Expanding Outreach: There’s an App for that!

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a launching point, or discussion of some possible frameworks for conceptualizing the intersection of information seeking in on- and off-line mediated religious environments, using internet enabled apps such as the Youversion™ Bible. The author would like to note that this paper is a work in progress and not a finished product. Due to the breadth and complexity of the subject, this paper serves to highlight what the author perceives to be some key issues in the developing world of the Internet of Things (IOT) and brings together ideas, ruminations, and a possible conceptual framework. Much of this topic deserves further exploration beyond the attempted scope of this paper.

Introduction

Intentional communities are formed by like-minded people interested in a communal experience, with shared goals, beliefs, and a vision of what that community looks like for each individual. Religious communities are shaped by the leadership teams, the people who attend the times in which they live, and the technology they have available. The Gutenberg Bible brought literacy and a more personal experience to the masses; the automobile brought mobility, and one was no longer tethered to the church in one’s town; and the radio and television brought the religious leader to the living room.
The Internet, has continued the trend of more choices, erased geographical boundaries, and made synchronous communication and live attendance optional. This changes the traditional dynamic between faith leaders and their followers, and “challenge[s] traditional ideas of koinonia (fellowship)” (Michaels, 2015). While the number of people who claim to attend religious meetings has declined in the last decade, the majority of people in America continue to indicate that their belief in a higher power, with ninety-two percent of American in 2011 indicating they believe in God (Newport, 2011).

One’s personal spiritual belief system can (among other things) bring comfort when a loved one dies, (Rosick, 1989) improve health outcomes and increase longevity, (Koenig, et al, 1988) and support healthy behaviors (Campbell, et al.) within an intentional community. According to Flory and Miller (2008), “religion continues to be one of the most fundamental organizing schemas that individuals and groups have for their lives and their actions in the world.” As such, understanding how technology is changing peoples’ use of, interaction with, and information seeking for personal or religious purposes with a sacred text such as the Bible is quite important. What draws a person to seek comfort from an app, and share it on Facebook? What drives a person on the 12-step program to locate and share verses and reflections on Twitter, or with their accountability partner using an app? How are church leaders using the Youversion Bible app or other apps like it to mentor their flock, and open dialogs with their followers on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, many of whom might not be attending their church?

With the exponential growth of Social Networking Sites (SNS), interest groups, and sharable data within apps, more people are choosing to interact in online communities rather than in communities defined by geographical location. One can now
join a discussion on the Apostles Creed, play a game with friends in the United Kingdom, join a World-wide team to contribute Charity Miles for Parkinson’s research, or other noble causes, and work on projects with colleagues whom you have never met. If one chooses, one’s society of friends can be less location specific and more widely distributed. As the world becomes “smaller” and more networked, and its users more reliant on their smart devices, manufacturers and developers will offer apps with perceived greater convenience and value. The developing Internet of Things (IoT) will mean even more connectivity potential for its users, connectivity that automates a users’ updates and statuses, reading logs, and more. As the Internet continues to become more entwined in peoples’ lives, it is important to gain an understanding of this larger, less location centric meaning of community. Where once people invited their friends, colleagues and neighbors over for building connections and strengthening their interpersonal ties, they now like, tag, comment, post, tweet, and use other methods to build connections. The boundaries between one’s personal and professional life are less clear; when one is connected to work, family, friends, church, music, movies, books, and more with the swipe of a thumb or the click of a mouse, the distinction between each is no longer so easily delineated. Prior to SNS, a person might have had more or less distinct groups of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances in one’s community, forming overlapping circles, and which worked to provide cohesion and structure, but also some boundaries and distinction amongst the groups. A person now has less clearly defined boundaries in their networked community. Each person can interact with others in the SNS; the connection may be more tenuous, less clearly defined, and yet, at the same time, have more overlap within each set. It is a radically different method for approaching
one’s life, and one’s faith; one worth investigating. As Campbell states, “Community as a network thus provides an important new narrative and research tool for investigating emerging relations and interaction occurring within contemporary religious organization and groups” (Campbell, 2012).

The proliferation of web-based opportunities for formal and informal worship, dialog, reflection and reading has led to new opportunities and also perceived new threats to hierarchical, formal religious interactions. Formal places of worship have responded by creating their own presence online, offering virtual spaces in an effort to develop their online communities.

Religious leaders’ use of the Internet has been examined by a number of scholars for various reasons since the World Wide Web’s inception. People who wish to share their personal belief system with others “may harness the Internet to create not only one-to-many broadcasts but also incorporate social networking platforms and an array of other Web-enabled, interactive and GIS applications for many-to-many communication to fulfill their organizational functions and community missions” (Cheong, et al, 2009).

While religious authorities may invest in websites, live streaming services and events, sermons notes and blogs, etc., individuals may also be choosing to “create knowledge and legitimacy on their own,” (Flory and Miller, 2008) using the deconstructed spaces of the internet, and the computing capacity of their internet-enabled devices. Previously, the decentralization and lessening of cultural value to one intentional community has led to tremendous growth in the homeschool and unschool movement over the last two decades, as parents opted their children out of organized
schooling. That same decentralization and lessening of cultural value is now making some inroads in other intentional communities as well, including religious ones. When one can worship online or at home with like-minded individuals at times that fit one’s schedule, the impetus for attending in person may very well be lessened. It is not only ordained religious who can curate their religious experiences and reflections online; it is also wide open and available for the lay person to also do so, reflecting on larger changes in society as a whole. One can share and minister without the ministerial credentials, and reach a large audience doing so. The physical walls and timetables of traditional congregations are no longer necessarily deemed as essential to an individuals’ spiritual growth, as two or three may gather together in asynchronous dialog to explore and express their faith, or set meeting times to suit their own schedules “the rise of a network-based society where these social relations are increasingly decentralized, yet interconnected and often supported by a social-technical infrastructure” (Campbell, 2012). Sites such as Facebook “have become the arena for argument and deliberation, as well as for association and institutional collaboration” (Masuku, and Moyo, 2014). But it is not only the organizational structure of personal preference concerning religious practice that may be changing; it is also one’s interaction with the sacred texts. One can now read or download every major religious text from various places on the Internet in a plethora of languages, and in many cases, one can also find copies that can be ported to handheld devices, or used with an app built specifically for that purpose. Contextual framing of biblical passages for personal reflection, religious instruction, and dialog is obviously not a new idea. While today’s users may tweet, post to their wall, and use Instagram, YouTube, and other media to accomplish this, the sharing of religious
passages is not a new phenomenon. Paul, for example, utilized the Old Testament and his Roman education to frame his missives to the early churches, while Jesus occasionally quoted the Torah to his listeners.

**Growth of App-enabled Devices**

For this paper the primary focus is on the emergence of one particular app, which has the potential to change how individuals and religious leaders interact with a sacred text in informal and formal settings. Religious apps have multiplied exponentially with the prevalence of smartphones, and portable electronic devices. According to researchers in the United Kingdom, in 2013, an estimated 2.1 million children under the age of eight had their own tablet, such as an ipad or Kindle; (Barrow, 2014) while in the United Stated that same year, fifty percent (50%) of all households with children owned a tablet computer, up from 25% in 2011. Pew research (2015) also reported in April 2015 that 76% of teens, ages 15-17 have a smartphone, compared to 64% of all adults. “Indeed, 7% of Americans own a smartphone but have neither traditional broadband service at home, nor easily available alternatives for going online other than their cell phone” (ibid). This trend may indicate a growing reliance on apps, which dominate the software industry for tablets and smartphones.

What makes an app so much more appealing to the end user? Apps are more accessible and flexible than internet-based resources; they allow the user to customize the font, colors, and layout, as well as download content, add notes, bookmarks, etc., all of which can remain accessible even when not connected to the Internet. The user is not reliant on WIFI or cell phone data for access; he or she no longer needs to connect with
the Internet when using the app, thus offering the user instant access, added convenience, and cost-savings.

Religious leaders can leverage the power and flexibility of the Internet and religious apps to connect to their base, as well as promote their own, or their church’s brand. Tech savvy mega churches and religious leaders are emerging from the cacophony of the online environment to attract and retain new followers. Leaders and religious personalities who once may have marketed themselves in more traditional media, such as television or radio, have instead resorted to YouTube and Facebook. Pope Benedict XVI, Franklin Graham, Joel Osteen, have all recognized the power and potential of the Internet; for example a mass conducted by Pope Benedict and posted on YouTube can easily garner more than 20,000 views over a six month period, while Joel Osteen’s YouTube sermons have an incredible following, with many videos surpassing 250,000 views.¹

Tech-savvy religious leaders are banking on this trend to cement their relationship with the faithful, the seekers, the skeptics, and the agnostics. They use the Internet to market to their potential audience, using live streaming events, sermon notes, reading plans and friendship circles to strengthen the user’s sense of community and belonging in the app and online.

**Power of the App**

Currently, the most downloaded religious app on the Apple app store is the Youversion Bible; it was the first religious app on the Apple app store, and has a distinct

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¹ A search for Pope Benedict, followed by a search for Joel Osteen was completed May 20, 2015 on Youtube.com; results are shared here.
advantage over every other app, because the parent company has permission to make every version of the Bible currently available from the three largest Bible publishers. It has been downloaded to smartphones and tablets 180,489,520 times since its launch in 2008 (Youtv.com). The Youversion website provide real-time data for the curious visitor; for example, the website claimed that during the 24 hours prior to May 2, 2015, 9PM EST, 58 bible verses were shared in Vietnam, 241 Bible verses were shared in the United States; 440 searches of the Bible were completed in the United Arab Emirate, and 2469 searches were completed in Hong Kong; during that same time period, 20 reading plans were started in Bahrain, and 108 bookmarks were created in the Bahamas. Since Youversion’s launch in 2008, there have been 178,517,440 installations of the Bible app. There are 1092 versions of the app available, and 780 languages are supported. Youversion Bible app has over 482,354 followers,

The Youversion Bible is marketed to the potential user with a dedicated blog, slick marketing and promotional materials for church leaders, and has been touted as being able to provide the user with a more meaningful experience online and on the go. For example, the website is marketed on YouTube as providing the user with unfettered instant access; “YouVersion.com has given you the ability to engage with Scripture like never before and with YouVersion mobile you have access to the Bible, corresponding contributions, reading plans, and online community no matter where you are” (ibid). The marketing strategy is right on target, as according to Bellar, (2012) users of the Bible app “were most concerned with using the app for spiritual impact, encouragement, and as a sort of spiritual toolbox that, for the most part, resulted in helping them navigate their own spirituality and religious practice.”
The app is also marketed on the company’s website, on YouTube and on Facebook to the layperson and to the religious professional. For the layperson the message is, “God is near, and so is His Word. As you wake up. While you wait. When you meet a friend. Before you go to sleep. When the Bible is always with you, it becomes a part of your daily life” (Youversion.com, 2015). For the church leadership team, the message is how to engage the audience, build relationships, and encourage spiritual growth. “Church leaders can set the tone for daily time in God’s Word,” [by]:

- Mentioning the Bible App during your message is a simple way to encourage people to use the app.
- [Using a] reading plan together as a church, or prompt people to choose their own.
- Us[ing] the app during church. Pulling up a verse on their phone will be easier if they aren't worried about giving others the wrong impression.
- Shar[ing] verses with your church on Twitter and Facebook. With a few taps, you can share an encouraging verse or something you're learning from Scripture during the week (Youversion.com, 2015)

Religion and Information Seeking

The framework for understanding how the Internet, and a server-based Bible app fits into information- and religion- seeking paradigms is slowly developing as web-based applications mature. Understanding the user experience, and interest in faith based resources can help inform faith leadership teams, health care providers, community leaders, and launch further research.
The Youversion Bible app uses a client-server network schema, with the app acting as the client, and only fully functional when connected to the server. When offline, one can use the app for reading downloaded translations, switching back and forth at will, while also taking notes and highlighting passages. When online, the app allows for automated sharing of verses via email with internal, app based friends, and one can also share things with friends on Facebook and other SMSs; the user may also add app-based friends, interact with live religious events connected to the app by religious teams, send a request for technical support, and more. Users frequently comment to tech support volunteers how much they appreciate the capabilities of the app, and how it has supported their spiritual growth or how they have come to depend on it for spiritual sustenance.²

While “it has been suggested that such experiences can inhibit an individual’s ability to develop a cohesive religious identity further, or to restrict one’s reaffirmation of boundaries between different interpretations of religion and religious identity, for example, between authentic or “serious” religious identities and “fake” versions” (Campbell, 2012), one could also argue that the use of a religious text app such as Youversion can solidify an individual’s ability to affirm their faith and share it with like-minded individuals, and for religious leaders to use the technology to support and empower the individual, as well as the flock. Furthermore, when sharing on Facebook, Twitter, or other personal/impersonal social spaces, the individual or the spiritual leader can simultaneously hold a mirror up to one’s own spiritual “reflection,” while at the same time sharing a reflection, comment, exposition, experience or insight with others who may or may not be of like-minded disposition.

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² This comment is made from personal observations, April-June, 2015 as a Youversion support volunteer.
Some Possible Frameworks

This remainder of this paper focuses on some of the most interesting (to this author) frameworks and theories. Personal empowerment theory, Uses and Gratification Theory, Religious Social Shaping of Technology Theory, and Information Seeking Behavior theories are exciting and interesting methods of examining online user behavior and interaction. Each will be discussed briefly, below. The discussion is not meant to be an all-inclusive listing of various theories and frameworks available in the professional literature, nor is it meant to be an in-depth overview of each idea, but rather a skimming of the stone across the water in order to generate in the reader a desire to investigate one or more of these ideas.

Personal Empowerment Theory

Personal empowerment theory supports the individual’s own sense-seeking, encouraging proactive behaviors that “provide opportunities for participants to develop knowledge and skills” (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995) using “individual strengths and competencies” (ibid). While it is mentioned frequently in the psychology literature focusing on mental health, it is also prevalent in other fields as well, including religion and theology, especially in the last fifteen years. In the library literature, Personal Empowerment Theory is the framework for Information Literacy, in which the user develops lifelong information seeking skills. “Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (ALA, 1989)
Personal Empowerment Theory implies that an individual’s proactive behaviors will bring about positive changes in the person’s life. People who download the app may do so for an expressed or unexpressed need, out of curiosity, or with an expressed agenda; once downloaded it is unknown how many people actually use it over an extended period of time, or if it is used at all; unless the person who downloads the app creates an account and then uses the account in a manner that leaves a digital trail, there is no way for the creators of the app to gain insight into its use, other than through anecdotal evidence and data mining of SMSs, which may or may not reveal how many people who interact with the app are blessed in some manner. This is a potential area of further investigation and research.

What is known is that the app is very accessible; it is free on the Apple App Store, and it is fairly easy to use, with hundreds of Bible translations in a multitude of languages at no direct cost to the user. It is well documented in the professional literature that people strongly prefer easy, accessible sources of information to all other types of information. The rapid adoption and appearing preference for the alternative format of the Youversion Bible app is similar to the preference by many users for Google over subscription based library resources.

**Uses and Gratification Theory**

People interested in personal religious exploration are not the only visitors to these websites, nor are they the only non-Christians downloading the app. Atheists have also commented that they find such resources useful for locating inconsistencies in the Bible, flawed logic, and more for their own purposes (Winston, 2013).
The founder of the Youversion app has indicated he welcomes the opportunity for the Youversion community to dialog with these minority user groups, which have resulted in a number of conversions. One piece of supporting evidence is a quote available on the Youversion website; "@YouVersion undoubtedly your app, which allowed me to read the Bible anywhere in any version, played a major part in my conversion in 2010" (Youversion.com, 2015).

The majority of religious websites and apps are open to and welcome all users, but most are not developed with a hostile or indifferent audience in mind. They are primarily used to serve a like-minded audience. The website Gotquestions.org is one exception to this type of Personal/Impersonal Community (PIC); the website states, “It is not our purpose to make you agree with us, but rather to point you to what the Bible says concerning your question. You can be assured that your question will be answered by a trained and dedicated Christian …Our writing staff includes pastors, youth pastors, missionaries, biblical counselors, Bible/Christian college students, seminary students, and lay students of God's Word” (GotQuestions.org, 2015). The website claims to have 12,000,000 visitors per month, and 245,000 subscribers to their Question of the Week email.

Like the Youversion app and website, not every user is a Christian; and, while neither organization releases or even knows how many non believers visit their websites or use their resources, there is some anecdotal evidence that each resource does get web traffic, downloads, and questions from a broader audience, including personal enlightenment seekers, the curious, agnostics, atheists, and others.
Religious Social Shaping of Technology Theory

There is a definite need to examine and understand how religious leaders adopt (or adapt to) technology for use with their intentional community. At this juncture, “leaders” is being used loosely, to include religious media personalities, as well as formally trained religious leaders. There is also a need to examine their constituents’ use of SMS, religious websites, and apps in their personal and spiritual lives, as well as part of their formal religious experience within the intentional community. According to Campbell (2010), Religious Social Shaping of Technology framework draws on the Social Shaping of Technology theory, which “conceives of technological change and user engagement as a social process” (Campbell, 2010) the “Members often reshape new forms of media in practical or ideological ways in their efforts to incorporate them into the life of their community and beliefs” Campbell (2010) suggests “four distinctive areas that should be explored and questioned in order to fully understand a religious community’s relationship towards new forms of media” (ibid) She also suggests a multi-modal approach be utilized, in order to better understand the community and its use(s) (or avoidance of) technology. By 1.) exploring the history and traditions of a community in order to discover previous adoptions or non-adoptions of technology, 2.) explore the social values of the community to determine why adoption or non adoption occurs, as well as 3.) the community’s method of social negotiation, as this may influence the technology adoption/non-adoption decision.

From an organizational perspective, Campbell (2010) discusses the three factors that she argues shape the religious community’s response to media in general: “these three religions’ patterns of media negotiation are guided by three factors: (1) how they
define their distinctive communities around issues of interpretation of core beliefs and practices, (2) their tradition of interaction with their sacred texts, (3) their unique understanding of religious authority.”

**Information Seeking Behavior Theories**

The need for information to fill a gap in one’s schema has long been discussed, with probably the first being discussed in a broad based manner by Dewey (1910), and more recently by Wilson (1981) and Kulthau (1991), among many others.

Dewey discussed a natural progression in the information seeking cycle, in which the information seeker identified a need and sought to fill that need; once the need was met, the cycle could begin again. Wilson’s models of information seeking behavior (1981; 1999) are broad based frameworks, which support various social and learning theories, with the user taking “action to satisfy a need for information.”

Tangentially related, Kulthau brought to the fore the idea that, with the need for information comes a sense of uncertainty concerning the process. Interestingly, Dewey (1910) also discussed this same type of cycle in *How We Think*, in which he outlined a series of steps for thinking about a problem; one would feel a “difficulty” or a need for information; with the need to define what that “difficulty” is; the user would then “suspend judgment” in order to “determine the nature of the problem before proceeding to attempts at its solution”. He does not discuss information seeking in detail, but rather the importance of a disciplined, critical and thoughtful approach. This is also a potential area of further investigation.
Conclusion

Gaining some insight into the user experience, and interest in faith based apps that are web-enabled resources can be useful when attempting to further explore and understand the power and potential, for the user, to support the users’ information seeking behavior and personal journey of faith. This paper highlighted and explored the use of the Internet and internet based apps by users for information seeking as they explored or questioned their own or others’ ideas concerning faith, religion, and the Bible.

When geographical boundaries are capable of being removed and one can Tweet, post, and share with others one’s own readings and musings, does that challenge the traditional ideas of what constitutes fellowship, and does it change the dynamic between faith leaders and their followers?

While this paper was too brief to delve more than superficially into these ideas and the theoretical frameworks of information seeking for religious reasons, the author attempted to highlight and discuss some of these areas and issues.
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