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HOW TECHNOLOGY HELPS HUMANITY FLOURISH

A Guide to Further Research

By Yvonne D. Harrison

In his June 2010 Mexico City address, Jesuit General Fr. Adolfo Nicolás discussed three challenges to shared mission in an increasingly interdependent and globalized world. He suggested that the meeting of leaders was the “beginning” of an “ongoing conversation about the future of Jesuit education.” The particular focus of this article is how technology helps humanity flourish in this context.

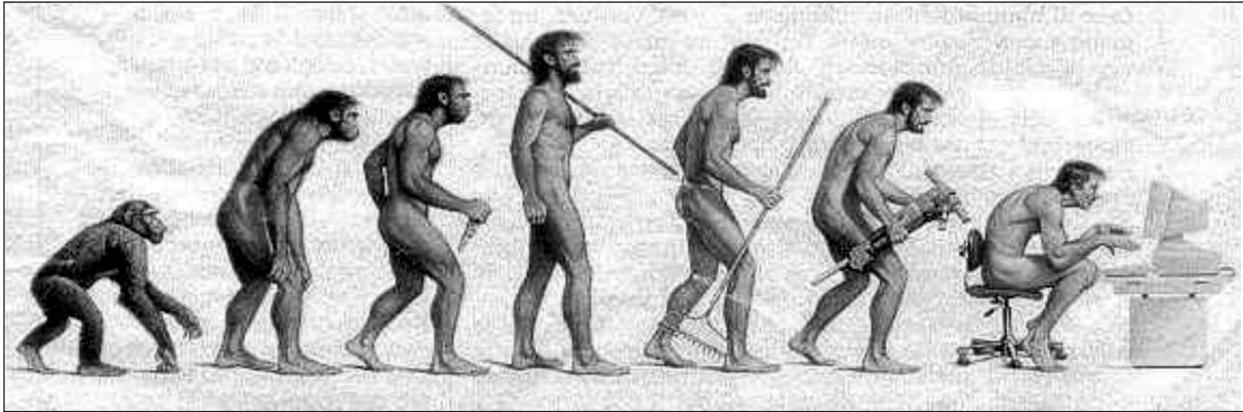
What is Technology?

Much has been documented about technology and its impact on how people work and live. Some consider organizations themselves to be a form of technology; and, in any case, they all use various technologies as a means for performing tasks to meet specific ends or strategic objectives. In this sense, technology can be understood as a form and function. As a form, Maurice Richter defined technology in *Technology and Social Complexity* (1982), as “knowledge of any technique for achieving specific objectives.” As a function, it is a set of “tools and practices deliberately employed as natural means for attaining clearly identifiable ends.” The most primitive example of technology is “use of tools by chimpanzees to catch termites.” Moving forward in time, a similar example is the use of newly invented tools to conduct industrial tasks in the 19th

century. With the invention of computers and ways of connecting them, technology has evolved into the information age. It is now possible to share knowledge and tasks across a wide range of people, organizations, and networks using computers, their software, and the Internet.

In higher education, information and communications technology (ICT) is ubiquitous with a multitude of examples of its use in every student dorm, building and classroom. ICT tools are now used to facilitate almost every organizational function (e.g. marketing, fundraising, admissions, planning, course registration, delivery, and management). ICT has had such a pervasive effect that it has even changed the look and feel of academic institutions (web presence) and the nomenclature used in higher education. As Parry reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 28, 2011), the elite universities are now recognizing that “courses are services to offer not *products* to sell.” And, some are *offering* them online for free to people all over the world.

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Challenges in a Technological World

Fr. Superior General Nicolás speaks of three challenges for Jesuit higher education in an interdependent globalized world. I will respond briefly to each from a technological perspective as a Catholic scholar who has studied the adoption and impact of technology.

Challenge of Superficiality

The first challenge is what Fr Nicolás refers to as the "globalization of superficiality"; a problem that he says affects student perceptions and educational experiences (e.g. feelings, critical thought, behavior etc.). Harry Dammer (*Conversations* 39, 2011) describes it as one of "being under the influence" so that students are engaged so superficially in their work that they "never truly focus on context, experience, reflection, action and evaluation or deal with the key issues of life." Fr Nicolás notes this kind of influence of technology and calls on Jesuit educators to "understand this complex world more deeply and intelligently so that we can respond more adequately and decisively..."

Much of what Fr. Nicolás speaks of is also discussed in the sociological work of Manuel Castells. In a 1999 report for the United Nations Research Institute titled, *Information Technology, Globalization, and Social Development*, Castells suggests that consumerism is the result of a service economy and market oriented culture. In his 2003 book, *Leaders, Fools, and Imposters*, clinical psychologist and management consultant, Kets de Vries suggests that market-oriented cultures are highly problematic because "individuals have a shaky sense of identity and are exceptionally superficial and changeable." However, contrary to Dammer, Castells suggests that to address this negative trend toward individualism, *more* not less technology needs be used. In his eyes, it can be used to "empower human kind." He suggests the challenge

for human society is educational. In this regard students must learn to be critical processors and effective producers of information by using technology to deepen, not trivialize, it.

Questions to consider in addressing this challenge are: *To what extent should the Jesuit education system be re-designed to avoid the pitfalls of superficiality and take advantage of the benefits that exist for engagement in the modern technological world? What skills and methods must faculty develop to critically engage students in it? How will the knowledge generated from it (critical engagement) be analyzed and used?*

Challenge of Universality

The second challenge Fr. Nicolás describes is the role of technology in "re-discovering universality," building and working as a more effective "network." While he acknowledges that many Jesuit institutions are fulfilling their missions at the local and regional levels around the world, none have coordinated a global approach to the shared mission of Jesuit institutions. He refers to the 35th Congregation and suggests that the Society of Jesus needs to consider how to "more effectively realize the universality which has always been part of Ignatius' vision."

While Fr. Nicolás describes the benefits of a global Jesuit network in addressing and providing service to address critical social issues (e.g. secularism, poverty, and sustainable development), it must be noted, as Castells has also pointed out, that the challenge is not so much in building the technology (network) as it is as in managing and motivating people (e.g. coordinating and controlling the functions or activities) to achieve strategic objectives through it. This, he says, has been a problem of networks "throughout history."

The challenge is also theoretical. As Jane Fountain noted in her book, *Building the Virtual State* (2001), there is a lack of understanding of technology use from the institutional perspective. Specifically, little is known about "the ways in which

information technologies interact with behavior, ongoing social relations, and organizational structure and process.”

In responding to this challenge, it may be helpful to think about modern technological networks in two ways. One, they are best understood from an open systems theoretical perspective where the emphasis is on relationships, spanning boundaries, collaborating, and forming alliances. Two, changes within this form are also considered from a socio-technical (ST) perspective. This perspective can be framed as a question: In addition to the return technology provides the institution on its investment, *what benefits does technology return to the end-user?*

Challenge of Learned Ministry

The third challenge Fr. Nicolás speaks of is, learned ministry. In this challenge, the concern is for those on the “wrong side” of the knowledge divide. More specifically, he wants universities to consider *who benefits from the knowledge produced in Jesuit institutions and who does not.* Moreover, *who needs the*

knowledge and how can Jesuit institutions share it more effectively with those for whom that knowledge can truly make a difference, especially the poor and excluded? He also directs a question to faculty: How have you become voices for the voiceless, sources of human rights for those denied such rights, resources for protection of the environment, persons of solidarity for the poor?

With attitudes about technology usefulness predicting technology effectiveness, questions institutional leaders need to consider are—*who is likely to adopt the technology that lies behind the knowledge economy? who is at risk for failing to adopt; and what strategies and resources are in place to manage technology effectiveness?* These questions are of particular importance in an organizational context where the role of leadership is to facilitate technological change rather than to dictate and supervise it.

Fr. Nicolás says that Jesuit institutions must not turn their backs on technology, but rather, to embrace it and work diligently to design and apply it to the everlasting missions and goals of their institutions. It is within this context that technology will help humanity flourish. ■



At Fordham University's Gabelli School of Business, undergraduates learn the ins and outs of the stock markets through interactive technology in the school's trading room on the Rose Hill Campus. Photo by Bill Denison.