



Readings II in Faith & Science

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The Information Superhighway

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Bishop Mark Hurley
Diocese of Santa Rosa, California, 1970 - 1987
(Deceased)



Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

Cardinal Rigali Center • 20 Archbishop May Drive • Suite 3400-A • St. Louis, Missouri 63119 • USA
314.792.7220 • www.faithscience.org • E-mail: mariannepost@archstl.org

The Information Superhighway

The concept is dazzling and its application seductive. The “miracles” of science and technology are once again opening up new dizzying vistas at once fascinating and seductive to the human mind.

The new area is called “cyberspace,” the marvels of semi-conductors and integrated circuits, microfilms, recording discs and tapes, laptop computers, broadcasts and cables are already forming networks: city-nets in California; national and international “Internet,” already exploding with data of every sort. The experts say that all of these are coalescing into one grand organism dubbed the Information Super Highway.

The question begging for answer is: who and what will be traversing that highway? When technology interfaces with the human factor, inevitably there arises the ethical component: is the new phenomenon for weal or woe, or perhaps both? Is there, for example, a right and wrong inherent in the Super Highway?

The medical profession welcomes the swift interchange of information for diagnosis and surgery in the interests of their patients; the state police powers rejoice in the tools to ferret out international spies, to locate criminal suspects, to keep track of parolees; businessmen revel in the power to make multi-million dollar purchases and sales even in the international fields without leaving their home desks; telephone companies can monitor all calls and keep records of them; television can swing over the earth and radio even more so; the IRS can more easily track down income tax cheaters, and credit bureaus credit card swindlers. Is not this technology in the service of the human race? Is it not verging on Utopia? The Information Super Highway is in reality a double-edged sword.

It can as well carry very compromising personal information from the medical records; thieves and crooks can use the electronic powers to hide crime and hide themselves, to launder money, to build a crime syndicate even as an international network; spies and traitors can the better cover their tracks; business white-collar criminals can carry on industrial espionage; citizens can more readily deceive the IRS with overseas assets controlled by computer.

Marshall McLuhan, in his famous dictum that “the medium is the message” identified the electronic “eyes”: photos from space, photos through walls, sonar and radar and other surveillance devices. The “electronic ears” he pictured as snoopers on people’s personal lives with wiretaps and recording devices. But perhaps even more ominously he recognized the “electronic memory” by which computers and data banks compiled records, not in stone, but potentially more lasting and quickly retrievable. The eternal memory is even more threatening than the electronic “eye” or “ear,” a serious threat to human privacy, intimacy, seclusion and personal dignity in society at all levels of human sociability and social relationships.

When science and technology touch the human race, value judgments need to be made -judgments of “right” and “wrong.”

With the astonishing growth of the tools for an information super highway, there has been born concomitantly an insatiable appetite for information-gathering, a gourmand hunger and endless craving to collect, store and retrieve data of all kinds. This appetite is increasing at an exponential rate, abetted by the prospects of the Super Highway. It is at once an appetite that is desultory, capricious and dangerous.

A United States Senate committee in 1969 cautioned that with computers becoming less expensive there has grown up “an army of specialists. . . . battalions of investigators and analysts who specialize in seeking out and reporting derogatory information on individuals . . . overflowing with the daily lives of people.”

The federal government has at least 27 agencies hungry for computer data, much of it personal and private. When originally passed, the law forbade the owners of the Social Security numbers, namely, the Health and Human Services Agency, from giving them to anyone else. When the census bureau in 1970 asked for the SS numbers

as cross-reference, Congress refused. But the protections fell: the IRS demands and gets the numbers with each income tax report. S.I.N. - the single identifying number - has become requisite not only for government purposes at all levels but in banking, school entrance, credit and even sales. Over 700 life insurance companies rely on a central data bank in Boston. Womb-to-tomb personal and business history retrievable on demand has become an expanding reality and somewhat taken for granted in spite of the early warnings.

Writing some fifteen years ago, law professor Arthur Miller warned that “all these trends must be looked at as a unit because their confluence represents a terrifying spectre.” Is not the Information Super Highway by definition that confluence? Who will control it?

The bottom line can be summed up in the Latin cliché: *Quis custodit custodem?* Who will guard the guardian? Who will watch the watcher? There are three areas of government control.

The physical protections range from control of the areas and personnel who have access. Even at the highest level the Commerce Department shares one-half access to certain data with the Treasury Department the other half, meaning a double check, much like the keys to the launching of atomic weapons. Besides the external safeguards, there are internal ones.

The computer is a many-splendored animal and in its technology there can be programmed various codes for scrambling, for the distribution of data after a given time, for audit trails. In a word there can be a program “to forget” as well as to remember -- built in. Such physical security is a first step because security measures can always be broken if the pay-off warrants the trouble.

The electronic revolution inevitably has forced a reassessment of the legal climate on privacy. The judiciary, the legislatures and the executive branch of government must cooperate. Courts customarily are slow to act; legislatures are not much better; regulatory agencies act but often without reverence for the spiritual and moral nature of people who wish to be secure in their private, and corporate lives.

“The right to know” and “freedom of information” must be measured against “the right to be left alone,” that some data “are none of the government’s business.” Private persons, families, as well as groups of people, unions and corporations have a deep abiding interest in not having some information communicated to others without their knowledge or contrary to their will. Such information may be detrimental, may cause pain or discomfort.

“By its very nature the privilege [against self-incrimination] is an intimate and personal one. It respects the inner sanctum of individual feeling and thought, and proscribes state-intrusion . . . [affirming] the right of each individual to a private enclave where he may lead a private life.” (US Supreme Court, January 9, 1973.)

The right to privacy is not absolute nor even semi-absolute but it is fundamental.

When all is said and done, there still remains the moral climate in which the judicial, legislative, executive and administrative branches of government, as well as private enterprise, live, breathe and have their being. A moral climate is fundamental to solving the ethical challenges of the Super Highway.

Pope Pius XII in 1958 warned that “just as it is illicit to appropriate another’s goods, to make an attempt on his bodily integrity without his consent, so it is not permissible to enter into his inner domain against his will.” There exists a natural secrecy from the nature of the human person and of society itself protecting individuals and groups from harm or reasonable displeasure.

But it should be added that moral theologians too have not produced a comprehensive treatment of privacy particularly in view of the electronic revolutions, much less the explosion of information-gathering and the temptations thereunto attached.

As was well-stated in 394-US, 564, *Stanley vs Georgia*, the right to be left alone, to reasonable privacy is an aspect of the spiritual nature of man:

The Makers of our Constitution undertook to secure conditions favorable to the pursuit of happiness. They recognized the significance of man's spiritual nature, of his feelings, of his intellect. . . They conferred, as against the government, the right to be let alone -- the most comprehensive of rights and the right most valued by civilized man.

The Information Super-Highway promises great benefits and poses equally serious threats. Science is being asked to build in its own controls; the legislative and the judiciary to vindicate the human rights involved; and the Church to update its moral theology in light of the advent of the "Highway" to foster a moral climate which will respect the dignity of the human person. This is true of the individual, a member of a social group, a corporation or other voluntary body or a citizen.

There are many other aspects of this issue to be discussed, not the least of which is the "Clipper chip" the government would like to install in every computer.

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Questions

Is truth one of the major casualties of the Information Super Highway - If so, how?

What is the eternal memory McLuhan talked about? How is that a serious threat to human privacy?

It's difficult to envision any single agency controlling the Information Super Highway ? so far, at least. Right now, anything goes.

Will there be cries to "censor" the World Wide Web? What might be "censored"? Unreliable data? Politically incorrect speech? Pornography? Religion?

Will the Information Super Highway lead to "group-think" and "group feel"? What is good with things the way they are now? What might change them?

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