

What a Difference a Decade Makes: OSCAR's observations on changes in technology



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It's been ten years since OSCAR [1] began. Research was undertaken in the autumn and winter of 1999 and the OSCAR website was launched on March 1st 2000, right at the peak of the dot-com bubble.

This was an era when the Internet really was the 'Information Superhighway'. The early years of the digital age saw many organisations starting to move their services from using traditional to electronic forms of propagation. Part of this was to have a presence on the World Wide Web, initially resembling an online version of their sales brochure but later becoming more of a depository for specific information and advice. The web quickly became the first port of call for anyone looking for information, overtaking the telephone, paper directories, local libraries, reference books, newspapers, periodicals, etc. One of the big challenges was organising all this information and making it accessible for Internet users. Search engines were in their infancy and often struggled to return relevant results, so web portals appeared offering categorisation of the growing chaotic mass of Web information. The vision of OSCAR was born in this era, part of which was to provide an information portal for all things 'mission' on the Web.

During the last ten years the Internet has really 'come of age'. Driven by a combination of Moore's Law [2] and globalisation, the Internet has taken on a life of its own, defying many predictions and producing new opportunities at every turn.

So what have been the big changes [3] of the decade?

Increased Connectivity

World Internet usage has grown 380% in the last ten years and an estimated 25% of the world is now online [4]. But it's not so much the fact that more people are online, as it is the variety of ways by which people now connect to the Internet. The rapid expansion of the mobile phone industry has been driven by the need to have a more permanent and mobile way of connecting to online services. This has created what many refer to as the Digital Divide, where the increased use of technology by the privileged few just serves to increase the gap between the digital 'haves' and the 'have nots'.

Whilst a large portion of the world remains unconnected directly to the Internet, there are most likely some people who are connected in every part of the world and some of these will be Christians (either ex-pat missionaries or nationals). Through their connection with the Internet, OSCAR has sought to resource and encourage these folk, to help them reach the people around them. We have also tried to improve the connections between Christian workers, mission organisations and supporters, understanding that mission is a team game and only really works well when every team member is released and enabled to play their part. For those of us who belong to the Kingdom, the ultimate aim, of course, isn't to connect everyone to the Internet ... but to connect them with the Good News of Christ and to the God who loves them. OSCAR lives for this purpose.

Increased Pace

Do you remember when technology was supposed to free up our time? The initial dream was that we would work less and have more time for other pursuits. However, the need to work and be productive is still a strong driving force and the temptation to do more with the help of technology seems to increase with each technological advance. But time itself is also a

resource to be treasured. Being wise stewards of our time is implicit in so much of Scripture's teaching. Whilst OSCAR has attempted to embrace and utilise the technological advances of the last decade, I'm always conscious that the appropriate use of technology for mission is to enhance the message and not detract from it. I try to pass everything through this filter.

High Touch-High Tech

High Touch-High Tech was the title of a book written by John Naisbitt in 1984. He proposed that technological solutions led to an increased need for face-to-face relationships. As impersonal devices have become more a part of our lives, many have lost out on human interaction. I think that this has been one of the most significant factors behind the post-modern revolution. Again, technology promised us more time with each other, but the early Internet years have just drawn us into a world with little direct interaction with other humans. The last ten years, however, has seen the Internet develop into a tool that can enhance relationships. I hear so many people of a certain age (usually the Baby Boomer generation and above) who like to rubbish social networking as a poor substitute for 'real' relationships. This usually comes from the fact that most of their close relationships were formed before and without the use of such facilities. As stated earlier, technology has the ability to enhance or detract, and as Christians we really should be looking to utilise these new developments to enhance our relationships, both within the body of Christ and outside.

Back in 2002, I spoke at an IT day organised by Global Connections. The main thrust of my talk was that the Web, whilst mostly a one way broadcast medium at the time, was soon to become something much more two-way and interactive. I never realised just how this would happen but today we have an Internet that empowers all users to participate and interact.

Over the last few years, OSCAR has introduced various facilities to connect users with each other and provide them with a platform for interaction. Our latest venture in this area is OSCARactive [5], a mission-focused social network launched back in March 2009. Part of my vision for OSCAR is to be less of a centralised resource and more of a peer-to-peer network where individual users are empowered and enabled to help each other, despite the large distances between them. This, ultimately, is about building relationships... where people can serve each other and pass on the blessing that God has given us.

Even with all these advancements over the last ten years, I'm still amazed at the potential that the Internet has to enhance life and ministry for those working in cross-cultural mission. A potential which I'm sure, in time, will be realised. Whilst it's important to recognise that the Internet can be used for both good and bad, it's up to us in the Christian community to both inhabit this domain and use all that it offers to promote God's purposes and build His Kingdom.

Footnotes

[1] www.oscar.org.uk

[2] Moore's law states that the number of transistors that can be placed inexpensively on an integrated circuit has doubled approximately every two years. This law subsequently effects anything enabled by computer hardware and is often used to describe the driving force of technological and social change in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

[3] Titles are based loosely on some of the chapter 'The Impact of New Technologies: Life in the Virtual World and Beyond', in the book 'The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends' by Pocock, M, Van Rhee, G and McConnell, D. (2005) Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

[4] Internet World Stats www.internetworldstats.com

[5] www.oscaractive.net

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