Fear Not: Facebook, Information

and Extensions of Local Church Ministry

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Introduction

The Christian church has a reputation for embracing communication technologies as a way of disseminating information about the faith. This reputation was first established with the church's acceptance of the printing press. That technology, despite some resistance from entrenched authority, resulted in an update of Christianity. For example, Latin began to be replaced by vernacular languages. The focus of the faith began to change too, from deference to the imperatives of authority to more practical and personal concerns, such as homilies that spoke to the needs of the local church gathering (Horsfield & Teusner, 2007).

Chris Forbes (2008) says this last point—the practical concerns of Christianity— was a primary force that moved the church to "…lead the way in the Old Media…the earliest adopters of radio were evangelists…" Christopher Boerl & Chris Perkins (2011), in an insightful work about how Christians used the old media to build a movement, agree that religious leaders eagerly embraced radio and the marriage of sound and image through television.

When television began to hit the nation in the early 1950s, religious leaders saw the opportunity to reach out to thousands of people at once. One result was the launch of Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network and the rise of a number of regionally popular televangelists (2011).

But for some reason many of the groups who eagerly accepted the old media have greeted the rise of the Internet and social media with a bit more ambivalence. While there are some enthusiastic church-related supporters of the digital world, there is no one yet who can be cited as a leader in this area. This is a major change from the Martin Luthers

of the printing press era (Horsfield & Teusner, 2007), the Aimee Semple McPhersons during radio's early years (Hilliker, 2003), and from the Robertsons during the era when television was taking root in homes (Boerl & Perkins, 2011).

So to what can we credit this ambivalence by segments of the church in standing apart from social media, which Leslie Ciesielski (2009) calls our new universal medium of communication? The reason seems to be the so-called conventional wisdom about social media and the acceptance of an anecdotal understanding about how people are actually using social media at this point in its development.

The purpose of this study is to examine the conventional wisdom, particularly worries that the online communication paradigm may not be in the best interest of the church because of its tendency toward individualism instead of communalism. This concern will be compared with recent research that shows how people appear to actually use online communication tools, and how disseminating information online can extend the reach of the local church.

Conventional Wisdom and the Unconventional Reality

Over the last several years, the literature in the area of online communication and social networking has grown immensely. The picture that is beginning to appear challenges a number of the widely accepted opinions about life within the social media sphere, including the foundational belief that online communication is creating a fragmentation or disregard for interpersonal relationships.

Mark Bauerlein (2009) and Nicholas Carr (2010) are among the more trenchant thinkers in this area, and what they say appears to connect with common sense. It *seems* correct that a medium that forces one to send a message or post an idea to his or her

friends *must* come at the expense of building and maintaining face-to-face relationships. It makes sense that this sort of communication (read: "communication" with the scare quotes) might tend to be shallow and self-centered. But this, according to recent research, is not the case.

Carlyne Kujath (2011) and Kirsty Young (2011) performed separate studies examining the friending habits of adults and youth who are regular social network users. Young performed a mixed-methods study, first beginning with a quantitative study before moving to a face-to-face follow up with a subsample of her original pool. Kujath's study was a qualitative survey given primarily to college undergraduates, which made up 92 percent of her sample, and the balance was given to post-baccalaureate and graduate students.

Kujath (2011) discovered that, by and large, social networks among the young are an extension of face-to-face relationships. In fact, the research in this area is so clear that the author writes it is "very unusual for a friendship to exist on Facebook or MySpace that has no real-life counterpart" (p. 76). The study notes that 40 percent of Kujath's sample had *no* friends online that they had not already met in person (2011), and 75 percent of adolescents said they use social networks *almost exclusively* to keep in touch with people they already know (2011).

Kujath claims her study proves that the attraction of social network use for young people is not relationship formation but relationship maintenance (2011). The pattern also appears to hold for adult users.

Young's (2011) work, examining adult social media friending habits, shows that an astonishing 98 percent of social network connections adults make consist of people

they know offline. It should be noted that this number may include people they barely know—such as people they met while on a vacation—but the point is that these relationships have at least some face-to-face foundation. With this finding, her work supports the findings of Hua Wang & Barry Wellman (2010), who created an earlier study and came up with similar results.

In her findings Young notes:

The Internet has not replaced traditional forms of communication. Instead, social networking sites amplify offline relationships. Online social networking is just an extension of the types of interactions that people have daily by phone, text message and email, so the line between what is real and what is virtual is beginning to fade. Facebook, therefore, is a social tool but not an alternative to social activities (Young, 2011, p. 29).

The results of the studies by Young and Kujath are in sync with a study by Chris Underation (2009). In this qualitative study, he asked a small number of individuals to take part in a "media fast" for five days—no social networking, Internet use, texting or digital communication. Among the surprising findings in the post-fast interview, was the fact that nearly all the individuals who took part in the study—individuals who ranged in age from 20 to their early 60s—mentioned that they missed the ability to connect with children, spouses, friends or relatives during the work or school day, though it was not a difficult thing to personally connect with these people after work or school.

As one of the study subjects said of her habit of texting with her husband:

One point of realization for me was that I found some of our best interaction through the day is instant messaging. Most of it is just small talk back and forth, but that is a major point of our connection. I missed that (Diana Montgomery, qtd. in Underation, 2009, p. 16).

A second concern the church grapples with regarding the use of online media is the dilution of authority. Churches, speaking generally, require acceptance of a reasonable hierarchy. Religious leaders have to have a real credibility in order to speak authoritatively about issues of eternal importance. Social media tends not to have a strong hierarchy, and where it does have hierarchy it is usually not a formal one (Antonios, 2010).

Social philosophers like Richard Weaver (1984) point out that an ingredient in cultural decline is a lack of a definable, accepted formal hierarchy. The reason for this, he says, is that hierarchies benefit humankind by the fact that they provide clear channels for knowledge, acceptable behavior and cultural norms. Without these things, we begin to fragment.

Pauline Cheong, Shirlena Huang & Jessie Poon (2011) point out that the digital world's "…expanding religious marketplace (has resulted) in religious authorities losing to a great degree the ability to control their own symbols and the means by which those symbols are expressed and communicated" (p. 938-939).

When considering the history of the church and its warm embrace of past communication advances, it is useful to reflect upon the fact that each of these media is substantively different from digital media, though in their early days the printing press, radio, and television were met with overheated promises about the democratization of

knowledge and overstated worries about its negative effect on people and society

(Czitrom, 1982).

Digital media is not mass media. Mass media is quite friendly to hierarchy. The writer, the person in front of the camera or the person speaking on air is automatically granted some sense of authority by the simple fact that he or she is in a position that a relatively small number of people occupy. We tend to assume they are credible and, therefore, have authority (Cialdini, 2009). This simple fact goes a long way in explaining why religion, especially evangelical Christianity, and mass media have had a long, largely happy relationship.

But this hierarchy, this one-way communication, is being challenged by the popularity of a two-way, leveling method of communication.

The Religious Right has been able to win when they have been able to maintain and control a monologue on the relationship between faith and politics. But when a dialogue begins about the extent of 'moral values' issues and what biblical Christians should care about, the Religious Right begins to lose. The best news of all for the American church and society is this: the monologue of the Religious Right is over, and a new dialogue has begun (Jim Wallis, qtd. in Boerl & Perkins, 2011, p. 75).

Research, such as that by Peter Horsfield & Paul Teusner (2007) and Cheong, Huang & Poon (2011), and best practices thinkers like Forbes (2008), illustrates the mistake of thinking about online communication as a new type of mass media.

Cheong, Huang & Poon (2011) say epistemic authority flows from hierarchy and a sense of institutional order. However, the move away from forms of communication

that "push" information out to people and toward communication that people "pull"

toward themselves means knowledge "becomes proletarianzed and deprofessionalized"

(p. 944) so that authority now becomes more merit based rather than epistemic.

Horsfield & Teusner (2007) echo this view when they write:

> "…(religious) bloggers tend to shy away from terms favored in
> academic discourse upon which modern theology was developed…and
> simply continuing the current practices of and attitudes of Christian
> theology will expose it for what it is: the offline, limited-circulation
> discussions of a particular interest group within Christianity" (p. 292).

Forbes (2008) is more to the point. Online media is not mass media—it is better

considered interpersonal communication. He writes:

> People are not interested in being targets of communication and church
> members do not want to be treated as media channels used by their
> pastor as a church marketing communication outlet. Stop thinking,
> 'How can I reach the youth in our community,' and you will start
> thinking, 'How can I reach Josh, and Cassie, and…' You will no
> longer have a 'target audience' or a 'demographic,' but you will have
> individuals in mind, actual people you will be trying to connect with"
> (pp. 9, 11).

There is an idea that connects to this point, and that is a concern about who young

people or unlearned individuals may look to for guidance online. The worry is that the

digital universe is so large and so diverse that people will easily be led astray by the lack

of clear channels of authority.

Karen-Marie Yust, Brendan Hyde & Cathy Ota (2010) suggest this perception may not quite be the reality, however. They point out that 61 to 76 percent of young people say they rely on parents and on other adult figures to help them grow and form their spiritual beliefs. This finding is supported by other research that demonstrates parents and authority figures who are regularly in the lives of young people are their greatest influences (Rideout, 2007). Regarding the online world, this means that users tend to bring the ideas taught and modeled in the home into their online communication, serving as a bit of an anchoring point.

The last major area of conventional wisdom centers on the area of narcissism and the self-referential nature of online communication. Within the church, there is concern that the habits of the online world counteract those we are taught in scripture (Yust, Hyde & Ota, 2010), and therefore it should be minimally (or cautiously) used. Forbes (2008) reminds us that this argument is no more true online than it is offline, though he admits online communication is certainly more casual than most face-to-face encounters.

This causal climate can create an easy familiarity that connects back to worries about authority and a lack of hierarchy addressed previously. But, as Yust, Hyde & Ota (2010) write:

Hodge (2010) has conducted a small study that reports online gamers experience their interactions as 'highly communal' and Morehead (2010) argues that 'cybersociality' is an example of an Oldenburgian 'third place': a public setting 'that host[s] the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.' Thus, we cannot dismiss the potential for

and likelihood that social networking contributes positively to the adolescent quest for connection (p. 292).

Keeping in mind the things we have said earlier about the interpersonal nature of digital communication and the tendency of online communities to consist of offline acquaintances, it is worth pointing out that the type of online communities Yust, Hyde & Ota write about may consist of people who are well known. It stands to reason that communication to people such as this might be more personal in nature, tending to make it less formal.

Along with this, research shows that online groups develop and extend to its members normative modes of behavior. This sets the boundary about what behavior is acceptable and what is not.

A very helpful study by Tao Zhou (2011) about how functional online groups are created and sustained indicates there are three traits that stable online communities have. First, the group itself has a clear purpose. From this purpose, Zhou found, norms are set forth that generally mirror norms that exist within the general culture.

Next is the perceived social identity of the person joining the group. How do they see themselves? Are they helpful? No nonsense? Faith-filled? This identity has a strong limiting factor on behavior that would be disruptive within a group, and other group members will sometimes view online behavior by another member through this prism if it is known. Put another way, if people are in a group with a person who knows them offline the tendency is for one's online social identity to mirror their offline one.

Finally, the intention for joining the group matters a great deal. Zhou says this is the strongest factor in his study indicating how people will interact with the group. For

example, if someone joins a group for expressive purposes, they will tend to interact with it differently than someone who joined to learn something.

In the case of faith-based online groups, the concern that these groups will fall into narcissism or other unsavory behavior should not be a great worry. It is true the Internet is full of beasts clean and unclean, but Zhou's points in relation to this paper should tend to result in a group that is generally well behaved. It is true there may be some people who stir the pot, but the worries about bad behavior or self-referential behavior should not be considered anything more than an excuse to avoid getting online or educating oneself about how online communities form and interact.

Before leaving this section, it is worth a moment to address one of the issues noted earlier—namely that online communication is a shallow form of communication. The rise of social networks has been advanced as evidence that the quick, informal style of messaging and posting is a 180-degree departure from the slower, more deliberative type of writing on paper. Ken Pugh, a cognitive scientist, says writing and reading these "fractured messages" has an impact on how well online users develop literacy skills and understanding (Rich, 2008). In short, it makes users of social media mentally shallow.

One of the difficulties of discussing literacy in an online environment is the many different types of writing or reading that take place. Critics tend to point to texting and the breezy, informal tone of social networks as one of the major forces undermining literacy (Kelleher, 2010). The research in this area is developing, but at this time it seems as if texting, messaging, social networking and so forth are supplemental methods of communication instead of primary ones (Ito & Bittani, 2010).

In one of the more extensive studies available, Danah Boyd finds that youth

mostly use online media "…as another method to connect with friends and peers in a way that is seamless with their everyday lives" (Ito & Bittani, 2010, p.84). We will not spend a great deal of time in this area because texting and writing or reading on social networks seems akin to placing a quick call to a friend. Its purpose is short and utilitarian, not creative, expressive, or for deeper information exchange. Some of the research cited earlier in this paper, such as Underation (2009), supports this understanding. Viewed in this way, online communication is not shallower than most of the communication millions of Americans engage in daily using traditional means of communication.

Extensions of Local Church Ministry

Properly separating the myth from the reality of communication online can bring solid benefits to the local church. In fact, done consistently, communication within the digital world can extend a church's reach and its ministry.

There are two final thoughts before we bring this paper to a close.

Though there exists with social media a possibility of speaking one-to-many, it is a one-to-one medium that others can, to borrow an idea from Fred Craddock (2002), overhear. This idea of overhearing means that a communication meant for a specific person can also be heard (or "heard" in the case of social media) by others, allowing for the possibility of someone being able to take in an indirect message that provokes them to reflect on an issue or idea. Craddock says these moments of overhearing can be powerful because messages given in this way often do not provoke the defensive crouch that a direct address may, especially if it is a challenging message.

Research suggests the ability of users to overhear messages may encourage reticent or shy individuals to engage in discussion. In a study examining the use of social

networks and how people of differing personality traits interact with the online environment, we find that social networks not only open up messages to a greater number of people but they also seem to encourage greater interaction among people who might otherwise remain silent in a face-to-face interaction.

Emily Orr, Mia Sisic, et al. (2009) find that online chats and e-mail are not very useful communication tools for those who are shy or in some way reticent to take part in discussions because there is not enough initial anonymity. But networks like Facebook are different.

Lenora Rand (2009), in an article about why we need the virtual community today, tells a story that illustrates the idea of how social networks can open up dialogue among the reticent:

(Facebook) also offers a "Notes" section, which has turned into another way of making yourself known to others at a deeper level. Not long ago someone wrote a note called "25 Things You May Not Know About Me." The person…invited 25 friends to read the note then write their own "25 Things" list and share it with their friends. This chain idea spread like wildfire. For two or three weeks I was receiving intimate details about many of my Facebook friends' lives, such as: 'I couldn't sleep through the night my first two months of teaching' or 'I am so emotionally devastated when I listen to good music that I am too intimidated to learn a new instrument besides the drums I never play' —things I didn't know about them, things that moved me closer to them. Would my friends have ever shared these thoughts in person?

Perhaps, if we ever had enough time and found ourselves in the right situation—which we never seem to do (p. 23).

Social networks allow people to blend in and watch a conversation, and this results in more time spent on Facebook. The bottom line is that people who are shy or reticent to take part in face-to-face discussions tend to feel more comfortable with online communication. The result is that they end up entering into conversations online (Orr, Sisic, et al., 2009). Orr, Sisic, et al. write, "…they tend to regard this tool as an appealing method of communication and spend more time on Facebook than people who are not shy or reticent" (p. 339).

Paul Haridakis and Gary Hanson (2009) pick up on this idea, looking into what motivates people to take part in online communication. One particular part of Haridakis that resonates with Orr is the fact that people who use a medium of communication often tend to develop what Haridakis calls "media affinity" (p. 319). This concept holds that regular use of a medium creates a sense of personal identity with that medium, its habits and its rules. It's not so much that people communicate via a communication channel, Haridakis and Hanson maintain, but that these channels are ultimately internalized, making the communication more deep and personal.

The final way in which online communication extends the work of the local church is through the nurturing of weak ties (Rosen, 2009). As most churches handle communication right now, they tend to communicate only with their strong ties—the people who are a part of their immediate interpersonal circles. There is nothing wrong with talking to this group, but outreach and connection tends not to succeed if communication takes place only with this group (2009).

Weak ties are those created by a meeting with a person that results in an acquaintance. We may not speak with, or even see, these people very often, but they know who we are. Social networks are a prime mover in keeping these connections alive. Networks also leverage these contacts by providing information that they can then spread among their primary network, creating a new connection with or an awareness of new information. Rosen writes:

> Your closest friends—those who move in the same social circles as you do—are likely to be exposed to the same sources of information as you are. On the other hand, those who are outside this group are much more likely to hear things that you do not. In this way weak ties with more distant acquaintances are most apt to bring information that is new (p.123).

This is one of the strongest extensions of local church work that social networks can provide. It's worth a moment to review the friends we have in our social networks. We are likely communicating a great deal to our primary network through outlets like Facebook. But how many of our friends are people we have not seen or talked to for more than six months? There is a good chance this is a weak tie.

Facebook, with its wall feed and timeline, has the potential of extending awareness of even the smallest of churches to many people it would never reach through traditional means. This means weak ties are potentially a very powerful tool. Rosen (2009) also speculates that the reason information travels so quickly today may be due to the profusion of weak ties through the Internet.

If a church is outreach focused and is not seeing this sort of spread of its message,

it is likely due to the fact that the information they are putting out has gotten trapped in a cluster. In the face-to-face realm we do not always connect with those outside of our social circle. Notice how, in a public setting, we tend to move immediately to people we know. We sit with these people. We talk to them. It is possible we may be introduced to someone, but we do not often leverage these relationships. Instead we pass information to people we know. This is a hazard of the offline world that the online world is designed to overcome.

Conclusion

Digital communication is a new thing, not simply offline communication in a different context. Properly understood, there is nothing to fear in applying it to the local church. We simply need to understand that it is not a mass media forum that broadcasts messages, but an interpersonal one that encourages feedback in real and asynchronous time. It also allows others to overhear a discussion and involve themselves as they wish.

Based on current research, online communication appears to encourage the shy or reticent to enter into the conversation, possibly creating a tie for a face-to-face relationship. It amplifies existing relationships so they can be more fruitful.

If the research is correct, outlets like Facebook are not a threat to the church but are instead giving it new tools to fulfill its role and mission in the community—and, perhaps, beyond the community.

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