

On the Web, Your Past Is Never Forgotten -- or Forgiven

The Wired Word for August 1, 2010

In the News

A recent article by Jeffrey Rosen in *The New York Times Magazine* reported on a growing, and to many people, a troubling, new reality in our global society today, which is dominated by the Internet: the permanence of information about ourselves -- accurate and otherwise -- that is available online and can undo us when we wish to be seen at our best.

Some of this is public-record information over which we have no control -- credit ratings, records of our bankruptcies, divorces, misdemeanors, accident reports and the like. But more of it is from material we ourselves have posted, tweeted, blogged or shared in some other online way that either no longer represents who we are today or is part of our social or private life and which we feel should have no bearing on our public and professional life. In short, privacy is becoming a scarce commodity.

For example, the article tells that four years ago, Stacy Snyder, then 25 and a teacher in training at a public high school in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, shared a photo of herself on her MySpace page that showed her at a party wearing a pirate hat and drinking from a plastic cup. Her supervisor at the high school saw the page, told her it was "unprofessional" and reported her to Millersville University School of Education, from which she was to graduate a few days later. The university responded by denying her a teaching degree. Snyder sued the school, saying that the university had violated her first-amendment rights by punishing her for legal, after-hours behavior. A federal judge, however, dismissed her suit, saying that because Snyder was a public employee and her online photo wasn't about matters of public concern, it was not protected speech.

Facebook and other social sites encourage the sharing of information within a wide arena. On Facebook, which has nearly 500 million members, "public" is the default setting; you have to choose to limit your material to a private circle. What's more, even if you do, there's nothing to prevent people with whom you've shared it from disseminating it more widely.

Even the Library of Congress is in on the preservation of momentary utterances. It recently announced that it is acquiring and *storing* the entire archive of public Twitter posts since 2006. There are more than 100 million registered Twitter users.

Already, some sites are keeping track of our book choices, our movie preferences and even our Internet-search terms, and some worry that those may eventually be available to search engines as well.

What's more, a recent survey by Microsoft found that 75 percent of U.S. recruiters and human-resource professionals say their companies *require* them to conduct online research on applicants, including photo-sharing sites, blogs, personal Web sites, dating sites, online gaming sites and other pages that turn up through search engines. And 70 percent of the respondents say they have rejected candidates based on what Internet searches revealed.

One of the most troublesome parts of this is that it discounts the fact that people change, convert, start over, rethink their positions and evolve. Some of the material that represented them in youth or young adult years no longer represents who they are today. Some of it may be out of context or be given too much weight. (Studies

have shown that people discount positive information about others more quickly than they do negative information.) Yet, thanks to the Internet's ongoing memory, many cannot escape those early representations, which can overshadow their present reputations. Short of going into witness protection, gone are the days when people could just move to a new location and start fresh without dragging all their history with them. With the Web, it's hard to have a second chance or to reinvent oneself.

Another issue Rosen raised is that "the idea of a home self, a work self, a family self and a high-school-friends self has become increasingly untenable. In fact, the attempt to maintain different selves often arouses suspicion."

The article reviewed possible legal means for getting material one no longer wishes to be shackled to removed from the Internet, but saw greater possibility in technological innovations that build time-bound self-destruct commands into postings. Yet, all of these have limitations. It's critically important that Web users themselves consider possible ramifications before posting a compromising photo, shooting off a heat-of-the-moment rant on a blog or firing a nasty tweet.

Rosen suggests that a possible upside of all of this may be that we are being forced "to merge identities that used to be separate -- we can no longer have segmented selves like 'a home or family self, a friend self, a leisure self, a work self.'" Rosen quoted a psych professor who wrote on a Facebook blog, "I have to find a way to reconcile my professor self with my having-a-few-drinks self." This professor also suggested that as we have to merge our public and private identities, photos on Facebook showing us having a drink will no longer seem so scandalous.

Still, Rosen says, while there may be some value in ending the segmented self, "a humane society values privacy, because it allows people to cultivate different aspects of their personalities in different contexts; and at the moment, the enforced merging of identities that used to be separate is leaving many casualties in its wake" - like Stacy Snyder.

More on this story can be found at this link:

[The Web Means the End of Forgetting. *New York Times Magazine*](#)

The Big Questions

1. From a Christian point of view, is it best to let every aspect of ourselves be known to our fellow church members? Why or why not?
2. Should privacy about oneself be a basic human right? Why or why not?
3. How are forgiving and forgetting related?
4. Do you agree that it is important that God does not remember the sins of which we have repented? Explain your answer.
5. In what ways does discovering an unflattering action, opinion or moment in someone's past affect how you think of that person? Is there a right or wrong about that from a Christian standpoint?

Confronting the News with Scripture

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 22:1

"A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches ..." (This is a stand-alone proverb; no context needed.)

This is a comment on the value of a good reputation -- more important than great wealth, the teacher in Proverbs says. And reputation is part of what's at stake when you remain chained to ill-advised, immature, out-of-context or even stupid stuff about you that is living on in cyberspace. There actually are services that, for a fee, will contact the sites where your unwanted material is and try to have it removed (one such service is called, appropriately, ReputationDefender). Some have proposed that some legal means be developed whereby we can declare "reputation bankruptcy" to have negative scores, low ratings and sensitive information about ourselves deleted by legal order.

The Bible's idea, of course, is that we should live our lives from the start in obedience to God. When we do, the proverb implies, we have no bad reputation to be removed.

Questions: Do you agree that a good name is preferable to great wealth? If you have plenty of money, will you even care what others think of you? Should you? Explain.

Proverbs 20:19

"A gossip reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a babblers." (This is a stand-alone proverb; no context needed.)

In our current context, certain Web sites could be considered "babblers."

Questions: How can we decide which parts of the Web qualify as "babblers"? As long as we use privacy settings, are we avoiding the babblers? Why or why not?

Luke 7:39

"If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him -- that she is a sinner." (For context, read 7:36-50.)

Jesus had accepted an invitation to eat at the house of a Pharisee. While there, a woman who was a known sinner (which implies she has a bad reputation) slips into the house to see Jesus. Overcome by her own unworthiness, she begins to cry, her tears falling on Jesus' feet. She dries his feet with her hair, and then anoints his feet with ointment.

The Pharisee, seeing what's going on, thinks, "If this man were really a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him." In other words, he's recalling this woman's reputation. No matter that she is in the process of repenting at that very moment, her past is all the Pharisee is thinking about.

Jesus puts a question to the Pharisee: Two men are in debt to the same creditor. One owes a little and the other a lot, but neither can pay, so the creditor cancels both their debts. Which one does the Pharisee suppose will love the creditor the most? The one who was forgiven the most, the Pharisee answers. Then Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little" (v. 47). This comment is clearly directed to the Pharisee, implying, "You love little because you think you have nothing to repent of."

Jesus then turns back to the woman and says, "Your sins are forgiven ... Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (vv. 48, 50).

Question: This woman left her encounter with Jesus a new woman, but you can be sure that with neighbors like this Pharisee, it took a long time for her reputation to change. Why are we so prone to remember -- and repeat -- negative information about people over positive information about them?

Luke 16:10

"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much ..." (For context, read 16:1-13.)

Jesus told a parable about an unfaithful steward. He then made the comment above as the positive moral to the negative example of the steward. While he is speaking of consistency in faithfulness, this is also a comment on an integrated individual, someone who is as faithful when no one is looking as he or she is when in public.

Questions: Does such a person have less to fear from an Internet search on his or her name? Why?

Micah 7:19

"[God] will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." (For context, read 7:18-20.)

This verse tells us how God deals with repentant sinners -- not just granting forgiveness, but also wiping the slate clean. We may have to deal with human consequences of mistakes we've made and things we've done wrong, but as far as God is concerned, we have a fresh start.

God casts our sins, says Micah, "into the depths of the sea." The implication is that God then posts a "No Fishing" sign. Or, to connect it to today's news, run an Internet search in the mind of God, and your sins won't come up.

Question: What does this divine forgetting mean to you personally?

Questions for Further Discussion

1. What is the problem with just telling people to not use social-networking and other sites that preserve "moments" in our lives or retain a trail of our usage?
2. Given that the Internet is a mixed blessing, should the church develop a set of ethics to guide Christians and their families in its use? If so, what would you include?
3. When you post a sign in front of your church saying, "Come as you are," do you really mean it? If not, what qualifiers do you have in mind? (For example, "We expect you to be sober.")

Responding to the News

It is important in our households to continue to educate our children and teens not only about dangers from predators on the Web, but also about the implication for their future of the things they choose to post. Admittedly, youth often have trouble seeing beyond the present, but we should not abandon the effort for that reason. It might be useful to have a Web-savvy young adult address the youth group about wise Internet usage.

Closing Prayer

O God, thank you that with you, when our sins are forgiven, they are truly forgotten. In Jesus' name. Amen.