paper to state the reasons why there needs to be a so called cyber/digital theology and what this term fundamentally refers to. Although there is still no official definition of what cybertheology or digital theology (cyber/digital theology) is, the reflections here can contribute to the process of development of its final definition in the future. One of the aims of this paper also is to discuss cyber/digital theology with some references to the Asian context since the theme of the conference is entitled “Religion in Digital Asia.” By situating the inquiry in the Asian environment and making the relevant connections, we will see that cyber/digital theology takes on various shapes depending on the context. Thus, the task of this paper is threefold: (1) To discuss the necessity of developing a cyber/digital theology; (2) to reflect on human relationships with God and fellow human beings from a cyber/digital theological perspective; and (3) to briefly situate this reflection in the Asian socio-religio-cultural context.

The Need for a Cyber/Digital Theology

It has been seen in the history of the Catholic Church that its theology has more than once undergone various developments, sometimes willingly but oftentimes being pushed and nudged along by various events that took place beyond the confines of the institutional church. Paradigm shifts brought about by scientific developments such as the Copernican astronomical model of the universe and Darwin’s theory of evolution led the church to officially accept the position that the Bible could not be read as a source of scientific information.⁴ Technological advances also significantly affected how theology was done. During the Old Testament period, biblical texts were written and transmitted on scrolls. However, a single scroll could only hold so much text; thus, multiple scrolls were needed for various portions of the Bible. However, by the 4th century, after the invention of the codex, the entire biblical canon could fit into a single physical codex with a specific arrangement and relationship to one another. Unlike previously where the idea of the biblical

³ Ibid.

⁴ J.F. Haught, “Science, Theology, and the Copernican Revolution,” accessed December 1, 2015, <https://www.khanacademy.org/partner-content/big-history-project/big-bang/other-materials2/a/science-theology-and-the-copernican-revolution>.

canon as a single entity was just a conceptual notion, the invention of the codex helped the reader to envision the canon as a unified entity. Although the earliest printing of a book is credited to China's ninth century production of the Diamond Sutra which helped to spread Buddhism across Asia, a seismic technological paradigm shift took place with the invention of the printing press that gave rise to the text-based culture and unprecedented dissemination of information in the last 500 years.⁵

The development of computer technology in the last part of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the new millennium has taken communication to even more unprecedented heights. The digitalization of information and transmission of information in this form is a unique development that has affected how information is produced, disseminated and consumed. In this new context, books and journals can be published entirely online. "Newspapers" need not make it to the newsstand or even come in printed pages for that matter. Materials for academic research can be found to a good extent on the Internet, and a doctoral thesis theoretically can be completed entirely by doing research online, written on the computer or tablet, saved in a digital format, and sent to the review panel via email.⁶

The Internet as a new and unique form of communication, however, holds a lot more ramifications for human society and for Catholic theology. In the document "The Church and the Internet," (2002) produced by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, the Catholic Church recognized the power of the Internet in bringing about "revolutionary changes in commerce, education, politics, journalism, the relationship of nation to nation and culture to culture—changes not just in how people communicate but in how they understand their lives."⁷ Indeed, with the rise of social networks, communication via the Internet is not just about sharing information, but also about people engaging in relationships with both those who they know offline as well as those whom they only are acquainted with online. Pope Benedict XVI remarked that social networks signified that

People are engaged in building relationships and making friends, in looking for answers to their questions and being entertained, but also in finding intellectual stimulation and sharing knowledge and know-how. The networks are increasingly becoming part of the very fabric of society, inasmuch as they bring people together on the basis of these fundamental needs. Social networks are thus nourished by aspirations rooted in the human heart.⁸

The fact that the Internet in all its manifold forms and applications (email, chat rooms, voice streaming, video streaming, the World Wide Web, Skype Calls, LINE, Viber, online video games, social networks, etc.) has permeated every aspect of modern human society means that this form of communication must be reflected upon not only sociologically but also spiritually and theologically. Here, it is important to make some delineation between Internet and cyberspace. The Internet is a system of networks connecting together billions of computers worldwide, and where information can be exchanged through various applications of the World Wide Web (WWW), electronic mail, telephony, and peer-to-peer networks for file sharing.⁹ While it is easy enough to define Internet, what exactly is cyberspace? Sometimes people use this term interchangeably with Internet, but that is not correct. The Oxford Online Dictionary defines cyberspace as "The notional environment in which communication over computer networks occurs."¹⁰ Notice the word notional is used because cyberspace itself does not physically exist. It is a metaphorical space that exists in our minds, especially when we are chatting with friends and feel as if we are meeting them in a particular space. According to Neil Postman, "Cyberspace is a metaphorical idea which is supposed to be the space where your consciousness is located when you're using computer technology on the Internet, for example."¹¹ Peter Singh remarks that cyberspace has become a generic term to refer to various things associated with the Internet. "In effect, cyberspace can be understood as the interconnection of human beings through

⁵ Ched Spellman, "The Canon after Google: Implications of a Digitized and Destabilized Codex" *Princeton Theological Review* 17.2 (2010):39-40.

⁶ Incidentally, the research and writing of this article is over 90 percent done online and with the help of a laptop, a Kindle Reader, and an Ipad 2.

⁷ Pontifical Council for Social Communications, "The Church and the Internet," accessed November 5, 2015, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html.

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2013," accessed November 10, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20130124_47th-world-communications-day.pdf.

⁹ Wikipedia, "Internet," accessed November 13, 2015, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet>.

¹⁰ Oxford Online Dictionary, "Cyberspace," accessed November 26, 2015, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/cyberspace>.

¹¹ Sunshine Recorder, "Neil Postman on Cyberspace," accessed November 26, 2015, <http://sunrec.tumblr.com/post/73223445766/neil-postman-on-cyberspace-1995>.

computers and telecommunication, without physical geography.”¹²

An associated but not identical concept that has arisen out of the notion of cyberspace is that of virtual reality, a term that is used often in everyday conversation but also suffers from much misuse.¹³ In the field of computer technology, virtual reality refers to a simulation or a clone of physical reality by employing 3D real-time interactive graphics and technological devices that help create environments that are immersive and interactive for the user in that environment.¹⁴ An important point to be made here is that virtual reality is a very specific technology that involves various instruments in order to achieve a certain experience for the user. Whatever can be characterized as virtual reality has to be believable, interactive, computer-generated, explorable, and immersive.¹⁵ However, virtual reality is often misunderstood because people often refer to this term in order to describe situations that do not involve all these factors. Virtual reality has been associated with things such as the World Wide Web and the world of social networks such as Facebook. However, according to Chris Woodford, the fast development of the WWW actually negatively affected the development of virtual reality technology. In fact, the WWW’s rise showed that “ordinary people were much more interested in the way the Web gave them new ways to access real reality—new ways to find and publish information, shop, and share thoughts, ideas, and experiences with friends through social media.”¹⁶

In this paper, the term virtual reality will not be used to refer to the modern digital environment because of the various ways that this term has been misunderstood and misused. In everyday speech, virtual often carries baggage that hinders discussion about what takes place on the Internet or cyberspace. Virtual is often associated with something that does not really exist but is made to appear to exist through clever computer programming. Thus, when one applies this notion to whatever taking place on the Internet, whether it is a community or chat group or different relationships, there is a tendency to

¹² M. Peter Singh, “An Overview of Cybertheology” (Paper presented at Seminar on Ekklesiology in Cyber Age, Bangalore, June 26-27, 2014).

¹³ Tomasz Mazuryk and Michael Gervautz, “Virtual Reality: History, Applications, Technology and Future,” accessed November 6, 2015, <https://www.cg.tuwien.ac.at/research/publications/1996/mazuryk-1996-VRH/TR-186-2-96-06Paper.pdf> : 3.

¹⁴ Mazuryk and Gervautz, “Virtual Reality,” 4.

¹⁵ Chris Woodford, “Virtual Reality,” accessed November 26, 2015, <http://www.explainthatstuff.com/virtualreality.html>.

¹⁶ Woodford, *Ibid.*

use it in a pejorative sense, so that anything that is deemed virtual is seen as inauthentic or unreal. This is not to deny that there is such a thing as virtual reality (especially in the specific sense mentioned in the above paragraph), but virtual reality does not necessarily characterize the Internet, digital communication or cyberspace, which in some sense is very real. As Pope Benedict XVI asserted, “The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young.”¹⁷ Indeed, for some gone is the day where they speak of going online or offline as if one sets out the time to take a stroll in some sort of digital wonderland only to return to real life with all of its real world issues and responsibilities. In today’s globalized digital world, the Internet is a place we keep in touch with family and friends, meet new people and form new relationships, do business and keep updated on local and international news, search for information on anything from how to tie a tie to how to make *tom yum kung*, and share photos, ideas, and feelings with others on social networks, blogs, or forums. Pope John Paul II compared cyberspace to the ancient Roman public forum “where politics and business were transacted, where religious duties were fulfilled, where much of the social life of the city took place, and where the best and the worst of human nature was on display.”¹⁸ In our Southeast Asian context, a comparable image is the large markets where people congregate to work, to socialize and gossip, even to make merit to the monks who make their morning rounds with the begging bowls.¹⁹ In some ways, cyberspace is symbolic of this town market with all the bustling sights, sounds, and colors fused together.

Cyberspace, thus is no longer a place out there but integrally connected to our life so that we are as much attached to our physical environment as to the digital one. No longer is the Internet considered a novelty but part of everyday life for many people.²⁰ Armed with a smart phone or tablet with a 3G/4G connection, we are able to check in and let people know where we are at any moment whether it is at the airport, at the metro station or standing in line at the supermarket checkout counter. One only needs to take a glance at the

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for World Communication Day 2013”.

¹⁸ Pope John Paul II, “Message for World Communication Day 2002” accessed November 20, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day.html.

¹⁹ In the Theravada Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, it is not uncommon to see monks with their begging bowls making the rounds through the markets each morning.

²⁰ Sam Han and Kamaludeen Mohadmed, *Digital Culture and Religion in Asia*, (London: Routledge, 2016), Kindle edition.

line of Bangkok office workers patiently cueing up at motorbike taxi stations every evening to see how prevalent the Internet is in their lives. At Kasetsart University in Thailand, the administration has even adopted a “mobile phone lane” for phone junkies to use so as not to hinder the path of other students.²¹ According to Antonio Spadaro,

The Internet is therefore not at all a simple *instrument* of communication, which one can choose to use, but it has evolved into a cultural “environment” that determines a style of thought, creating new territories and new types of education, contributing also to the definition of a new way to stimulate the intelligence and to tighten relationships. It is a way to live in and organize our world. It is not a separate environment, but it is becoming ever more integrated into our everyday lives.²²

Spadaro’s assertion, however is not new or unexpected. Even as early as 1990, when the Internet was yet widely known in non-professional circles, Pope John Paul II had already foreseen the potential for a cultural paradigm shift brought about by the world of communications in the modern age. In *Redemptoris Missio*, he characterized the new communications environment as a “new culture” with “new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology.”²³ It is, therefore, unsurprising that Domenico Pompili argues that the Internet is a place with real human presence and qualifies as an anthropological space.²⁴ This realization forces us to give credence to its existence and its role in shaping our thoughts and feelings, and ultimately our spiritual and theological sensibilities.

²¹ Visarut Sankham, “Varsity Gets Thailand’s First ‘Mobile Phone Lane’ for Smart Phone Junkies,” *The Nation*, October 22, 2015, accessed November 6, 2015. <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/national/Varsity-gets-Thailands-first-mobile-phone-lane-for-30271375.html>

²² Spadaro, Chapter 1, “The Internet”. Kindle Edition.

²³ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 37c, accessed January 11, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.pdf. Incidentally, in the same year, Pope John Paul II also discussed in his “Message for World Communication Day” the importance of “computer telecommunications” and a “computer culture” for the evangelizing mission of the Church. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_24011990_world-communications-day.html.

²⁴ Domenico Pompili, *Il nuovo ell’antico. Comunicazione e testimonianza nell’era digitale* [The New in the Old: Communication and Witnessing in the Digital Era] (San Paolo, Italy: Cinisello Balsamo, 2011): 62.

One must ask the question what then is digital/cyber theology? At Durham University in the United Kingdom, the staff at the CODEC Research Central for Digital Theology writes on their website that one of their foci is theology in the digital age. The group lists the activities in this area as including Biblical literacy, the impact of digital transformation on society, culture and communication, and theological issues related to religious identity online.²⁵ Debbie Herring administers a website on cybertheology in which she divides the contents into three categories— theology in, theology of, and theology for cyberspace.²⁶ Peter Singh asserts that “Cybertheology must be understood as the intelligence of faith in the cyber age which influences the way we think, learn, communicate and live.”²⁷ Spadaro also refers to the classic definition of theology to discuss the theological implications of the Internet. He writes:

Cybertheological reflection is always a reflexive knowledge that starts from the experience of faith. . . Cybertheology is not, therefore, a sociological reflection on religiosity on the Internet, but is the fruit of faith that frees from itself a cognitive impulse at a time when the Web’s logic marks the way of thinking, knowing, communicating, and living.²⁸

Cyber/digital theology can also be distinguished from other theologies that focus on or give priority to particular sectors/groups in society, for example liberation theology (the poor and the working class), feminist theology (women), womanist theology (African American women), and Asian theology (Asian men and women). Cyber/digital theology is also unlike various contextual theologies because the case of the digital environment is not simply some sort of special human context that is isolated from the rest of human society. Moreover, cyber/digital theology is not necessarily just about a brand of theology that is found *in* cyberspace, removed from actual day-to-day life. Indeed, the digital environment is becoming increasingly all encompassing in our lives and exerts a great deal of influence on all of life’s dimensions. *Thus cyber/digital theology is the systematic reflection on the transformative impact of the digital age on the various dimensions of one’s faith life and his/her response to this ever changing milieu.* Theology in any form still takes God

²⁵ “The CODEC Research Centre for Digital Theology,” Durham University, last modified October 28, 2015, <https://www.dur.ac.uk/codec/>.

²⁶ Debbie Herring, accessed November 7, 2015, <http://www.cybertheology.net/>.

²⁷ Singh, “An Overview of Cybertheology.”

²⁸ Spadaro, “Cybertheology,” Kindle edition.

and God's relationship to human beings as its subject matters. Nonetheless, cyber/digital theology is informed by the digital environment with all of its revelations and inspirations. The subsequent parts of this paper will present reflections on the implications for the various dimensions of human lives, in particular one's relationship with God and with fellow human beings. The aim is to see how these relationships may be perceived and maintained within the digital environment that characterize the modern era.

Searching for God in the Digital Environment

Any theological exercise has to begin first and foremost with reflecting on one's search for and perception of God. Traditionally Christians have located God within a temporal and spatial framework as reflected in the "Our Father Prayer" which informs the believer that God is in "heaven." God is also eternal and the supreme ruler of a kingdom that will come in a particular time. As the Psalmist proclaims, "Your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens."²⁹ The way one grasps what eternity may look like is by imagining a thousand years for God is like a day in our human experience. "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day."³⁰ Thus, by imagining heaven as a particular place and eternity as a day multiplied infinitely, it is easier to imagine how and where God exists. Though theologians affirm that heaven is not a physical place, the faithful are also not discouraged from looking up beyond the stars in order to imagine that up there somewhere is God lovingly looking down upon his children and seeing all of their joys and sorrows as well as their challenges and weaknesses. This gives one a sense of direction and assurance. Lavinia Byrne writes, "Nothing makes so powerful a bid to the human heart as the promise that we will live forever, albeit in heaven. Nothing is so comforting as the sense that more time means more of the same kind of time, with regular sunrises and sunsets to measure out our days."³¹

Modern science, however, has done much to intrude on the previously construed notions of God and heaven, at least for those who give serious considerations to scientific development. Science declares that space is, in fact, infinite, thus displacing the possibility of heaven having its own

distinctive place.³² This presents a dilemma for popular spirituality because how then, can God be located in heaven if logically such a place cannot exist?³³ Theologians attempt to deal with this reality by proposing the existence of a spirit world that lies beyond common space or the notion of "sacramental space" within this world or within the Christian community where God's presence is real and could be felt.³⁴ The digital environment, nonetheless, has presented new opportunities to enrich one's search for God and imagine how God may be present in the world. Lavinia Byrne notes that the universe comprised of observable atoms which cluster together to form things is no longer the only kind of universe which one might hold in conception. With cyberspace comprised of nonphysical digits, we are presented with new dimensions that exist alongside the world of atoms. She asks, "If this digital world is so accessible to our computers, then why not a spiritual equivalent? Suddenly God fits because there is a place for God to live. The idea that angels may indeed dance on the head of a pin gets re-instated, for there is more to space and time than can presently be seen and communicated."³⁵ According to Singh, the digital world provides a metaphor for God's presence and "ways of imagining things in a new sense of time and space where digits inform our situation,"³⁶ thus overcoming the challenges presented by science. This metaphor thus presents fresh insights into the question of "Master, where do you dwell?"

While the digital environment with its newfound possibility may help in overcoming former limitations presented by science, it does not promise that one's search for God is necessarily simpler or easier. In the past, people came to figures of authority such as priests and religious for questions related to God and spiritual matters as well as some non-spiritual issues. This is due to the fact that the priest was not only seen as an authoritative figure in such matters, but was probably one of the most educated, if not the most educated person in the town or village. In many parts of Asia, especially in the rural areas, this is probably still largely the case. However, people, especially in developed countries, are increasingly turning to the Internet, television, and other media in order to look for the answers that they need.³⁷ In the digital era,

²⁹ Psalm 119:80 (NIV).

³⁰ 2 Peter 3:8 (NIV).

³¹ Lavinia Byrne, "God in Cyberspace," accessed November 7, 2015, <http://www.ed.ac.uk/files/imports/fileManager/god%20in%20cyberspace.pdf>.

³² Singh, "Overview of Cybertheology."

³³ Byrne, "God in Cyberspace."

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Singh, "Overview of Cybertheology."

³⁷ Philip Clayton, "Theology and the Church after Google," *Princeton Theological*

the role of institutions and individuals functioning as authoritative entities are becoming less prominent.³⁸ At the same time, there is an excessive amount of information on the Internet that can cause one to be overwhelmed by what comes up before their eyes. A search on Google using the keyword “God” results in over a billion and a half entries. Searching the word “พระเจ้า” (Thai) renders nearly 3 million entries, and “Thiên Chúa” (Vietnamese) also results in approximately the same number of entries. When clicking on the “Images” button, pictures of the Judeo-Christian God and Jesus appear on the screen alongside deities of other world religions, but also graphics of video games. The phenomenon of being bombarded with excessive information has been called information overload. Antonio Spadaro comments, “The problem today is not to find the message that makes sense, but to decode it, to recognize it on the basis of the multiple messages that we receive.”³⁹ Thus, despite the plethora of information, ironically, in the digital era, one’s search for God could become an experience that requires a lot of patience and sifting through all sorts of data in order to find what one needs.

Even then one cannot be sure that what one landed upon is authentic and spiritually nourishing. As Pope Benedict remarks:

Often, as is also the case with other means of social communication, the significance and effectiveness of the various forms of expression appear to be determined more by their popularity than by their intrinsic importance and value. Popularity, for its part, is often linked to celebrity or to strategies of persuasion rather than to the logic of argumentation.⁴⁰

Thus, one’s perception of and relationship with God could very likely be shaped by a blog that one follows rather than the Church’s officially sanctioned websites whether it be from the Vatican or of the local parish. Internet applications, however, have modeled a way for us to be more focused in the search for God. While Google is essentially what is known as a syntactic search engine, which conducts searches based on specific words within the text and can render innumerable entries, a semantic search engine works from a different logic. A semantic search engine takes into account the intent and

the contextual meaning of the terms being used.⁴¹ It attempts to interpret the thinking of the person requesting the search and provides the information that they might need. For example, when one types the words “Who is Jesus” in the Google search engine, the websites that appear on top are those that most match the keywords employed. However, when the same thing is done using WolframAlpha, a semantic search engine, the result that appears is not a list of websites but a picture and a series of information about Jesus, such as date of birth, place of birth, date of death, and place of death. From the information available on the Web, it also lists important events in the life of Jesus. Unfortunately, while Google often gives too much information, the semantic search engines cannot always provide the searcher with an answer at all. When entering the question “Where is God,” WolframAlpha comes back with a small red dot on the map of Hungary, showing the location of a city called God.⁴² No answer such as “God is in heaven” can be found. Likewise, asking the question “Does God exist?” results in the following answer: “I’m sorry, but a poor computational knowledge engine, no matter how powerful, is not capable of providing a simple answer to that question.” The logic of these two types of search engines models different ways that one may go about searching for God—an effort that is either random and depends largely on happenstance or one that is intentional, concentrated, and focused. The search for God in the digital era thus can be exciting as it is bewildering.

The digital age not only can help with new ways to envision how God may be present in the world, but also provides the means to search for God in ways that do not limit the seeker to simply the traditional channels (i.e. the hierarchy or the local parish priest). In context of Asia, the Internet facilitates the search for God and understanding about God in richer ways beyond the local parish priest or traditional religious figures. In Asia, Christianity forms a tiny minority of the population, constituting only 4.5%.⁴³ Catholics make up 3% of Asia’s population,⁴⁴ slightly over 115 million.⁴⁵ Over 63% of all

Review 17.2 (2010):8

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁹ Spadaro, “Cybertheology,” Kindle edition.

⁴⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for World Communication Day 2013.”

⁴¹ Wikipedia, “Semantic Search,” accessed November 9, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semantic_search.

⁴² Incidentally, Hell is to be found in Norway.

⁴³ FABC Papers No.131, “A Glimpse at Dialogue in Asia,” 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ James H. Kroeger, “An ‘Asian’ Dialogue Decalogue: Principles of Interreligious Dialogue from Asia’s Bishops,” accessed November 27, 2015, <http://www.lst.edu/academics/landas-archives/353-an-qasianq-dialogue-decalogue-j-kroeger-mm>.

Asian Catholics live in the two countries of the Philippines and East Timor,⁴⁶ while in many Asian countries, Catholicism makes up less than 1 percent of the population.⁴⁷ In Thailand, there are less than 300,000 Catholics⁴⁸ out of a population of 67 million while neighboring Cambodia has a little over 20,000 Catholics⁴⁹ out of a population of 15 million. In Asia, searching for God and maintaining close relationship with God is not only challenged by the limited means of the local church but also greatly affected by cultural and religious milieus within which Christians find themselves. Having access to the Internet allows for this search to be facilitated and relationship with God to be nourished in new ways beyond what is immediately available. Catholics in a small remote village can find spiritually beneficial materials that differ from the repetitive homilies given by their parish priest, especially the ones who take time in Mass not only to preach but also to lecture on all sorts of matters in the parish. Seminarians in Laos who have extremely limited resources in their seminary library can turn to the Internet to study the Scriptures and find helpful materials to prepare for reflections that they must present to local villagers in their Sunday ministry.⁵⁰ In Thailand, many Buddhists and potential converts to Christianity turn to a web forum set up by a layman to ask questions about matters of faith.⁵¹ With the help of the Internet, God potentially becomes more accessible and immediate while the images of God to which we are introduced become more rich and diverse.

Thus, how Asians search for, perceive, and maintain relationship with God may greatly be influenced by the modern digital environment which facilitates these activities. However, this does not mean that searching for God in the digital age promises easy access to the truth when a smorgasbord of information is available online, and not all leads one in the right direction or provides the necessary nourishment for one's faith life. More than ever, the search for God

⁴⁶ FABC Papers No.131, 3.

⁴⁷ Kroeger, "An 'Asian' Dialogue Decalogue."

⁴⁸ Udomsarn, "How Many Thai Catholics Are There Really?" accessed January 6, 2016, <http://www.thaicath.net/diarybible/cathsuebsiri/word/ew05.htm>.

⁴⁹ Wikipedia, "Roman Catholicism in Cambodia," accessed January 6, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholicism_in_Cambodia.

⁵⁰ Because of the lack of ordained priests in Laos, Catholic seminarians at the philosophy and theology levels are usually asked to undertake weekend ministry at various churches in which they not only teach catechism but also give reflections based on the Sunday readings.

⁵¹ According to the owner of the forum "New Mana," dozens of people have converted to Christianity partly because of their participation in this webboard. <http://www.newmana.com/phpbb/index.php>.

and maintaining relationship with God requires self-initiative, prudence, and patience. One's image of and relationship with God can no longer be dictated from above as in the past; in the digital age, one must be more responsible for this spiritual quest, and by virtue of their presence and participation in the digital environment, contributes to how God is seen and understood by fellow searchers.

Interpersonal Relationships in the Digital Age

Ever since the creation of what has since been referred to as Web 2.0, which takes the users from experiencing the Web as passive viewers of content to being able to generate content and interact and collaborate with other users,⁵² the focus has been not just on receiving or exchanging information through the Internet but on human relationships. Unlike the traditional text-based websites, newsgroups, and mailing lists which do not highlight the relationship dimension of its users, social networks aim to put relationship at the center. According to Spadaro, "The key concept is no longer merely *presence* on the Web but *connection*. If we are present, but not connected, we are alone" (italics in original)⁵³ Indeed, on Facebook, one has the option to be either a "friend" of another user if the person has a profile page, or to be a "fan" of a particular user if he or she has a fan page. Though Facebook and Twitter are the most well known, all over the world, there are numerous other social networks based on different interests, hobbies, and ethnic backgrounds, etc.⁵⁴

Relationships mediated by the Web are always necessarily limited because the full extent of the relationship will somehow be "flattened" by the nature of the technology. Thus, on Facebook, your classmate, grandmother, pastor in real life, as well as people on the other side of the world that you have never met are all collapsed into the category of "friend". On Twitter, all the people who are connected to you are your "followers." In some ways, these words not only ignore the true nature of the relationship between you and a particular person with whom you are connected to, but it also distorts the meaning of what it means to be "friend" or "follower." Brett McCracken writes:

⁵² The term Web 2.0 was coined by Tim O'Reilly and Dale Dougherty at the O'Reilly Media Web 2.0 Conference in 2004. Examples of Web 2.0 include social networking sites, blogs, wikis, folksonomies, video sharing sites, hosted services, Web applications, and mashups

⁵³ Spadaro, "Cybertheology," Kindle edition.

⁵⁴ Wikipedia provides a list of active as well as defunct social networks worldwide. Accessed November 11, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites.

In the world of Facebook, our “friends” are almost destined to become collectible commodities and status symbols, things we collect to adorn the “walls” of our own online environs. We strategically “friend” people on Facebook or “follow” them on Twitter, and then we post things on their wall or tag them in a post to publicly consummate the relationship.⁵⁵

McCracken asserts that the way people put their relationships on public display in the online world, sharing openly information that otherwise should be reserved for the “inner circle,” and micromanaging these social relationships with posts on their own walls or on someone else’s status constitute “performative” acts that cheapen relationships.⁵⁶ Pope Benedict warned in his Message for the 2009 World Communication Day, “True friendship has always been seen as one of the greatest goods any human person can experience. We should be careful, therefore, never to trivialize the concept or the experience of friendship.”⁵⁷ In the same message, Pope Benedict also warned of the dangers of investing time and energy in online relationships while failing to nurture the other relationships in one’s life:

It would be sad if our desire to sustain and develop on-line friendships were to be at the cost of our availability to engage with our families, our neighbours and those we meet in the daily reality of our places of work, education and recreation. If the desire for virtual connectedness becomes obsessive, it may in fact function to isolate individuals from real social interaction while also disrupting the patterns of rest, silence and reflection that are necessary for healthy human development.⁵⁸

This perspective is founded on the thinking that truly nourishing relationships require a dimension of personal and physical contact that cyberspace cannot provide. Both Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessor Pope John Paul II emphasized the significance of direct human contact in one’s day-to-day

relationships with others in their messages for the World Communication Day during their papacies.⁵⁹ Pope John Paul II remarked, “Electronically mediated relationships can never take the place of the direct human contact.”⁶⁰

Despite the perceived limitations of the Web’s mediated relationships, the reality and the prevalence of such relationships require that we not dismiss them categorically but attempt to recognize their existence as well as to see how they may help expand present parameters for what it means to be in relationship with someone or what it means to call someone a neighbor. Although both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict have been quoted above to be wary of online relationships, both leaders know full well the reality of the situation as well as the opportunities that these relationships may engender. Pope Benedict stated that this form of “spreading information and knowledge is giving birth to a new way of learning and thinking, with unprecedented opportunities for establishing relationships and building fellowship.”⁶¹ This not only facilitates people coming together, but also helps with the work of evangelization. Pope Benedict called on priests who are standing “on the threshold of a new era as new technologies create deeper forms of relationship across greater distances, they are called to respond pastorally by putting the media ever more effectively at the service of the Word.”⁶²

The online relationships do not always necessarily represent a desire to escape real life relationships but in a way symbolic of the deep human desire to communicate with others. The various Internet applications that help people engage in building relationships, sharing information, exchanging ideas, creating new forms of entertainment can persuasively be said to reflect the desire for interconnectedness that are rooted deep within the human spirit.⁶³ They also manifest fundamental human needs to be open to others and to seek

⁵⁵ Brett McCracken, “The Separation of Church and Status: How Online Social Networking Helps and Hurts the Church,” *Princeton Theological Review* 17.2 (2010): 26

⁵⁶ Ibid. 27

⁵⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for World Communication Day 2009,” accessed November 12, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day.pdf.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for World Communication Day 2011,” accessed November 11, 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20110124_45th-world-communications-day.html.

⁶⁰ Pope John Paul II, “Message for World Communication Day 2002,” accessed November 12, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day.html.

⁶¹ Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for World Communication Day 2011.”

⁶² Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for World Communication Day 2010,” accessed November 11, 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20100124_44th-world-communications-day.html.

⁶³ Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for World Communication Day 2013.”

communion with others, an act which helps to realize our own humanity.⁶⁴ The digital age and the type of relationships available through this environment force a re-examination and redefining of what it means to be a friend and neighbor. The parable of the Good Samaritan told by Jesus proposes that to consider someone as a neighbor is not based on ethnicity or social status, but on one's own disposition towards the other. In the parable, a Jewish man was violently attacked and robbed on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho. However, as he was lying half-dead on the side of the road, both the priest and the Levite who passed by ignored him and walked on. Eventually, a Samaritan man came upon the hapless victim and gave him the necessary care to rescue him from a grave situation. In Jewish society, Samaritans were looked down upon and forming relationships with them were considered taboo. On the other hand, priests and Levites were highly respected, well-educated and powerful people. Nonetheless, in the parable, they failed to come to the aid of their fellow man. The Samaritan, on the other hand, displayed mercy and compassion towards the victim far beyond anything expected of him.

The parable of the Good Samaritan presents a paradigm of relationship not restricted by artificial boundaries imposed by cultural, social, ethical, or religious norms. Moreover, it emphasizes the relational possibilities presented by a heart imbued with charity, mercy and compassion. Even though this story was told by Jesus two millennia ago, the relationship paradigm that Jesus proposed through this story has not lost any of its relevance through all the ages, including the present digital age. If anything, the digital age with its new opportunities and limitations have helped us to be able to reflect on this relationship paradigm in new ways. Cyberspace as a place where people all over the world with their diverse cultural, religious, and social contexts can come together and engage in mutual exchange, sharing, and even support reinforces the idea that human need for communion can and ought to surpass any hindrances. If relationship ought not be restricted by culture, gender, or social status, they must also not be held back by any distance, whether physical or virtual.

The digital era highlights the human need for a neighbor no matter what age we live in. Some people may claim that preoccupation with online relationships hinders one from getting to know the people in their own physical neighborhood, even those living very next door. However, one needs

to ask the question: Does the preoccupation with online relationships cause distance with offline neighbors or is it a reflection of a society in which it is quite common to not know a neighbor's name despite years of living next to them, and one is thus forced to find nourishment in relationships that do not depend on physical proximity? This is sort of a chicken-and-egg problem. In the latter years of the last decade, the location-based social networks Foursquare and Gowalla were released. Foursquare is an application that through the user's own description of their interests and reporting of places frequented as well as feedback of other users gives recommendations for places to go in a current location.⁶⁵ Gowalla, which was born in 2007 and closed in 2012, was an application that allowed users to check-in on various locations that they were visiting.⁶⁶ Gowalla would eventually be acquired by Facebook,⁶⁷ whose check-in feature is one of its most popular functions. Checking-in on social network effectively reveals to all your "friends" of your presence in a particular place, which facilitates not only online encounters but physical ones as well.⁶⁸ Thus, checking-in could lead to people who would otherwise be greatly separated by physical distance or by lack of information to come together for coffee, a movie, or even a date. Antonio Spadaro raises the question, "What is encouraging people to continually violate their own personal privacy and to communicate their own movements to their digital worlds?"⁶⁹ Spadaro answers his own question by stating, "This, of course, expresses a need for proximity, that is, a desire to carry the world of their own relationships to a *real* level of contact" (author's italic).⁷⁰ Indeed, the location-based social networks and the check-in feature on various applications is a manifestation that in the contemporary culture, the deep seated need for meaningful relationship and communion with others continue to direct our technological developments. In some ways, these technological advances help us cope with and compensate for a situation in which the opportunities for stopping in the front yard to talk to a neighbor or meeting up friends and family regularly after work or on the weekends are becoming increasingly rare.

⁶⁵ Wikipedia, "Foursquare," accessed November 13, 2015, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foursquare>.

⁶⁶ Wikipediate, "Gowalla," accessed November 13, 2015, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gowalla>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Spadaro, "Cybertheology," Kindle edition.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2009."

The relationship paradigm in the parable the Good Samaritan makes an important reminder, which is to be a neighbor demands that one must behave neighborly. To be neighborly obviously speaks of something more profound than physical proximity or engagement in social and physical contact. It speaks about how people treat each other, especially in times of difficulty and calamity. The digital environment not only helps us to be able to keep in touch with a much greater number of people than we could imagine in traditional society. It also helps us to be more informed about the lives of an even more vast number of people in the world. Recently the term “viral philanthropy” came into existence to describe charitable initiatives, whether planned or spontaneous, that took off in the online world and raised vast sums of money for the aims of the project. In 2012, Max Sidorove, a Reddit user, used this social network to raise money for an abused bus monitor named Karen Klein. An initial campaign to help “Give Karen Klein a Vacation” with a goal of 5,000 USD turned into 703,833 USD by its conclusion on July 20, 2012.⁷¹ Reddit users have also raised money for other causes (100,000 USD to protect the Faraja Children’s Home in Kenya, 212,000 USD for Doctors Without Borders, 50,000 USD to help a three-year-old with medical treatments for a rare blood disease).⁷² The money raised by this social network’s users is far from unique and one can cite hundreds and thousands of efforts that benefit from online publicity.

While the digital age proves the power and the possibility of neighborliness, it has yet to be able to fulfill the relationship paradigm that Jesus put forth. In the story, before the Samaritan took out his wallet to pay for the expenses of the room in the inn for the victim to recover, the story tells us that the Samaritan “saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.”⁷³ Thus, being neighborly is much more than being willing to shell out cash. In fact, money does not even come first in the order of things. Being neighborly, in Jesus’ paradigm, means recognizing someone’s presence and seeing his pains and suffering, and feeling compassion towards the other. Moreover, it requires a physical dimension, which in the parable, is

⁷¹ Wikipedia, “Bus Monitor Bullying Video,” accessed November 13, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bus_monitor_bullying_video.

⁷² Matt Petronzio, “Viral Philanthropy: The Impact of Crowdsourced Compassion,” accessed November 13, 2015, <http://mashable.com/2012/07/11/viral-philanthropy/#Dvw.x3Z7qmqr>.

⁷³ Luke 10:33-34 (NIV).

exemplified by the acts of *going to*, *bandaging* the wound, *pouring* oil and wine, *lifting up* onto the donkey, and *taking to* the inn. These concrete, up-close and personal actions imply that real relationships require the aspect of embodiment in addition to other dimensions that may be described as emotional and spiritual. According to Pope Francis, it is indeed the image of the Samaritan tending to the injured man that communicates the true sense of neighborliness.⁷⁴ Pope Benedict reminds us that “It is important always to remember that virtual contact cannot and must not take the place of direct human contact with people at every level of our lives.”⁷⁵ This is so because only in direct human contact can one pour oil and wine over the wound of another as in the case of the good Samaritan and the Jewish victim, or pouring water over the feet of someone, as in the case of Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper. Thus, the emotional and spiritual connections between individuals mediated by the digital environment must be supplemented, concretized, and realized to their fullest potential in embodied manifestations in the physical world.

As we can see, despite the fact that the digital environment introduces new dimensions to interpersonal relationships, there are real limitations to how these relationships play out in our lives. Moreover, relationships that heavily depend on the development and availability of technology will always mean that there is danger of unequal access to that particular technology, thus causing a gap between the rich and the poor. In this digital era, this gap in access, known as the digital divide, is a real problem in the world as well as in Asia itself. It is estimated that as of May 2015, the number of Internet users reached three billion worldwide; however, this means that there are still over 50 percent of the world population who still do not have access to the Internet.⁷⁶ Reasons for not having access to the Internet include not having 3G coverage, not being able to afford the service,⁷⁷ and not having content produced in a language that users can understand.⁷⁸ Asia is said to be the most digitally divided region in the world.⁷⁹ While the Republic of Korea

⁷⁴ Pope Francis, “Message for World Communication day 2014,” accessed November 13, 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20140124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html.

⁷⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for World Communication day 2011.”

⁷⁶ Internet Society, “Global Internet Report 2015,” 119.

⁷⁷ In many countries, the cost for Internet service exceeds 5 to 10 percent of the average per capita income. Internet Society, 122.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ UNESCAP, “Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Maps,” accessed November 27, 2015, <http://www.unescap.org/our-work/ict-disaster-risk-reduction/asia-pacific->

has 37.56% fixed broadband penetration, Myanmar has only 0.01%.⁸⁰ Overall, only 7 percent of people in the Asia-Pacific region have fixed broadband access.⁸¹ While Singapore ranks first in the world in terms of making the most of the digital age, with Japan ranking 10th and Korea following closely at 13th place, countries like Myanmar and Nepal find themselves in the worst group on the Networked Readiness Index.⁸² Not only is there a digital divide across the population, there is also a large gap with respect to gender. Only one in five females in Asia have access to the Internet, and 2 out of 3 females who are unconnected come from the region.⁸³ The gender digital gap is not only caused by poverty but also due to socio-cultural and institutional attitudes and constraints that restrict women's exposure and access to the Internet.⁸⁴

The statistics mentioned above show that interpersonal relationships formed through and maintained by digital technology have social justice implications because division in society becomes manifested in a new form—those with access to the technology versus those who cannot afford it. The digital divide is also the gap between the “information rich” and the “information poor.” Thus, if technology is the primary mediator for our interpersonal relationships, chances are we are only engaged with people who are socially and technologically similar to ourselves. The digital “have nots” become people out there that one may know something about through reports and news feeds, but do not have a chance to get to know on a deeper personal level. Consequently, the digital divide hinders the potential for the Internet in bringing people of all kinds of backgrounds together, especially on the continent of Asia.

Conclusion

information-superhighway/asia-pacific-information-superhighway-maps.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Thierry Geiger and Attilio Di Battista, “The Top Ten Nations for Bridging the Digital Divide,” accessed November 27, 2015, <https://agenda.weforum.org/2015/04/which-nations-are-top-for-digital/>.

⁸³ Internet Society, “Can Mobile Internet Bridge the Gender Digital Divide? Lessons from our APriGF Workshop,” accessed November 27, 2015, <http://www.internetsociety.org/blog/asia-pacific-bureau/2015/07/can-mobile-internet-bridge-gender-digital-divide-lessons-our-aprifg>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

This article delved into two fundamental dimensions of cyber/digital theology by discussing one's relationship with God and with fellow human beings, and how these relationships are informed and transformed as a result of the digital environment. Our reflections show that the Internet and cyberspace allow for the perception of God's presence in a metaphorical sense that neither confines God to time nor space. While science with its discoveries about time and space seem to have displaced any possibility for heaven as a place out there and renders ingrained popular religiosity illogical, the new technology with its nonphysical digits inform us that presence is possible even without physical qualities demanded by traditional science. The image of God for those who desire to seek God has also become enriched by the fact that how God is perceived is not necessarily handed down by any single official church document or dictated by the pedagogical method of a single local pastor, but by a myriad of sources both official and unofficial. One's perception of and relationship with God, in addition to the traditional figures, can be also influenced by the writings of professional theologians and amateur bloggers, Papal tweets as well as a friend's testimony on Facebook. Just as the digital age confirms the fact that God cannot be confined to any particular realm, it also makes it ever more difficult to confine God to any particular creed or set of doctrines.

Similar to how the boundaries, whether real or imaginary, placed on God are greatly done away with by the digital environment, traditional boundaries for interpersonal relationships are also transformed. While Jesus' paradigm for what it means to be neighbor is not done away with by any means, the digital age informs us that neighborliness not only transcends social, cultural, and religious conditions, it can also transcend physical space and can manifest itself in cyberspace in very real and meaningful ways. It is undeniable that truly nourishing interpersonal relationships must also include some levels of embodiment. The digital environment, as it has been proven, when poorly utilized, isolates people and facilitates a form of escapism; however, when wisely used, becomes extremely effective tools for people to live out our deepest aspirations to be in communion with one another.

In the Asian context, for the people of this continent, the digital environment has the potential to affect their relationship with God and with others in some profound ways. As part of a tiny religious minority on a vast continent of major world religions, living primarily among people of different

faiths, Asians' search for God and perception of God will be enriched by what the Internet can offer to them, in addition to the present conditions that form their faith and spirituality. However, Asians must struggle to overcome the challenge of the digital divide that separates the rich and the poor, men and women that threaten to diminish the potential of interpersonal relationships. Instead of facilitating the erasing of boundaries existing among individuals, the digital divide can represent a replacement of one form of separation with another.

Reflecting on the various theological dimensions inspired and pertaining to the digital age is still a rather new exercise, perhaps due to the fact that most of us have not fully grasped the implications of what the digital environment holds for us in the present as well as in the future. Understandably, many of us are still trying to become acquainted and comfortable in this new environment as "digital immigrants," while the so-called "digital natives"⁸⁵ may not have come of age enough or equipped with the necessary tools to reflect deeply on the new social, cultural and spiritual milieu brought about by the new technology. Notwithstanding, this article attempted to contribute to this process of systematic reflection by discussing how the digital environment created by technology has become irrevocably integrated into human life, thus calls for and legitimates the effort to create a cyber/digital theology or something akin to it.

⁸⁵ The terms "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" were coined by Marc Prensky in his seminal article "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon*, 9.5 (2001):1-2 to differentiate between the generation who was born and grew up after the rise of digital technologies and those who were born before the advent of digital technology.

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