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Phil Jump reflects on Sir Tim Berners-Lee's concerns for the internet 30 years after its invention

I admit to finding it somewhat disconcerting when I arrived at a recent meeting of the Industrial Christian Fellowship, to be told by several fellow-participants that they knew exactly where I'd been for the preceding couple of hours. One showed me an image on their smartphone, taken in the lobby of a hotel, where I'd taken advantage of being in the area and arranged to meet the vice-president of our Baptist Union.

Had this been foretold 50 years ago, observers might be forgiven for assuming that this was indeed the manifestation of George Orwell's "Big Brother" dystopia, and that I had somehow fallen victim to the omnipresent state surveillance that he imagined. Yet the reality was that this was an entirely voluntary act,

participating in the social media normality of sharing our pictures, emojis, meetings, locations, experiences, thoughts, reactions, expectations and so on. My colleague is particularly social media savvy, and by the time I arrived at my next appointment, he had already informed his many followers of his appreciation of the time we spent together.

George Orwell was certainly right in his anticipation of the power of technology, and no-one would deny that not only is it now possible to connect every room in our houses to a single web of communication and potential surveillance, but many of our homes and offices have most or all of it in place. This is the emerging world of what is coming to be known as the "internet of things". When we

recently replaced our domestic washing machine, the manual informed us that even this can be connected to our home internet, and by downloading the relevant app I can use my phone to switch it on and off. (What no manual can explain to me is why on earth I would want to control a washing machine when I am too far away to empty or fill it.)

What Orwell was less successful at predicting was the nature of human behaviour and interaction; rather than being imposed by some totalitarian state, this growing tendency to place an account of our daily comings and goings in the public domain is entirely participant-driven. Having said that, we might also acknowledge the various conspiracy theories beginning to emerge about how our



smart devices might be used by the agencies of domination to survey and monitor our actions and behaviours covertly .

This, of course, is just one of the ways in which the Internet has completely changed our lives, and this is particularly so in the world of work. I can now carry around in my laptop shoulder-bag what would once have required an entire filing-room to store, and a colleague on the other side of the world can look at its contents at exactly the same time as me. I wander into my local coffee shop in the middle of the afternoon, and it is not unusual to see a cohort of young professionals sitting at the various tables, designing electrical installations, replying to correspondence, compiling end-of-year accounts, skyping colleagues, composing music or watching their scheduled university lecture. People are in the same place and a dozen different places at the same time, and the only thing they need to have in common is a shared commitment to the same brand of coffee. This is not work as it was envisaged when I left university!

But the Internet has a dark side too, something highlighted in recent interviews and comments made by the man attributed with its invention, Sir Tim Berners-Lee. In an interview with the BBC in March 2019 to mark the Internet's 30th anniversary, he spoke of its future not with upbeat optimism but with genuine concern and foreboding. When asked about the key challenges it faced, he did not – as might be

expected – describe some great new technological frontier yet to be overcome, but the need to tackle what he described as its “downward plunge to a dysfunctional future”.¹

Berners-Lee is not alone in lamenting the moral demise of his great invention, and with good reason. Those who first developed its technology did so with a naïve belief in the goodness of humanity, and never foresaw it becoming the means by which sexual predators might deceive and groom their potential victims or that it might be harnessed to influence and manipulate entire populations to serve the interests of marketers and power seekers. They never imagined that words like cyber-bullying, fake news, click-bait, sexting, troll and the like would become commonplace in our emergent vocabulary.

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As a person of faith, it interests me that such a renowned computer scientist, whose invention will be up there with those that have most impacted human history, sees his mission for the next decade as more of

a moral crusade than a technological quest. And I believe the sense of surprise and despair that he and other early pioneers have expressed at what has become of something originally intended for the good of all humanity, are utterly genuine.

Yet as I reflect on this, I hear an inescapable echo of that somewhat old-fashioned idea of original sin, expressed in some of our more dogmatic creeds as the human condition of “utter depravity.” Given that this term is susceptible to

misinterpretation, I can understand why it has somewhat fallen from use, but its original intent was simply to convey that as human beings there is nothing we can do, think, say or invent that we will not eventually manage to spoil through our fallenness and frailty. Those classical theologians saw a world in which everything was in need of God's redemption, and while they might never have envisaged the discovery of electricity, never mind a digital communications network that covered the entire earth, that too has become a 21st century manifestation of their underlying conviction.

The difficulty for the web is that having failed to foresee the way in which its technologies and opportunities would be harnessed for ill, its technicians and regulators now find themselves playing catch-up. Perhaps it might have been different if the theologies of faith and the theories of science had enjoyed a better coexistence in the days of its development. Of course we have to acknowledge the incredible good that can and has been achieved through the Internet, and also that our Christian tradition does not have a monopoly on morality (and indeed has its own susceptibility to “utter depravity”). But as the worldwide web's inventors seek to construct a narrative for its redemption, we are reminded again of the mutual reliance that faith and the world of work continue to expose.

How and where such conversations might take place is a matter for further engagement. But once again the popular narrative that science and technology can only diminish the need for the stories and values of our faith traditions is exposed as “fake news”. 📺

¹ See BBC News - Tim Berners-Lee: 'Stop web's downward plunge to dysfunctional future' - 11th March 2019 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-47524474>



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