

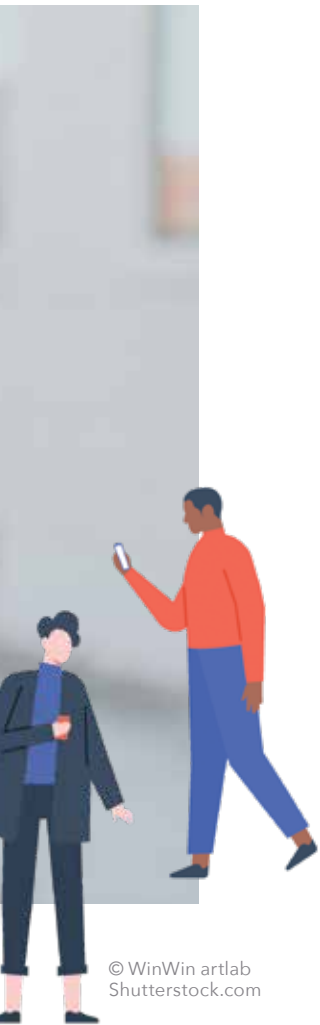


# You are what you tweet

BY JAMES F. CACCAMO

We certainly have come a long way in terms of technology in the past 100 years. If we look around, it is easy to see the many ways in which life is easier now than it was for our great-grandparents. Information and communication technologies have revolutionized how we work, learn, entertain ourselves, and connect with those around us. For better or worse, we live very different lives from people who would have read the religious ethics textbooks of years gone by.

At the same time, religious people are still trying to answer the same fundamental question as a century ago: how to live in a way that enables them to reach the values they hold dear and in response to the truths



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they see in the world. **The core truth for Catholic and other religious ethicists has not changed much: God exists and requires creation of a world in which people are supported and enabled to become their fullest selves.** That means acting in ways that advance human physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development. It also means creating structures in society that enable others to do so as well. Information and communication technologies may provide new ways for people to act, but they haven't substantively changed the goals that people of religious conviction seek.

**Given the evidence so far, it seems that the jury is still out on information and communication technology ethics.** Our gadgets provide opportunities for authentic development and increasing the common good, but they also endanger both. This is what we might expect at the birth of a new technology. Information and communication technologies represent so much potential—for good and bad—but we don't yet have a long enough track record to know just where the promises and pitfalls lie. There is still much to keep an eye on.

At this early point in the development of contemporary technologies, perhaps the most important thing we can do is to be attentive. By this I mean two things. **First, we need to pay much more attention to the habits we are creating around information and communication technology.** Most of the time, using gadgets is not particularly a well-thought-out choice. Many of us who grew up before the digital age began to use information and communication technologies either out of sheer excitement about the brave new world of

computing or because we were forced to for our jobs. Those who grew up in the “digital native” generation have always had these technologies in their lives; they probably seem like a part of the “natural habitat.” In either case, though, few among us sat down before we started using our gadgets and thought about how to use them in ways that enhance human life and do not detract from it. We simply started using them, and habits formed as we went along. Unfortunately, not all of our habits are good ones.

**Figuring out how to use technology in ways that support integral human development and the common good depends on a thoughtful consideration of the impacts of our actions on ourselves and the world around us.** Only by examining our choices, can we steer through the competing goods—not to mention the attractive evils—and discern what is right. Put another way, morality requires intentionality. Otherwise, we are likely to fall prey to the technological imperative (“because it exists, we should use it”) or market forces (“you’ll be a better person with a newer gadget”) so prevalent in our culture. Likely a lot of different tech habits could be considered morally laudable within the parameters we have used here. But without intentionality, we won’t really end up using our gadgets—they will use us.

The second way attentiveness is important lies in attending to the impacts of information and communication technologies as we learn what they are. **Often we are one-sided in our predictions of what technology will do for and to us.** Some are wildly optimistic about how technology will make life better. Others are almost entirely negative about technology, seeing it as the downfall of personal morality and Western culture.



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But if we stand back and look at the evidence, it seems that neither view is entirely accurate: one sidesteps real harms, the other ignores real goods. **If we sincerely want to create good lives and societies in the data age, we need to be attentive not simply to what we want the data to say, but to what they actually say.** In the end, we will become what we tweet. The question is whether or not we'll be honest about what we are becoming.

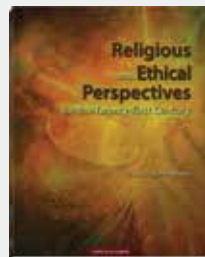




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**Given the newness of many of the information and communication technologies that surround us today, it seems appropriate to approach the whole question of tech ethics with a degree of humility.** We have our guesses about how these things will affect us, but we don't know for sure. We also have our considered opinions and intuitions about what habits and practices will support integral human development and the common good. But again, we have yet to see. We may end up hitting the mark on some things and being really wrong about others. It will take some time to get this all right. One thing is clear, however: only through honesty and attentiveness will people ever learn to use emerging technologies to treat others well and help create a world worthy of the values and truths they hold dear.

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James F. Caccamo is associate professor of theology at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, where he teaches Christian social ethics. Jim's work focuses on the implications of technology and media on spiritual and moral practices.