

A Reformed look at the World Wide Web/Internet

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The advent of the World Wide Web, or the Internet, is undoubtedly the most extensive global change that our world has experienced in the last decade. Like the television in the 50's, the Internet of the 90's has swept across the country, entering homes at a rapid pace. Homes without access to the Internet have become more and more difficult to find. President Clinton's goal that "every home be connected to the Internet" by the 21st century appears to be being met. Any major business, organization, church, or other group is also sure to have its own website. Students of all ages are quickly replacing books with the web as their primary source of information. An individual who wants to find out the weather forecast or last night's baseball scores is now more likely to turn to the Internet than to the TV or newspapers.

There is no getting around the fact that the Internet, or cyber world, is now a real, integral part of our society. The question for us as Christians now is, "How do we evaluate and respond to this new, inescapable phenomenon?" Some, recognizing its usefulness, its wealth of information, and its unprecedented aid to communication, have heralded it as "the best thing since sliced bread." Others, recognizing the great dangers and obvious pitfalls which it brings, have been quick to proclaim it "of the devil," declaring that it should have no place in Christian homes.

As Reformed (and always reforming) Christians it is our calling to be fully informed and aware of both the strengths and weaknesses, blessings and dangers of the Internet, so that we might be able to use it wisely and carefully, to the glory of God.

The dangers of the Internet are real and many, and need to be taken very seriously. We all know that our world is full of all sorts of gross sins and sinful lifestyles. Every abomination imaginable is taking place somewhere "out there." For those of us who live in small, "Reformed" communities it has been possible to live a semi-sheltered life, without encountering many of these gross sins. The birth of the cyber world, however, is making this much more difficult. The Internet contains absolutely every type of worldliness, making access to it as easy as the push of the button—for adults and children alike. The Internet is the world at our fingertips.

This constant access to anything in the world has fast become an addiction for thousands of individuals. The cyber world activates and reinforces "real-world" addictions such as gambling or pornography. Countless men/boys have turned to the web as an easy and unobtrusive way to gratify their sexual lusts. At the mere click of their fingers they have all the unclothed women they could want. Numberless women, on the other hand, flock to the chat-lines and on-line forms of communication (addictions unique to the Internet), where they can flirt, fantasize, and pour out their hearts to unseen "soul-mates." Online relationships evolve rapidly and passionately as women search for the communication and intimacy that may be missing in their own lives.

Needless to say, these addictions of both males and females have already broken up many marriages and hurt countless more. One devastated woman wrote how her husband divorced her after finding an online "soul mate" on a Christian bulletin board service. He was convinced that it was "God's will" and was married a week later to this new woman he'd never met. His former

wife wrote, "I never thought this kind of thing could happen, but it does, even in Christian families.

Another news clip renders a woman found dead and buried near the trailer of a man she'd met online, and had gone down to meet (without her husband's knowledge). Still another report tells of a young 12-year-old boy, who shot and killed his mother and then himself, after she took him to a counselor to talk about his Internet addiction problem.

The number of alarming reports such as these is growing quickly. It is easy for us to think that this is all stuff that is happening "out there," but we need to be warned and to realize that the dangers are also very real for us. Our sinful natures, too, could easily become addicted to the sinful allurements of the Net.

Apart from the fear of Internet addiction or gross misuse, for the Christian parent or teacher there also is the question of whether or not it is possible to safely use the net at all (for educational purposes and such). Many parents and teachers, seeking to assist in their child/student's education have found it very difficult to use the web without running into obscenities along the way. *USA Today* told the story of a mother who recently ran a web search with her daughter. She entered the words, "I love horses," and an article on bestiality was included in the results.

Researchers at *Focus on the Family* found similar results. The researchers ran Internet searches using the most innocent words they could think of, such as "kids' toys." But every Internet search engine they tried failed to limit its selections to kids or toys. Innocuous sites such as "Kids' World 2000," "Cabbage Patch Kids" and "Dr. Toy's Best Children's Products" were always accompanied by a site(s) such as "Erotic Escapades" or "Sex Hunters." If selected, these lurid sites would reveal explicit pornographic images without so much as a warning.

Many companies are selling "blocking software" to protect kids/teens from encountering these objectionable sites. However, while these devices may provide a measure of assistance, we cannot expect them to provide anywhere near full protection. *Consumer Reports* recently analyzed the five biggest Web "babysitters" on the market. The results of their study were very discouraging. After selecting 22 easily accessible, objectionable sites they tried to access those sites while using the blocking software. Six of them were still accessed while using *Cyber Patrol*. *Cybersitter* let eight slip through. *Surf Watch* came up first, with only four sites appearing, but *Internet Explorer* failed to block out 19 of the 22, and *Net Nanny* didn't block any at all. A catch-all device is currently no where to be found. All forms of sinfulness are not only accessible on the web for us and our children, but can sometimes be almost difficult to keep from encountering.

The world of filth contained on the web is enormous and all-encompassing. Pornography, violence, Satanism, bestiality, every form of religion or cult, gambling, and many other types of sinfulness are all found on the web. The danger of addiction to the Internet, its chatlines, its forums, or any of its other devices is open to each one of us, by nature.

While the evils of the Internet are great and many, we also need to look at the positive aspects of the web. There are also many good, plausible virtues of the cyber world which can be used for many beneficial purposes. While we do not "look for the small bits of good among the bad" (such as looking for the good in pornography) as many advocates of common grace do, we can and should distinguish the good from the bad in every area of life. As with the television or radio (which also contain an abundant share of filthiness), the Internet contains both junk and "good stuff."

The positive aspects of the Internet are many. As I sit typing this article, Widor's *Tocatta in F*, taken from the Internet, plays in the background. The complete works of Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart, Handel (including the complete *Messiah*), among most other composers are also available on the Internet. Sites such as the "Cyber Hymnal" have almost every hymn available for our listening enjoyment, along with valuable information about the composer and why/when the hymn was written.

Our Protestant Reformed web site has been used to inform many individuals about our churches and the Reformed truths of the scripture. Its current records show that it has been cited 18,878 times during its few years of existence so far. Articles/pamphlets which it contains can also be used for our own edification, as well as for witnessing purposes. Other denominations also have their own similar sites which we can use for our enrichment and education, as well as to aid our ability to have a knowledgeable and beneficial discussion with someone from another denomination.

An article in the *Reader's Digest* told the story of a young boy whose life was saved after his mother found the correct diagnosis for his illness (which local doctors were unable to identify) through an Internet "cry for help."

These are only a few, specific examples of positive uses of the Internet, but there are countless more. Its current, world-wide information stores are immensely useful in doing any type of research. Teachers and students everywhere are finding its resources invaluable as a research/information aid. For example, a fourth grade classroom I recently visited was studying the country of Switzerland. Through the use of the Internet it was possible for each of the students to connect to a Swiss email pen-pal their age. They also were able to keep tabs on any current events/weather there, as well as to order food samples from shops in Switzerland—all online. This classroom study provides merely one example of the valuable role the Internet can play in education and research.

The Internet also provides a wealth of practical, everyday uses. The maps from a recent trip I took were all taken directly off the Internet. If we had chosen to fly instead of driving, an easy way to find out all the cheapest airfares there would have been to check on the Internet. The weather forecast, current news, ads, and yellow pages are all found on the Internet for quick and easy, practical usage.

The electronic "chat-rooms" (whose negative uses were mentioned earlier) also have many positive applications. Family get-togethers, forums for sick children to share experiences, long-distance prayer groups, and cyberspace home-school classrooms can all be included in the list of positive applications in this area.

The high-speed level of communication possible through these chat rooms as well as electronic mail have done wonders in increasing the amounts of communication between family and friends from around the world. They are also a very beneficial and useful tool in the area of mission work.

As you can see, the positive, beneficial uses of the Internet are many. We must, however, be aware of all the sinful filth and common misuses of the Internet in order to use it properly. For the Christian who is aware of the dangers and is determined to use the web properly, it is possible to steer clear of the trash found there. It should not be necessary to overlook or cast aside this great gift from God because of the evil that is found alongside of it. If, however, there is a Christian who struggles within himself to fight against dangers of the internet, perhaps he needs to listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 18:9, "If thine eye (in this case, the Internet) offend

thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.”

As a general rule we do well to listen to Paul’s words in Romans 14:14, “I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus Christ that there is nothing unclean of itself but to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.”

As with every area of life, our Christian calling concerning the use of the Internet is to be on guard, aware of the dangers, cautious and wise in our use. As I mentioned earlier, the Internet is the world. It contains everything the world contains—both positively and negatively. Our calling, as with the rest of our walk in this world, is to be discerning. The dangers are real and many but should not hinder us from using this gift of God. When used wisely and properly the Internet can be an immensely beneficial tool used for our edification, the benefits of those around us, and God’s glory. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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