

# TRUTH AND THE INTERNET

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*Technology developments have changed the way we communicate. This article considers the impact of the Internet on communication, learning and truth.*



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When researchers from the New Literacies Research Team at the University of Connecticut<sup>1</sup> asked 25 seventh-grade students (judged to be high-performing online readers), to check out a website with details about an octopus that was facing extinction, the students all thought the tree octopus was real. This is the introduction to the online text.

The Pacific Northwest tree octopus (*Octopus paxarbolis*) can be found in the temperate rainforests of the Olympic Peninsula on the west coast of North America. Their habitat lies on the Eastern side of the Olympic mountain range, adjacent to Hood Canal. These solitary cephalopods reach an average size (measured from arm-tip to mantle-tip) of 30-33 cm. Unlike most other cephalopods, tree octopuses are amphibious, spending only their early life and the period of their mating season in their ancestral aquatic environment. Because of the moistness of the rainforests and specialised skin adaptations, they are able to keep from becoming desiccated for prolonged periods of time, but given the chance they would prefer resting in pooled water.

This experiment led a senior school administrator in the USA<sup>2</sup> to question how well children judge truth from

fiction: 'Knowing truth from fiction on the Internet is a huge problem. Students might be good researchers, but they tend not to scrutinise the information.'

It is indisputable that the Internet has changed the way most people obtain information and communicate with one another. But there are many questions about where it might take us. In particular, I have been contemplating how the Internet impacts on the knowledge we gain from it and the way we view the nature of truth. Does it privilege particular views of the world and specific epistemologies? Does it serve the needs of particular interpretive communities more than others?

I don't raise these questions as one who fears technology, nor do I raise them with any sense that I know the answers with any certainty. I raise these questions as a constant user of the Internet who wants to understand how it is changing our world. I have been using email for more than 20 years as a daily part of my life; I carry a BlackBerry and can browse the Internet while walking in the street; I write three blogs and read many others; I use the Internet as a constant and valuable resource. I know the wonderful benefits of the Internet and the many positive things it offers. But I also have a concern about the impact it has on my life and on the lives of others.

Like any technology application, the Internet has many potential benefits (which are outlined by Mark Hadley and David Horne in this edition of *Case*), as well as opportunities for misuse.<sup>3</sup> Some of its strengths may also be weaknesses

or offer threats. The key seems to be how we use technology and whether the technology is our servant or whether we, instead, are its slave. Nowhere is this question more relevant than in assessing how the Internet and its use might enable the sharing of Christian truth or, indeed, how it might make it more difficult to discern the truth. We need to ask the question: 'Which epistemologies and ways of viewing truth are best served by the Internet?'

If we understand the impact of the Internet on truth and epistemology, then we will be in a better position to understand the threats as well as the opportunities it poses. I will return to this later.

In this article I want to address three questions:

- i. Does the Internet change the way we learn and acquire knowledge?
- ii. Does the Internet pose a threat to truth?
- iii. What are the implications for how we engage with and use the Internet for God's purposes?

## **Does the Internet change the way we learn and acquire knowledge?**

In one sense, the Internet poses no more problems for Christianity than the cinema, television, radio or even the printed word in all its forms. In fact, the Internet is just a tool, like the book and the DVD. The Russian psychologist Vygotsky<sup>4</sup> argued that tools are the means by which we understand the world. We have access to material tools that help us to accomplish tasks (e.g. a screwdriver, pencil, computer)

as well as psychological tools that enable us to understand our world (e.g. words, letters and numerals). Mathematics and language as symbolic systems are broad examples of psychological tools.

Hence, the Internet like other tools is simply a means to understand the world. Like other tools it is used as an extension of, and as part of, cultural groups (e.g. the family, school, church etc). It is in such groups that we learn how to use psychological and material tools. Much of this occurs with no formal instruction as children from birth learn through interaction with others. The tools we use reflect the culture in which we live and are applied as we interact with others. Vygotsky argued that tools and the cultural groups within which we live mediate our thoughts and actions.

With Vygotsky's concept of the 'tool' as background it is worth reflecting on the Internet as an example. Is the use of the Internet as our primary tool for learning and the gaining of knowledge different from the use of books and a physical library? The answer I think is yes! But does it matter? Well, it might. There are three key differences between the Internet and other tools for learning and communication:

- It is used as part of different, more complex and more changeable interpretive communities;
- It uses many more modalities for communication in much more interactive ways and with little direct human contact;
- It provides a much richer tapestry of semiotic<sup>5</sup> opportunities and as such offers a less dominant place to the written word.

These differences have led many to claim that the Internet has not only changed the way we communicate but also the way we learn. One group of sociologists, linguists and educational researchers, using the name the New London Group (NLG)<sup>6</sup> has suggested that we should no longer speak of literacy but instead should talk of multiliteracies. This, they suggest, 'Leads to a pedagogy of multiliteracies that

*focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone.*<sup>7</sup>

Multiliteracies for the NLG is based on the understanding that *'language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes.'*<sup>8</sup>

In other words, the Internet provides much more than the written word. It allows the learner to read words, view images and videos, listen to audio presentations, music and so on, often simultaneously, or at the very least almost seamlessly, as he or she moves around the worldwide web.

The NLG also argues for the embracing of the concept of design rather than traditional terms such as comprehension and composition. They suggest that Internet users design meanings not just by reading and writing language but also by encountering *visual meanings* (images, layouts, screen formats), *audio meanings* (music sound effects), *gestural meanings* (body language, sensuality), *spatial meanings* (environmental spaces, architectural spaces) and finally *multimodal meanings* (those that require multiple modes used simultaneously).

Their work is underpinned by their belief that the removal of literacy (which they see as a dominating, colonising and disempowering tool of the wealthy and powerful)<sup>9</sup> is possible and desirable, and that design is an alternative that will be more equitable and empowering.

It is clear that groups such as the

NLG have no doubts about who will be disempowered by the Internet: those who have traditionally controlled the written word. I will return to this point in the next section. In practical terms, the Internet has changed the way many of us communicate ideas and the way we acquire information and learn. Much of this is good. We have access to a vast store of information at the click of a mouse. We can communicate our ideas almost instantly to the world. We have the power to craft words, images, sounds and video to present our ideas to others. But does it also present a threat to truth?

## Does the Internet pose a threat to truth?

Part of the attractiveness of the Internet for groups such as the New London Group is that it celebrates pluralism. Not only does it demonstrate what Carson<sup>10</sup> calls Empirical Pluralism (i.e. there is enormous diversity in our world in race, value systems, language, culture and religion) that cannot be denied, it is also home to 'cherished pluralism' (i.e. many who don't just accept diversity but celebrate and praise it), offering support for those who would want to trumpet the merits of pluralism. Indeed, I would argue that the Internet facilitates the communication and demonstration of hermeneutical pluralism and its dependent philosophy of Deconstruction. Hermeneutical pluralism is based on the key assumption that objective truth is not achievable, and that meaning resides in the interpreter (the reader, the viewer, the web surfer), not in the text.

The arguments of the New London Group reflect much of the thinking of deconstructive postmodernism which, as the name suggests, embraces Deconstruction (i.e. a type of internal conceptual critique) as one of its essential tools. Deconstruction was driven by the work of Jacques Derrida and others, and was used to challenge the authority of canonical works, power relationships, gender stereotypes and so on. Derrida and his followers built on the work of

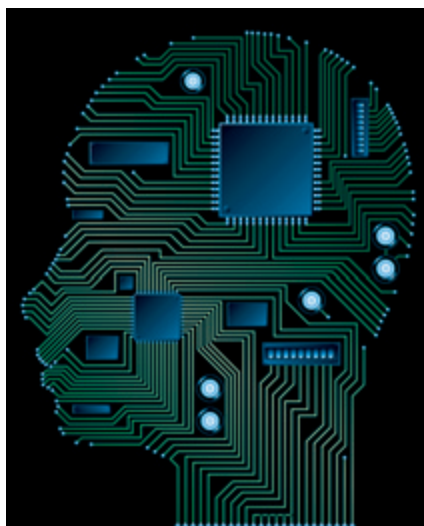


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structuralism<sup>11</sup> and argued that words are self-limiting, because words simply refer to other words. Derrida<sup>12</sup> goes even further and claims that meaning is locked within the knower, not the text. Hence, language cannot convey objective truth about objective reality. It is a small step from such claims to what we would broadly call postmodernism<sup>13</sup>, which asserts that truth reflects who you are: it is in the mind of the beholder. Knowledge, the postmodernist would claim, varies with the individual, circumstances and time, and leads to the catchcry, *'that might be true for you, but not for me'*. Just as the serpent in the Garden of Eden suggested to Adam and Eve that they could have access to all the knowledge that God possessed as creator (Genesis 3:1-5), the deconstructive postmodernist suggests that we can have access to the tree of knowledge because we create it, it is in us.

What deconstructive postmodernism does is to shift the focus from the author and the text to the reader and his or her context. Deconstructionists argue that we do not go to a text to gain meaning (let alone truth that does not exist), but rather to make meaning, which of course can only be relative. Such a view of reading that locates meaning in the knower reflects a view of epistemology that sees truth as relative.

Of course, while supporters of deconstructive postmodernism focus on the individual reader and writer rather than the text, they also see others as influencing our meanings. Stanley Fish<sup>14</sup> suggests that it is *'the interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features.'* So, for example, the Christian community, based on its reading of the Bible, may well believe in a divine, interventionist God who sent his son into the world to rescue us from sin and death. But this would be seen as just one among many truth claims embraced by a specific interpretive community having read this particular text in a specific context.

In considering the relationship



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between an interpreter (e.g. a reader), an interpretive community (e.g. a church) and a source of knowledge (e.g. a book such as the Bible), Fish sees the interpretive community as determinative. But the relationship is much more complex than he suggests.<sup>15</sup> Fish ignores the fact that the textual form<sup>16</sup> itself provides direction for the reader as encoded by the author, and that any community can be shaped by knowledge or texts. This is not unique to Christians, but it is critical to understanding Christian interpretive communities that have their foundations beyond themselves in what they view as God's truth revealed in his word. The question should be asked of any interpretive community, 'What is the

(e.g. technology companies, publishers, governments etc), and those who would like to make it available free to everyone, the Internet has provided significant access to information and knowledge throughout the world on a scale not previously imagined (and this is mostly good<sup>17</sup>).

This has also broken down hierarchical control of knowledge: the Internet allows almost anyone to publish their ideas and has generated many thousands of new virtual communities of people who read, view and communicate with each other about ideas that are of common interest.

What this process of democratisation has achieved is the creation of new interpretive communities where ideas are

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foundation of your shared belief and understanding?'

One of the great changes that the Internet has brought has been the democratisation of knowledge. Knowledge can never again be the preserve of the few and the privileged. Notwithstanding the ongoing battles between those who would still want to own and control information on the Internet

shared, interpretations are co-constructed and knowledge in turn is shared with others. While Barthes<sup>18</sup> wrote of the 'death of the author' more than forty years ago, and one could hardly claim that the Internet is responsible for the removal of the author from textual considerations, the Internet continues to add weight to this shift from authorial and textual power to the reader and their

interpretive community. In particular, the Internet has done much to negate individual authorship in favour of shared authorship. Phenomena such as Wikipedia make it increasingly difficult to identify a single author. An Internet encyclopaedia that can be changed instantly as the world changes has a number of advantages. But an encyclopaedia written by authors who are self-selected, unknown and faceless must raise questions about the potential accuracy of the information it shares. Wikipedia is the perfect palette for postmodernism.

Some of the major advantages that champions of the Internet cite in its support are:

- The ability of anyone to share information;
- The lack of control of content on the web;
- The shared ownership of information;
- All ideas have equal validity;
- A diversity of opinions is good and desirable.

## What are the implications for how we engage with and use the Internet for God's purposes?

The Internet is a tool that has great benefits for learning and communication, but it also poses threats to the Christian view of truth and to the very definitions of truth and knowledge that shape our worldviews<sup>19</sup>. I want to suggest three key things that are critical if the Christian wants to make the Internet their servant and not their master:

- we must rely on God's word and give it first priority as the source of knowledge and truth;
- we need to understand the interpretive communities (virtual and real) that we negotiate each day;
- we must see virtual communities as places to share our faith and enter them with the same respect, purposes, enthusiasm and preparation with which we enter any physical community.

dominated by radical hermeneutics and Deconstruction, it will take diligence to fight against the tendency to accept that all interpretations of texts are equally valid.

The Christian will need to rely on God's word as their ultimate test of what is right and true. Christians are people who 'guard [their way]' according to God's word, 'storing up' God's word in their hearts, 'meditating on' and 'delighting in' his statutes (Psalm 119:9-16). The Christian needs to confidently hold on



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## The Internet ... is a tool that sits comfortably

Christians should see some potential benefits in the above list. But can we also see the dangers? Some of the great strengths of the Internet, such as the speed with which we can share information, the egalitarian way in which almost anyone with access to a computer can share information, and the reach that one can have in sharing information, are also the foundations of some of the greatest threats it poses.

The question needs to be asked: Could this ultimately lead to a questioning of the very definition of knowledge? What will be the impact if knowledge is increasingly created in networks of relationships and shared as part of online communities of interest? Could the Internet not only change access to information and knowledge, but also change the very meaning of knowledge?

First, there is a danger that in embracing the Internet we may be shaped by it. The postmodern thinker lives in a world of openness, doubt and uncertainty. The Internet as a platform for information exchange is a tool that sits comfortably with relativistic and postmodern thought. Meta-narratives such as the Christian gospel, on which Christians centre their lives, can easily be dismissed as just one telling of humanity's story, just one possible truth among many, or perhaps even just one story among many stories.

A key priority to avoid being shaped into the mould of the dominant epistemologies of the Internet is for the Christian to continually place a priority on God's word. We should use the Internet both to strengthen our faith and to share it, but we need to do so with a healthy understanding of the varied epistemologies that we will encounter. Carson<sup>20</sup> suggests that in a world

to God's word as the way to know the truth that is life-changing for whoever hears and accepts it. As Jesus taught his disciples: *'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'* (John 8:31-32).

Second, just as we must take care with the networks of people we join in the physical world, we must take care with the cyber communities we enter. The insight that interpretive communities and status hierarchies shape the understandings and beliefs of the individual is not a new one. Jesus himself asked the religious elite of his day, 'How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?' (John 5:44).

We need to understand the interpretive communities we visit, and engage in them with full understanding

of the foundations on which they share their experiences and insights. Just as Christians share common beliefs based on their reading of God's word and their understanding of it developed in interpretive communities (e.g. families, churches, Bible study groups etc), so too non-Christian networks and groups share common understandings gained as part of interpretive communities. The atheist, the Rotarian and the sceptic all share common views of the world. What is different is that Christians claim a shared understanding of the Living God, whose truth, as recorded in the Bible, stands above and shapes all other truth and is focused on Jesus, who claimed, 'I Am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life' (John 14:1).

The primacy given to the text and the interpretive community on the Internet, rather than the author, poses special challenges for anyone (particularly children) seeking to make judgements about the worth and validity of any

to speak and the ideas they present. If adults are challenged by the testing of truth and the quality of what they encounter on the Internet, how much more so are children when faced with a tree octopus? The Internet is an ideal tool for the passing on of unexamined ideas. Greg Koukl suggests, '*By means of repetition and passive acceptance over time, they take on the force of common wisdom, a "truth" that everyone knows but no one has stopped to examine, a kind of intellectual urban legend.*'<sup>21</sup>

Whether we are trying to judge the worth and accuracy of a single text, image or video or simply test the views of a web-based community that we have joined, the challenges are similar. While the Internet can be useful for communicating truth, readers need to be able to assess information: to judge if it is true. As Howard Rheingold has suggested, 'the responsibility for determining the accuracy of texts shifted from the publisher to the reader when

What is the purpose of the writing? What are the underlying assumptions, ideology, values and worldview of the writer? How do the claims of this text match the claims of others?

Third, we should want to enter virtual communities, for people who are not aware of God's truth frequently populate them. One of the great joys of the Internet is that it provides access to every imaginable source of information, knowledge and opinion. I visit the Internet as a Christian, husband, father, sports fan, grandfather, gardener, academic, handyman, reader, political analyst, businessman and so on. In each of these roles and identities I move in and out of multiple online communities. This is inevitable and desirable if we are to be God's witnesses to the very ends of the earth.

A proper understanding of the Internet and the way it both shapes those who use it and reflects the philosophies of our age should lead us

## with relativistic and postmodern thought.



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information and knowledge they access on the Internet. While there is a great deal of truth on the Internet, and many who use it are seeking the truth, the Internet as yet offers few devices to help us have confidence even in the true identity of the author, let alone any organisation for whom they might claim

the functions of libraries shifted to search engines'.<sup>22</sup> Children and adults need to ask questions of the content they encounter. Who wrote this piece? What is the author's claim to expertise and knowledge in this area? From where does the writer derive his or her sources and how well regarded are such sources?

to a renewed desire to win people for Christ and to explore how we might do this more effectively and in new ways (Hadley and Horne offer some pointers, as does Weerakoon in this issue). We should not fear the Internet, for we know that God is sovereign and in control of his world. Rather, we need to think about how we might evangelise people who share a different view of the world, giving careful thought to how we can use the Internet for gospel purposes.

In addressing this task we should remember that the Apostles and early disciples shared the gospel of Christ in a highly pluralistic society. Using Paul's Athenian address in Acts 17, Carson<sup>23</sup> demonstrates how Paul went about evangelising people who were biblically illiterate and had worldviews inconsistent with Judeo-Christian teaching. Paul's writing and teaching did not hide from the exclusive claims of Jesus. The gospel



message was not accommodated to the desire for pluralism and acceptance of many gods and many views. Rather, Paul and the other apostles vigorously presented the claims of the gospel. As Carson puts it, they kept *'insisting on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the exclusiveness of the saving power of his gospel. But they did so in such a way that they showed they understood the people they were addressing. We must develop similar firmness, and similar flexibility.'*<sup>24</sup>

As we confront our postmodern and sceptical world we need to understand that the Internet can be friend and foe, slave or master. We need to use it as a window on our world and engage with cyber communities for the sake of the gospel. Not in silos of common and accepted beliefs, ideology, culture and a uniform worldview, hoping for the lost to stumble in. Rather, we need to seek out communities of common interest based on common human needs and concerns. We need to approach cyber communities like physical communities: we can be in them without necessarily sharing the same worldview. While there is still a place for Christian communities of interest on the Internet, we need to get beyond an 'echo chamber' experience. The Internet has many self-referential communities of interest that are simply silos of like-minded people who hardly make contact with others who hold different worldviews.<sup>25</sup> There are great apologetic opportunities for those who are willing to join chat rooms or become members of online communities. It is here that they can bring their own Christian worldview and ultimately share the

gospel of Christ, helping to shape such communities rather than being shaped by them.

The lesson of Acts 17 is that Paul does not present the gospel to the Athenians through a moral lesson, nor through a deconstruction of their culture. Rather, he lays out a biblical worldview framework, then presents the gospel of Christ. Paul affords the Athenians every respect, but he does not accept that their views of the world have the same authority. No gentle tiptoeing around the difficulties of competing truth claims for Paul; instead, he presents what he sees as the truth because he knows that the truth will set them free (John 8:31-32). ©

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 This work is cited in an online piece by Zach Miners & Angela Pascopella titled 'New Literacies', *District Administration*, October 2007. [www.districtadministration.com/viewarticle.aspx?articleid=1292](http://www.districtadministration.com/viewarticle.aspx?articleid=1292).
- 2 Kenneth Eastwood, superintendent of Middletown City, New York. [www.districtadministration.com/viewarticle.aspx?articleid=1292](http://www.districtadministration.com/viewarticle.aspx?articleid=1292)
- 3 Denis Alexander provides a useful discussion of the merits, dangers and history of technology. Alexander, Denis R (2003). *Worshipping God with Technology*. In *Cambridge Papers*, 12, 2, pp1-4.
- 4 Vygotsky, Lev (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cole, M., Scribner, S., John-Steiner, V., and Souderman. E. (Eds), Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.
- 5 Semiotics (from the Greek semeion meaning 'sign') is essentially the study of the role of signs and the laws governing them as part of life. Barthes argued that 'semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification'. Barthes, Roland (1964). *Elements of Semiology*. Translated by Annette Lavers & Colin Smith, London: Jonathan Cape, p9.
- 6 A good introduction to the work of the New London Group can be found in an edited collection of their writings: Cope, Bill and Kalantzis, Mary (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. Melbourne: Macmillan.
- 7 *Ibid*, p5.
- 8 *Ibid*, p5.
- 9 Their work is strongly influenced by thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.
- 10 Carson, Don (1996). *The gagging of God: Christianity confronts pluralism*. Grand Rapids (Mich.): Zondervan Publishing House.
- 11 De Saussure, Ferdinand (1916). *Course in General Linguistics*. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye, translated from the French by Wade Baskin, London: Peter Owen. The work of de Saussure is generally seen as the beginnings of structuralism. He saw language as a system of signs, with any sign having

two elements, the signifier (e.g. a word) and the signified (a psychological concept). He argued that the 'signifier' has no necessary relationship to that which it signifies (the 'signified'), and that what it signifies depends on its structural place within the language system.

- 12 Derrida, Jacques (1976). *Of grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Derrida took de Saussure's work one step further and argued that words never have a referent other than other words, there is nothing outside the text. In other words, even that concept signified by a word (e.g. dog) has no necessary connection to what is being signified (i.e. any real dog).
- 13 It is simplistic to talk of 'postmodernism' as if it's a unified philosophy. In reality there are many forms, including several applications of postmodern thought to theology.
- 14 Fish, Stanley (1980). *Is there a text in this class?* Boston: Harvard University Press, p14.
- 15 Space doesn't permit a full discussion but Don Carson provides a fuller exploration of these issues. Op. cit, Carson.
- 16 Thomas G. Long (1989). *Preaching and the literary forms of the Bible*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- 17 Elsewhere in this issue Roberta Kwan talks about privacy issues and we could spend much time on issues such as pornography and the impact the Internet has had on the spread of subversive activities such as terrorism.
- 18 Barthes, Roland (1967/1977). The death of the author. In Heath (Ed.), *Image, Music, Text*, London: Fontana, pp142-148. Barthes criticised the reader's tendency to consider aspects of the author's identity (e.g. political views, context, religious beliefs, ethnicity etc) to aid the extraction of meaning from any text. He argued that readers must separate a literary work from its creator in order to 'liberate it from interpretive tyranny'. His ideas have had a significant influence on the social sciences, particularly media studies, literary studies and sociology.
- 19 A worldview is a framework or set of fundamental beliefs through which we view the world and our place in it, See Olthius, James H. (1989). On worldviews. In Marshall, P.A., Griffioen. S. and Mouw. R. (Eds), *In Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science*, Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, pp26-40.
- 20 Op cit, Carson.
- 21 Koukl, Greg (2007). *The death of truth*. [www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=226](http://www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=226).
- 22 Rheingold, H. (2007). There's more to academic research. In *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October. [www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/theres-more-to-academic-research/2007/10/12/1191696170411.html](http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/theres-more-to-academic-research/2007/10/12/1191696170411.html).
- 23 Op cit, Carson, pp496-501.
- 24 This is in contrast to some, even within the evangelical community, who in trying to respond to non-Christians have embraced postmodernism and end up placing too much emphasis on 'our finiteness, on our cultural location, and on the context-specificity of each knower, and very little emphasis on the content of the divine revelation' as Don Carson (2008) argues in *Christ & Culture Revisited*, Grand Rapids, (Mich.): William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- 25 Kristof, Nicholas D. (2008). Divided They Fall. In *The New York Times*, 17 April. Kristof has used the term 'echo-chamber' in this way.