

The Future of Evangelism and Missions in a Flat World

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Abstract

Shared culture across the Internet has led to cultural commonalities that are only increasing with each generation. When mission strategies for tomorrow are examined, it may be that the near-culture Christian who has the best opportunity to evangelize the lost in the 21st century is someone from a relatively distant culture, but who has a high percentage of shared experience because of media and the Internet. This article will examine those connections and potential outcomes.

Key Words: globalization, Internet evangelism, media, technology

Introduction

Thomas Friedman famously declared that we are now living in a flat world in his book by the same name (Friedman 2005). He was not arguing with scientists of antiquity or today but making the point that technology and the removal of certain key barriers had allowed for a flattening of the world that made the disparate corners far closer than they had ever been before.

This article will examine the effects of this flattening, as well as the growth and prevalence of a world-wide common media and Internet culture in evangelism and missions. The article aims to begin a conversation to weigh some of the positives and negatives that have been brought about by these changing socio-dynamics and discuss some of the possible future outcomes as some of the trends covered continue. This article will begin by looking at the general impact of flattening technologies on evangelism and missions. Following that, it will discuss the prevalence of English-language and Western media culture and the impact on cultures around the world. Finally, the conclusion will focus on possible future outcomes.

Flat Earth Ministry

Thomas Friedman's book *The World is Flat* looked at the changing world from the perspective of an economist. While early traits of globalization were marked by the expansion of power of countries and giant multinational corporations, the new age of "Globalization 3.0" is defined by the power of individuals to contribute globally (Friedman 2005:20). At the heart of these changes was an explosion of technological innovation and the leveraging of these technologies across the Internet so that they might have maximum reach and impact.

Friedman's perspective has since been applied to many different fields. This new world as described has had far reaching implications for many areas beyond business. Whatever is touched by technology and the Internet has been changed. The changes may be subtle in the beginning, but they can grow to be significant and transformational in time. Christians around the world have been considering how to make use of these principles for the good of the Kingdom and the glory of God and sometimes feel like they are playing catch up.

The idea of applying these principles to the global church isn't new. Just a few years after Friedman's book was released, Bob Roberts called on the global church to think local and global, which he defined as glocal (Roberts 2007). This book encouraged the local church to catch this vision in helpful ways, but it was not thorough enough in addressing what these new strategies might mean for traditional missions and long-term cross-cultural church planting efforts. To apply the concepts Friedman espoused correctly, it would be better to think about the potential impact on individuals rather than churches, groups, or organizations. The flattening allows individual impact in a way that wasn't previously possible. No longer was an individual's impact limited by geography, but everyone was suddenly able to connect with almost anyone around the world.

Becoming someone who is engaged in gospel ministry in this kind of worldwide scale was given a different perspective by Rick Love in his book *Glocal* (Love 2017). Love puts forth the idea of a 3D persona that represents the same message regardless of context. The message that a missionary gives to a supporting church back home should be compatible with the message they give to their neighbors in the country they live in and the government that gives them permission to live in that country. This is a different perspective, but a necessary one to consider with the way information flows in today's world. It is not unusual for a missionary speaking to a U.S.-based audience to have someone in the audience who is connected to the country and people that are the focus of the topic. If the message is recorded or broadcast on the Internet, it is certain that the message will cross national and cultural barriers.

All of this means that ministry and missions in a flat world are far more complex than they were in a previous generation. Some of the potential complications and opportunities this complex world presents are beyond the scope of this study but may be explored further in later articles. For the purpose of this article, the discussion will focus on the potential impact of the commonalities that exist across cultures around the world and the potential for those common factors to be leveraged across cultures using technological and other tools for the benefit of future evangelism and missions. Three key components will be examined before drawing some conclusions: technology, the English language, and the pervasiveness of media.

Technology Flattens Everything

Technology is at the center of Friedman's perspective on the flattening of the world. Of the ten core flatteners that he mentions in his book, all of them have some direct or indirect connection to the expansion of technology (Friedman 2005). These same technological innovations impact future ministry outlooks as well, but this study will focus only on a few of these which have been leveraged effectively by those working to engage the lost around the world.

Friedman marks the day Netscape went public as the time when the web browser became pervasive (Friedman 2005:86). This event was significant because it provided a worldwide platform for digital distribution of content that was available to everyone who has a computer and a connection to the Internet. Computers were allowing for the creation of digital content, and now that content had a platform for delivery. The audience that resulted overnight also meant that everyone trying to connect broadly was ready to join the platform. The first web page went live in 1991, but by the end of the first year, when Netscape's Mosaic browser had become widely available, that number had grown to 24,000. The next year websites had grown tenfold to more than 257,000, and now the number has climbed north of 1.3 billion (Netcraft 2019).

This explosion of content has led to data overload, but it has also allowed more information to be available immediately than was ever possible before, even in the largest repositories of information. Information can be both good and bad as well as true and false, and sorting through those discrepancies has become a problem in and of itself. Friedman described a second, related flattening agent as “In-forming,” with Google and Wikipedia as the prime examples (Friedman 2005:247). The indexing of this data and presenting it in a searchable form has completely changed the way people do research and compile information for their own uses. Google is the new verb that has become the most common way to express the search for information (Hefferman 2017). The current three youngest generations are searching for everything, including truth, by going to the search engine online.

A third flattener Friedman puts forth is what he calls the “Steroids” (Friedman 2005:260). Under this category he mentions several disruptive technologies, including wireless, Voice over IP (VOIP), and file-sharing. These technologies and others listed in this chapter bridge the gap from information sharing to true collaboration on a level that is brought down to the individual and at a cost that is not prohibitive. Individuals now became their own bosses as people rushed to become content producers and digital entrepreneurs were everywhere. These technologies allowed independent contractors to operate across countries, continents, and time zones with little investment. Compounded by a lack of trust in traditional employers and large corporations, more and more people are choosing to be self-employed in what is commonly called the “Gig Economy” (Frazer 2019).

All these innovations have led to a world in which information can be shared freely from one point to the next, with little to no barriers. Many Christian innovators have taken advantage of these opportunities. Here are a few examples. Starting in 1996, Need Him Global has been one of several organizations that have been looking for ways to connect the lost to those who could offer answers in Christ (Need Him Global 2019). This organization is one of many that has been proactively thinking through the use of technology and media in order to engage a flat world. Another such project, entitled ECHO, is designed for volunteers anywhere in the world to be able to engage with seekers through an online platform that can even provide translation as necessary (Need Him Global 2017).

Some organizations have put technology and media at the center of their ministry strategies. The Seventh Day Adventist Church has a separate non-profit, the Center for Online Evangelism, designed to mobilize whoever is willing to enter the cause of online evangelism (Center for Online Evangelism 2019). Such sites are designed to reinforce the idea that anyone who is willing, wherever they are found in the world, can be involved in frontline missions. This site specifically contains materials to not only mobilize but provide basic training and strategic content. It also acknowledges that every day searches involving faith and God are among the most frequent searches on the Internet, regardless of country or culture.

Fortunately, the expansion of availability of resources has contained many good resources, including the Bible. Bible translation is accelerating due to advances in technology. In 2011 around five new translations were completed annually. Now each year between 25 and 30 translations are completed. As a result, millions more people get the full Bible each year. Michael Perreau, Director General of United Bible Societies (UBS), predicts that some of the people alive today will see some portion of the Bible available in every language on earth (Sandeman 2017).

Bible translation is by no means the only Bible-related area that has been significantly impacted by a flattening world. The availability of Scripture in both print and digital formats has increased, and distribution has greatly accelerated. In 2017, more than 354 million Scriptures were distributed through all mechanisms, including digital (UBS 2017). In addition to the growing availability of new translations, other factors cited as having significant impact on distribution are growing worldwide literacy, supply chain development, and electronic availability through apps and the Worldwide Web. The feedback loop built into many of these distribution systems has increased opportunities in evangelism and missions.

Prayer mobilization has benefited from this flattening as well. Prayer requests are shared widely using social media, apps, email, and online prayer platforms. Online requests for prayer are one of the most frequent requests at Christian web sites. Most (57%) online prayer requests are for personal needs, for example illness or finances. This percentage is significant, even though it may not be as overwhelming as the 75% of requests submitted by more traditional, non-electronic means, e.g., handwritten letters, post cards (Siôn and Edwards 2012). It is no surprise to see human spirituality in all its forms expressed through technology and the online world.

Is English Pervasive?

Though not as central to the discussion as technology, it is worth recognizing the impact of the growth of English as the modern *lingua franca* on modern missions thinking. English began to replace French as the most common trade language during the Industrial Revolution, then gained a dominant foothold from the growth of technology and the explosion of media exports from the United States (Marques 2017). Media's impact will be discussed at length in the next section, but it is worth noting the overall impact of English itself.

English is a mixed blessing as it relates to its impact on missions (Switz and Lessard-Clouston 2015). While some make comparisons with the positive impact Greek had on the expansion of the Gospel in the first century, English mostly aids in organization and facilitation. English is commonly spoken across many countries and is the official trade language in 61 countries (Switz and Lessard-Clouston 2015). This widespread use of English carries its own benefits, but broad usage without depth means that English does not penetrate to the heart language of the majority of non-native-English-speaking populations. Through English, then, the gospel is often communicated at a factual level as information more often than it is communicated pointedly and with insight as spiritual truth.

English proficiency is on the rise worldwide but is growing more slowly, or is in actual decline, in most of the 10/40 Window (Education First 2019). English proficiency spreads with technology, goes hand in hand with innovation, and is strongly correlated with education levels. English levels have risen to the highest levels ever in Europe, with several countries in Africa and Asia also showing great improvement. This worldwide rise in English proficiency has aided in both collaboration among missions organizations and the growth of sending agencies that are made up of multiple nationalities.

English teaching jobs abroad continue to be one of the easiest paths for English-speaking expatriates to find employment in countries around the globe. Many prominent mission agencies have promoted these opportunities for like-minded Christians to join the work in this way. So-called closed countries are accessed by Christian professionals who have the skills and training

to provide English language instruction (Snow 2012). Some English speakers are even using distance learning opportunities to reach out to others or to support themselves in their missionary endeavors. China and the Chinese have been the greatest, but by no means the only, customers for these services. This demand looks to continue to grow in the near future. Moreover, as more Christians take up the “Glocal” approach that Love espouses in his book, language instruction (English, Korean, and otherwise) may become even more central to missions engagement (Love 2017).

English also impacts the growth of the volunteer missions movement in North America. Volunteer missions or short-term missions trips have grown at an incredible rate and represent the majority of mission involvement today, as well as a large percentage of missions spending (Fanning 2009). Short-term missions have become big business, and many fields are marketing to supporters to attract missions funding to their cause. Even in countries where English is not common, it is not unusual to see handlers who speak excellent English who are willing to facilitate a short-term missions experience. The value of this explosion is beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth mentioning that this is one more area that has faced significant changes due to the flattening of our world.

The Greatest Export, Media

At its core, the flattening of the world means that many traditional barriers do not exist anymore. The lines that once separated countries and peoples have been removed or blurred to the point that access to information and content is pervasive. U.S. media and its producers have been one of the greatest beneficiaries of this trend. It is now common for people around the world to watch the same movies and TV shows, listen to the same music, and play the same electronic games. Synchronized worldwide releases also mean that, in the same 24-hour period, people speaking different languages and even living in countries that are not easily accessible to United States passport holders are being exposed to the same ideas produced in a Hollywood studio (Scott 2002).

These exports impact worldviews in many different ways. Perspectives and ideas are shaped subtly in some areas, but other viewpoints are influenced more dramatically. The world’s opinions about the United States and its people are heavily influenced by these media exports (Ibbi 2013). Despite the growth of film industries in countries around the world and the efforts to promote their own cultural values and even export those values outside of their countries, Hollywood remains the only regular source to have a worldwide impact with their content. This situation is related to quality, marketing power and savvy, and most significantly to the massive lead American pop culture has developed in worldwide distribution and establishment in the consciousness of thought. This influence means that a U.S. young person going on one of the short-term trips mentioned earlier is likely to encounter peers from another culture who may have a high percentage of common media input.

While much of these media influences would be seen as negative or neutral, occasionally there may be a more overtly positive influence. For example, when Mel Gibson’s controversial movie “The Passion of the Christ” was released worldwide, the face of Christ was suddenly plastered across billboards and bus stops around the Muslim world, with the movie even becoming one of the top earners for the year in many of those countries (Blanford 2004). Whether it is Hollywood, the music industry, video games, or popular YouTube channels, media is the largest export from the West, specifically entertainment media. Ibbi notes that some view

this spread of media as a unifying agent, while others see it as cultural imperialism (Ibbi 2013). Missiologists and mission practitioners should take these varying perspectives into account while encouraging skilled media professionals to produce for a worldwide audience (Dahle 2014).

This trend of global media use is accelerating with younger generations, who are consuming the majority of their media through the Internet and not through the same distribution channels preferred by their parents and grandparents (Loucks 2018). All of this media saturation demands that its consequences be taken into account when thinking about the future of ministry. The flattening world has made every entity and individual a potential media producer, capable of adding their own message to the global conversation, along with the crowd (Dahle 2014).

Conclusion

Technologies have always aided the expansion of the gospel, whether the system of roads in the Roman Empire in the first century or the invention of the printing press in Europe in the fifteenth century (McCracken 2019). The advances of the modern age, including all those which Freidman has noted in his book, are available to be leveraged for the good and glory of the Kingdom of God. Jumping into new fields should be done with wisdom more than simple urgency; the key to reaching the world is not having the shiniest new toy. Paul described a measured approach which should be a guide in this area as well:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19-23, ESV).

McCracken identifies three broad categories that are available for all Christians to make an impact in the Flat World: “Serving the Searching,” “Connecting the Lonely,” and “Sharing What’s Good” (McCracken 2019) Every believer should take new ministry opportunities seriously in today’s world, and doing so will make an impact that will affect the future of evangelism and missions positively. At the same time, the use of new technology should not be seen as a replacement for in person, relational ministry. Perhaps the most vital role for non-professionals in gospel ministry, then, is in the area of diaspora work, where the unreached people groups of the world have been brought into Christians’ own neighborhoods (Wan 2012).

Professional ministry among other nations, especially long-term missionary work, will remain the foundation upon which good missiology is built. At the same time, short-term and volunteer missions efforts can play a significant role as well (Fanning 2009). It is important to recognize that the world is not moving towards a one-world culture, but a vision of a multicultural world realized. Keeping that vision in mind provides expanding opportunities at all levels of involvement. A wise and creative approach will benefit the efforts of all, as they partner with the God who holds all outcomes in His capable hands.

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