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Violence in the Age of Technology: Theological Reflections on Cyber Crime.

Prof. Adam Kiplangat arap Chepkwony, PhD^{1*}

¹ University of Kabianga, P. O. Box 2030 - 20200 Kericho, Kenya.

* Author for Correspondence ORCID ID: ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4361-4235>; Email: adamchepkwony@gmail.com.

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It is generally believed that our societies are becoming more and more violent day by day. This is indeed not entirely true in that there are certain violent deeds that have subsided while other have been on the rise. This can be observed in the current age of information technology more so fashioned over the internet and related telecommunication services and gadgets. This paper debunks violence in terms of cybercrime from a theological reflection. With the escalated expansion of globalization and advancements in information technology, digitalization is an invaluable tool that is transforming the private, public, and professional lives of people; both Christians and non-Christians. Virtually, people depend on the internet and digital devices from communication to business transactions and so on. There are millions of websites and blogs offering various services and information to the population enabling people to acquire the readily available massive information. As much as we celebrate and enjoy the technology, it equally has liabilities due to cyber violence perpetrated by fraudsters, conmen, hackers, and other cyber criminals. Concerns such as impersonation, forgery, falsification, fraudulent representation, and presentation of facts as well as counterfeiting are common parlance, but the implication is adverse. Most internet users are vulnerable to traps set by conmen. The crimes are real as elucidated by the two personal examples given in this paper. People and governments are losing millions of monies daily through advance free fraud. It is prudent for Christians not to wait until one becomes a victim in order to acknowledge the risks and become vibrant participants in the mitigation of digital crimes.

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally believed that our societies are becoming more and more violent day by day. Steven Pinker in his new bestselling book, *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has declined*, argues to the contrary that violence has declined over stretches of history and that in comparison, we are living in peaceful times. He thus observes:

*For all the tribulations in our lives, for all the troubles that remain in the world. The decline of violence is an accomplishment we can savour, and an impetus to cherish the forces of civilization and enlightenment that made it possible*¹

Pinker attributes this decline to an enlightened world, a fact which is very difficult to comprehend in the light of the wars, crimes and terrorism experienced worldwide today. In this paper, I shall deal with violence brought about by digital crime other than the physical violence dealt with in Pinker's book. Cybercrime, also known as computer crime, is any illegal activity that involves a computer or network-connected device, such as a mobile phone.

If indeed physical violence has declined, the Cyber-crime brought about by technology and innovation is a new type of violence that is as damaging and most worrying in our modern society. If it is argued that enlightenment has reduced physical violence; it

is ironical to note that the same enlightenment through technology has created more violence for humanity. Yet one would think that the more enlightened and developed we are the more we are aware of the need for peaceful existence and in a non - violent environment.

I shall argue here that digital violence is a new type of violence which destroys individuals, family businesses, companies and even communities or governments among them Christians. This Chapter seeks to elaborate on the transformative use of information technology in the current digital era reflecting on the Christian life with the emphasis on digital violence. Although cybercrime affects everybody, this paper is addressed to Christians who more often than not see scientific development as a threat. The question to be asked here is: Is it possible that physical violence has declined only to be replaced by psychological tortures and anguish brought about by cyber violence? How should Christians respond to this new form of violence while embracing digital technology? Finally, I shall offer some suggestions on how to avoid the pitfalls created by cyber violence on Christian and non-Christian alike.

Violence in the age of Technology

The age of technology has brought with it new ways of carrying out business today in the world. These changes affect people in every sector of society. The epicentre of this change is a massive force of information technology that has virtually

¹ Pinker, S. *The Better Angels of our Nature*. (New York: Viking, 2011) 658

transmuted every aspect of people's lifestyles, communication, business, religiosity, health, and education.

Everybody, Christians included are on the run to embrace digital technology in their day-to-day endeavours. Rev. Dr. Phillips, his colleagues Dr. Bex Lewis and Revd. Kate Bruce have this to say:

Our research reveals that in just a few short years, new technology has fundamentally changed the way that we communicate. Talking face to face or on the phone are no longer the most common ways for us to interact with each other. In their place, newer forms of communications are emerging which do not require us to talk to each other especially among younger age groups. This trend is set to continue as technology advances and we move further into the digital age².

Cyber technology is a dynamic concept with multifaceted pros and cons. As change materializes so do the complexities that influence how well we use technology. Cyber technology is defined and influenced substantially by the idealism of complexity and change. The extent of adoption and implementation of cyber technology among Christians is indubitable. However, Christians need to create mechanisms to either help deal with or shield them from this global change of communication. The adoption of digital technology presents all kinds of challenges to the private, public, and professional lives of Christians. I have personally been a victim of digital violence and its uncertainties and I will discuss this later in the paper.

Many people do not actually consider the existence of cyber violence. The majority of Christians in their comfort zones of workplaces, religious gatherings and homes do not know the vulnerability of being prey to the digital predators. This is because many people have not been exposed to cybercrimes on a personal level. In the same way, few people are aware of the mechanisms that have

been devised to cope with the mischievous cyber criminals.

Cyber violence at personal lives of Christians is manifested from different fronts. Christians typically use emails to relay confidential and important information to families, friends, workmates, and employers among other users. Communication through emails is basically the opportune media that most of people use to relay vital information. In addition, there are social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and WhatsApp among others that are used for serious conversations. Emails have a sense of confidentiality and authenticity unlike any other form of internet communication. Due to this, it is susceptible to be used as a means for perpetrating cyber-crimes and exploitation. Information relayed via email between trusted friends and partners is perceived as authentic, truthful, and unquestionable, indeed treated as a message delivered in a face-to-face or phone conservation.

Recently, I experienced the power of cyber violence when a Nigerian conman/women hacked into my email account and initiated conversation with my friend in the US that led him to be conned a significant amount of money. The intruder paraded him/herself in my disguise and convinced my friend that I was in danger and terribly needed money. My innocent friend, wishing to assist me, eventually sent him some money, based on the trust and friendship we have. Later, it was demotivating on both our sides to realize it was a fraud. I felt deeply violated by the incidence. I felt that my privacy was invaded and I had no way to stop it. In another instance, I experienced a similar violation where a malicious young man technically blocked my M-Pesa business account enabling him to steal a considerable amount of money from my business. Again, the feeling of helplessness and emptiness for violation of personal property overwhelmed me.

² Phillips, P., Lewis, B., & Bruce, K.. *Digital Communication, the Church, and Mission.* (Retrieved February 14, 2017, from Church Growth Resource Mission. 2013).

<http://www.churchgrowthrd.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Resourcing>

[_Mission_Bulletin/June_2013/Digital_Communication_the_Church_and_Mission.pdf](#).

Chawki³ in his study on what is referred to as “419 scam free fraud” in Nigeria points out that the acquisition of properties by cheating and false pretences is a major global concern. People are falling prey of the vice due to anonymous servers, cyberspace, fake websites, and hijacked emails that are used for conducting fraud by cyber scammers. The intruders and criminals are not only from Nigeria, but a common trend traversing across the borders capable of being used in any country. The crimes do not appertain to fee fraud only but also cover lotteries, charity, and romance scams among many others.

Chawki notes further that internet scams cost the economy of the UK over £150 million annually with an average victim losing at least £31,000⁴. People are losing large sums of money through such criminalities of which you and I may not be aware until we become victims.

Since the cases of digital fraud violence are immense and real, it is prudent for Christians and Christian organization to familiarize themselves with the common mechanics that may help to evade the paws of the perpetrators. This includes concerns such as impersonation, forgery, falsification, fraudulent representation, and presentation of facts as well as counterfeiting. These crimes are real and very prevalent in our lives whether a Christian or not. The offenders do not discriminate whether the person is wealthy or average person as long as their target and wishes are achieved. The scammers have a convincing language and may go to the extent of presenting falsified documents that appear authentic and facts that you may not doubt once the conversation has been initiated. They can make all kinds of assurances to the extent of collaborating with other trustworthy associates that would see your accounts drained with no chance of tracing them.

Chawki also observes that the possibility of apprehending the perpetrators is often zero or very

small. This is because the same technology used permits the criminals to hide their physical locations and identities as well as cover companies that are untraceable. This makes the possibility of recovering the money impossible in many instances. He points out that:

Real-world criminal investigations focus on the crime scene as the best way to identify a perpetrator and link him to the crime. However, in automated or cybercrime there may either be no crime scene or there may be many crime scenes, with shredded evidence of the crime scattered throughout cyberspace⁵

Christian charities, churches, and religious personalities as well as entire congregations are vulnerable to fraud scammers. The social status of many churches, Christian charities, and missionary foundations more so in Africa are most vulnerable. Their vulnerability is based on the perception that African is in dire need due to its often-troubled states. Holt & Graves⁶ observe that donors lose millions of monies through advance free fraud email messages from individuals who are convinced to initiate conversations with the frauds. They note that many of the victims of identity thefts and fraud are those who manage to respond to the messages just like my friend in the US did. Take note that through the internet and the mobile communication, every kind of crime can be perpetrated to individuals, churches, corporations, and any organisation. All are vulnerable. Nonetheless, despite these delimitations, Christians should embrace digital technology as the pros supersede the demerits.

WHY EMBRACE DIGITIZATION

The internet and mobile communication devices have overturned and revolutionized the lives of Christians in their homes, workplaces, or religious places. Digitalization and technological information have intimately reshaped their private, professional, and public lives. This is evident given the time and

³Chawki, M. Nigeria tackles advance fee fraud. (*Journal of Information, Law, and Technology*, 1(1), 2009) 2-3.

⁴ Ibid,2.

⁵ Chawki, M. Nigeria tackles advance fee fraud. (*Journal of Information, Law, and Technology*, 1(1),2009) 4.

⁶ Holt, T. J., & Graves, D. A qualitative analysis of advance fee fraud email schemes. (*The International Journal of Cyber Criminology*, 1(1),2009) 150.

efforts people spend on their computers, smartphones, and the internet. The digital platforms have enabled individuals to connect and interact in different forms on the social media platforms. These sites have become the centre of communication for many people bridging the gap between the private and professional lives.

The millions of websites and blogs offer various services and information to the population enabling them to acquire the readily available massive information. Courtesy of the internet and mobile communication, people conduct business and attain their education pursuits from the comfort of their homes and workplaces via distant e-learning and e-commerce. The Internet has permitted people to shop and order goods and services regardless of geographical locations. Entertainment sector equally boasts of the power of the internet and mobile communication which enables individuals to download and upload any music and videos they like through platforms such as YouTube among others. The geographical boundaries are limitless; the interaction between people and digital media has inevitability become a prominent issue as manifested by the various digital behaviours depicted in our daily activities.

Digitization excels far beyond our intellectual, religious or age limits. To be precise, it is a defining force in the daily lives of human beings. The implication of the media transcends far more beyond the youth; the older generations are as well quickly catching up with the technology. The World Economic Forum reports that over three billion people are active internet users, over 2 billion fancy social media platforms while over 1.6 billion have mobile social accounts and mobile applications such as emails.⁷ This is a clear indication that digitization is well embedded in the lives of modern human societies.

The benefits of digital media are enormous. Information technology systems are a milestone in the promotion of social interaction that has

empowered the connection of like-minded people regardless of their geographical, cultural, political, ideological nor religious limitations. Christianity is thus one of the beneficiaries of digitalization. Take for example the sermons, testimonies, and the spreading of the gospel have been well propagated on internet and mobile communicating devices. Christians can share their life experiences, deliberations, and reflections about their faith in these platforms that have the capacity to substantially transform the mental, physical, and spiritual health of Christians. Digital technology significantly influences and stimulates human decision making to a great extent, for instance; different religious messages are tailored to specific target groups that enable them to re-evaluate and reconsider the faith for the betterment of Christian faith. Virtual churches have dominated the social media. Through emails, Christians are able to receive unending devotional messages from anywhere in the world whenever one subscribes and requests the same from the providers.

Glasser⁸ has observed how digitalization has transformed the church. She notes that people no longer only go to church to strengthen their connection with God but also to experience the power of technology used in visualization, preaching and worshipping. Unlike before, church going is no longer mandatory since one can listen to sermons and church services from the comfort of their homes, courtesy of digital technology. Campbell has further observed that internet technology has granted the religious practitioners with magnificent new techniques and media of exploring the spiritual experiences and beliefs. This is possible through the exacerbating email discussion groups, religious websites and chatrooms articulated to various faith-related issues. Cyber-churches have proved an incredible media of spreading the gospel. He said:

For many signing on to the Internet is a transformative act. In their eyes, the web is more than just a global tapestry of personal

⁷ World Economic Forum. *Digital Media and Society Implications in a Hyperconnected Era*. Retrieved February 16, 2017, from World Economic Forum: (http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEFUSA_DigitalMediaAndSociety_Report2016.pdf. p.6 2016, January)

⁸ Glaser, E. Conscious Dream, Unconscious Reality. (Augsburg College Youth Theology Institute Journal, 2014) 4.

computers. It is a vast cathedral of the mind, a place where ideas about God and religion can resonate, where faith can be shaped and defined by a collective spirit⁹

Information technology has thus brought about a fundamental change throughout the religious and social life of people. Personally, I am benefiting a lot from digital media. I can communicate at any time with my friends in Nigeria, United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and many other locations within and without my country. I do business, sent, and received money across countries, shared educational experiences and offer my expertise to different scholars and colleagues in various calibres regardless of my location. All such transactions among others are only possible courtesy of my email accounts and mobile phones communication media. However, as much as I have enjoyed the services of digital technology, am equally perturbed and worried as a Christian about the digital violence that is brought about by the use of the same technology. The next session will deal with how to mitigate the cyber violence and thus avoid being a victim.

Theological reflections and mitigating cyber violence

Having noted that digitalization is valuable technology in our modern world, one wonders how Christians should respond to the violence that go along with it. The issue of violence and Christian teaching and practice in both the Old and the New Testament is controversial¹⁰. Needless to say, what we can gather from Jesus' teaching and ministry is that He was against violence and taught that non-violence was admirable. His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount taught nonviolence and love of enemies. The following passage are a clear demonstration that Jesus and New Testament teachings in general does not condone violence which include the new cyber violence.

"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" Luke 6:27

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, Matthew 5:43-48

"Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword". Matthew 26:52

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone". Romans: 17-21

"Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing" 1 Peter 3:9

"Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you". Ephesians 4:32

The above teachings of Jesus and that of the New Testament point to the Christian theology of non-violence and how Christians should respond when violence of any kind is committed against them. Here are some suggestions.

From a personal experience and observation, there is a huge distinction on how most Africans and the people in developed countries trust digitization. My observation provokes me to allude that Africans use of electronic devices and sharing of our personal information such as emails in relation to our colleagues in developed countries depicts a trend of ignorance and excessive trust in the technology. For instance, people share their telephone numbers and email addresses even with unknown persons. The following questions can help us assess our vulnerability to digital violence. How quick are you to share your email addresses once asked? How often do you leave your email details unattended in various online applications and websites some that you do not know their authenticity? How quick are you to pick a call with a foreign or strange number? Do you care where you use your ATM cards from? Have you ever given a bank attendant or anybody else your Personal Identification Numbers (PIN) in the name of helping you to complete your

⁹Campbell, H. Religious and the Internet. (*Quarterly Review Of Communication Research*, 25(1-3),2007) 1-44.

¹⁰Miroslav, Volf. Violence and Theology in Magazine of Theological and Ethical Inquiry from Yale Divinity School, 2004

transactions? To what extent do you trust internet and mobile communication devices?

A case in point is when at one time I called a friend in the United States while in the United Kingdom several times but all the calls went unanswered. Later I contacted her via emails inquiring why my calls went unanswered. The explanation was simple, due to fear of crime and fraud. She could not pick my calls because she did not know any person in the UK.

The first step of evading the paws of digital violence is becoming vigilant and suspicious. Suspicion will always prompt you to ask the right questions that can prevent you from being conned. Your suspicion and fear of crime or being conned will always make you to be cautious whom you give and where you leave your confidential information. Through fear of crime and fraud, you will be induced to understand the loopholes for that conduit crime. Inconsiderate of the tension and delimitations of suspicion and fear of crime, it is one of the plausible manners in which we can protect ourselves of fraudulent digital activities. Adeoti¹¹ observes that through shoulder surfing, ATM fraudsters can monitor customer's private information such as customer PIN number through a giraffe method when you use ATMs unknown to you. Therefore, your suspicion of such crime shall limit the use of your ATM cards. Do not assume every ATM you come across is secure.

Holt & Graves¹² and Chawki¹³ caution us never to be so quick to initiate conversations through email more so those involving money transfer and require your personal information such as PINs. Prior to making any money transfers conduct due diligence on the person or company in question to determine their credibility. Seek assistance from even government agencies such as criminal investigation departments and anti-money laundering bodies to

authenticate the information required. Chawki¹⁴ further raises alarms on the opening of emails and internet banking systems in cybercafés as some of your information is left on the computers which can be exploited by conmen. The keeping of your information private and confidential at all times is a profound measure of evading the traps set by fraudsters. Sharing of passwords and PINs is a violation of customer privacy rights, which may, in the long run, make you vulnerable to crimes. Holt & Graves points out that acknowledging the fact you are very prone to digital violence manifested in advance free fraud is crucial in helping Christians mitigate the crimes. Awareness creates a sense of caution, vigilance, and suspicion that can help a great extent moderate and reduce the vulnerability of being conned. Holt & Graves affirmed that:

There is also no easy way to identify the fraudsters responsible for these messages due to the use of spoofing and anonymizing software that conceals an individual's location. Thus, it is difficult for law enforcement agencies to effectively deal with spam. Yet, it may be possible to minimize fraud victimization through public awareness campaigns on the threat of advance fee fraud schemes¹⁵ Where is the theology?

CONCLUSION

With the escalated expansion of globalization and advancements in information technology, digitalization is an invaluable tool that is transforming the private, public, and professional lives of people; both Christians and non-Christians. Virtually, people depend on the internet and digital devices from communication to business transactions and so on. There are millions of websites and blogs offering various services and information to the population enabling people to acquire the readily available massive information.

¹¹Adeoti, J. O. Automated teller machine (ATM) frauds in Nigeria: The way out. (*Journal of Social Sciences*, 27(1), 2011) 53-58.

¹²Holt, T. J., & Graves, D. A qualitative analysis of advance fee fraud email schemes. (*The International Journal of Cyber Criminology*, 1(1), 2007) 146-147.

¹³Chawki, M. Nigeria tackles advance fee fraud. (*Journal of Information, Law, and Technology*, 1(1), 2009) 4.

¹⁴Ibid,14.

¹⁵Holt, T. J., & Graves, D. A qualitative analysis of advance fee fraud email schemes. (*The International Journal of Cyber Criminology*, 1(1),2007) 151.

As much as we celebrate and enjoy the technology, it equally has liabilities due to cyber violence perpetrated by fraudsters, conmen, hackers, and other cyber criminals. Concerns such as impersonation, forgery, falsification, fraudulent representation, and presentation of facts as well as counterfeiting are common parlance, but the implication is adverse. Most internet users are vulnerable to traps set by conmen. The crimes are real as elucidated by the two personal examples given in this paper. People and governments are losing millions of monies daily through advance free fraud. It is prudent for Christians not to wait until one becomes a victim in order to acknowledge the risks and become vibrant participants in the mitigation of digital crimes.

Mitigation of digital violence starts with you as an individual before we look up to others. The internet habits and trust we have put in digital technology makes us vulnerable to cyber-crimes. First, to reduce our susceptibility to advance free fraud, awareness of the methods of perpetrating the crimes as well as the properties of individual crimes are critical. Vigilance, cautious and suspicion are the basic precepts of avoiding fraudsters as you will question the authenticity of calls, emails, blogs, and websites among others attributes that may seem unusual or require sharing provision of confidential information. Jesus Christ teaching is against violence and to ensure that we do not face such uncalled-for violence, while enjoying the services of digitalization, it is prudent that Christian are alert and ready for appropriate mitigation of digital crime.