

Shaping Digital Footprints

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I recently learned that my “digital footprint” since the first of the year was estimated to be approaching 180 gigabytes, or at least, that’s according to a five-minute survey I completed regarding my digital communication habits.

This bit of information raised an eyebrow along with a number of questions. To begin with, what do 180 gigabytes look like? A quick Google search informed me that 100 gigabytes would be equivalent to the amount of information on a “library floor of academic journals on shelves.” Now, I acknowledge that I’m an active user of new technology. But if a middle-aged family man and teacher at a Lutheran college has a footprint that large, I have to wonder about how incredibly large the footprints must be for my seemingly 100% digitally immersed students.

Digital Footprints

What does my digital footprint look like? It’s a data trail comprised of things by me and about me that are digitally and often publicly accessible. My footprint is a composite of my social networking profiles, my web sites and blogs, photos I’ve shared online, transcripts of my online text chats, videos uploaded, the heaps of emails I exchange, the information I divulge when registering on various web sites, and the data Google collects regarding my searching habits. From the body of my professional work, it includes the resources I create and the records I keep, nearly all of which are now in digital form. In addition to data I actively create and purposely publish, my footprint includes information about me posted by others as well as personal details that are part of the public record (sometimes referred to as a “digital shadow”). Yes, that’s now approaching two floors of a library of information about me visible to the world just from the current year.

Imagine how many virtual library floors my students are filling with their social networking, interactive gaming, online shopping, and Google searches with which the school day interferes.

In a New York Times article in 2006, John Battelle commented, “We are living online, but have yet to fully realize the implications of doing so... One of those implications is that our tracks through the digital sand are eternal.”¹

Eternity is a long time to have library floors of information about our selves exposed to the world.

Communication in Web 2.0

The ability to leave massive digital footprints is due to more recent innovations in the way the Internet is used today. Our early activities on the web largely consisted of accessing information posted online by universities, governments, and large corporations. The stuff we downloaded to our computers was a representation of those other entities. Although what we chose to download did communicate something about our selves, this self-portrait wasn’t exposed for the world to see outside of the emails we sent off.

However, the web as we once knew it has been transformed into Web 2.0 offering us a rich set of tools that makes the digital highway truly a two-way street. I (and my students outside of school hours) am leaving massive digital footprints because we’re able to interact with a flattening world, 24/7

with relative ease. We make friends in Facebook. We post photos and videos to web sites such as Flickr and YouTube. We broadcast our opinions on our blogs for the world to read, and add to news stories on mainstream media web sites by leaving our personal comments. We don't just read information, but we author it in Wikipedia. Our music downloads and other online purchases are being tracked in order to shape and personalise our future shopping experiences.

Multiple, Parallel Realities

In recognising the communication trends of Web 2.0, I've become self-conscious of what my digital footprints communicate about me, and concerned about what my students' footprints communicate about them? What should our digital footprints say about us, anyway? Do our online identities need to reflect our offline convictions? Is it acceptable to be anything other than faithful to my Christian identity when I go online? How real has my virtual world become?

The truth we're now acknowledging is that to this generation of young people, the virtual world is more and more becoming their reality. Our students are navigating a frightening new world in which postmodernism teaches them that they can construct their own reality (their own truths and values). If that's not enough reason to be weary, Web 2.0 gives them the tools to create multiple, parallel realities for themselves.

Christ's and christs

Web 2.0 is where many of our students are already residing, and where their future life and work, and even possibly their spirituality, will exist across an ever-expansive gray area between the online and offline worlds. Lutheran schools are uniquely capable of preparing students to take footsteps into the digital world that leave a witness to a faith in the only reality that matters – that our eternity rests in Christ alone.

Malcolm Bartsch wrote, "Lutheran schools attempt to demonstrate what living in community in relationship with Jesus Christ means."² The current challenge for Lutheran education is to grasp the opportunities offered by technology to teach what living in *online* communities in relationship with Jesus Christ means to the digital generations.

Weaving a Tapestry

So, what if we as Lutheran educators viewed our digital footprints and those of our students as threads being woven into a digital tapestry that gives a unified witness to the Gospel? And what if we accepted that for our kids today, the virtual world is as much reality as anything else to them? And what if within the walls of our Lutheran campuses we didn't just acknowledge the online identities of our students, but worked to influence and shape and nurture those online identities? What if we offered them opportunities to live out the 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 definition of love in the online world – and modelled it for them online? What if we taught them the reality that they remain "a chosen race, a royal priesthood" as described in 1 Peter 2:9-12 whether online or offline? What if we opened up the world of Web 2.0 for our students to show the world who they are, rather than banning and blocking it on our campuses and having no impact on their off-campus online worlds?

The world is their stage now. We've developed for them the communication tools to give a global witness like no generation before. Let's make footprints with our students.

NOTES

1. Battelle, John, quoted by Tom Zeller Jr. in "Lest We Regret Our Digital Bread Crumbs" New York Times, June 12, 2006 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/12/technology/12link.html>)

2. Bartsch, Malcolm, *Why a Lutheran School? Education and Theology in Dialogue* (Lutheran Church of Australia Board for Lutheran Schools, 2001), 81.