Religion and social media: Got web?

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Recent developments in new and social media have heightened debate and renewed consciousness among religious leaders and communities about the need to engage new communication technologies.

In popular conception and lingo, social media typically reference the term ‘Web 2.0’ which is said to represent a paradigm shift from Web 1.0. The latter is characterized by a more traditional, one to many, broadcast model of communication, where the Internet is seen as an online library or repository of information with static HTML websites, emails with read-only content, and large directories of data.

In contrast, the social and participatory nature of Web 2.0, is connected with more dynamic, user-generated content which is circulated among social networks found on the blogosphere, YouTube, Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, Flickr and Digg etc.

Given the potential of social media to support interactive communication, the same people who consume what is on the Web increasingly produce it such that traditional delineations between producers and consumers, authors and audience are blurred. Social networks allow the exchange of textual, visual and video information among participants, now known not just as ‘users’ but also as hybrid producers and consumers or ‘pro-sumers’.

As such, it is said that digitalization and the convergence of old and new media represents a cultural sea-change in media audiences’ engagement with information as online interactants are encouraged to seek out and author new information and even make their own connections among dispersed media content via social networks and create new forms of hybrid media products known as ‘mashups’.

For many advocates of new media including those in religious communities, social media bring numerous benefits associated with increased access and interaction where clergy and congregation can connect in new ways. The Internet is commonly seen as a catalyst for growth and revival given the waning influence of religious institutions and purported decline in interest in church related activities.

In recent years, social media have similarly been promoted to extend fellowship between believers, deepen intimacy between pastors and their congregational members, and sustain a ‘church without walls’ or church life beyond Sunday. Dedicated sites for Christian social media like www.Tangle.com purport to build a ‘faith-based, family friendly network where people of all ages and backgrounds can come together in connection, bonded by a shared faith and love for Christ... where users can connect and share their faith and lives with others through photos, audio messages, blogs, prayers, music, causes and so much more.’

Several books and e-books have been published to describe the rise of online religious activity on the Blogging church, St. Pixels and Godspace. Likewise, theses like ‘The reason your church must twitter’ seemingly mandate a compulsory embrace between religion and social media.

As scores of religious organizations have adopted the Internet and are now urged to adopt social media, it is important to consider some critical connections between religion and social media. At the same time, amidst the loud and strident calls toward constant digital connectivity, it is perhaps now more important to think about disconnections and also consider the need for periods of digital rest.
God Web?
Religious groups have historically engaged the ‘new’ media of their times for mass outreach, community building and to fuel growth. From tracts to pamphlets to radio, television and the Internet, we have witnessed the malleability of peoples of faith to adopt and adapt novel acts of writing and communication for religious missions. Now that blogs and microblogs represent one of the more recent incarnations of social software supported by networked computing, it is interesting to observe how Christian communities have appropriated these latest communication technologies.

Blogs refer to frequently updated sites, with chronologically marked postings, often linking to, and linked from, other blogs. More recently, microblogging has emerged as a popular phenomenon whereby users compose brief updates, for example on Twitter using 140 characters or less, and send them via web-based applications like text messaging, instant messaging, email, or on the web.

In light of media convergence, we can observe the integration of multiple media forms as blog content is embedded on individual websites, connected via social media networks, and/or indirectly connected via hyperlinks or ‘retweets’ whereby users forward a twitter post that have been sent to them.

In my research on religion and new media, I have uncovered various ways in which blogging and microblogging function as religious practices. For some bloggers, religious writings online reflect their personal mission to provide a prophetic voice and defence of their faith. Some use their blogs as a platform to educate and edify as they introduce the relevance of their faith to others, and to engage people in their social networks or those listed on their blogroll to meaningful dialogue. Blogging can also function as a form of social and prayer support as they provide an avenue for connections via hyperlinks, hits and comments from other bloggers, including comments from family, friends, and even strangers.

In these ways, blogs may represent a reintegration of religious life into the practices of everyday life as even among blogs that are explicitly dedicated to religious topics, the breadth of content spans a diverse and broad range of public and personal concerns. Likewise, on blogs that are not directly religious in nature, some entries are intimately marked by religious practice and influenced by spiritual beliefs.

Christians today are also developing brief microblogging content and symbols to develop innovative and interactive forms of evangelization, prayer and meditation. On its website, twitter is promoted as a new media service to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to the question ‘What are you doing?’ Some religious believers are harnessing these coincident messaging flows to strengthen their faith communities via synchronized prayer, devotional messaging and contemporary prayer chains.

For example, the Calvin Institute of Worship’s set up of an automated Tweeter feed to ‘pray the hours’ allows users to sign up to receive hourly prayers sent in verses of brief tweeter feeds or view a Tweetgrid with all prayer feeds to prompt continuous prayer or help those who are unsure of what words to pray. Drawing upon scripture that stress a commitment to continuous prayer, i.e. to ‘pray without ceasing’ (1 Thessalonians 5:17), believers can engage in the reinvention of traditional prayer practices by harmonizing prayer content via twitter feeds with fellow believers at designated times of the day.

Believers may also innovatively adapt twitter for various forms of interpersonal communication and to spread religious ideas. For example, there are individuals who are regularly tweeting Bible verses, and some are committed to composing a Biblically inspired
verse a day. Others have employed microblogging as mini advertisements to stoke interest in religious events and to serve as reminders to mobilize others toward a charitable or missionary cause.

Given their brevity and current novelty, tweets can be used as memes to spread religiously related content, and to raise provocative questions which can spur further interest in the faith. For example, in the #TOF, Twitter of faith challenge, one is to write a statement of faith in 140 words and pass-it-forward. Many prominent leaders of evangelical megachurches who have cultivated a large twitter following have also used tweets, many of which are duplicated in their facebook postings, to reach out to seekers, encourage laity and direct attention to their personal concerns or organizational causes.

Furthermore, some organizations are recreating traditional rituals using Twitter, as in the case of churches which have enacted a Twitter version of the Passion Play or the Christmas Story whereby followers were sent brief and frequent lines dramatizing important Biblical events and stories.

**Good web?**

The above contemporary examples evince artful endeavours to blend faith inspired practices with the emerging cultural logics of social media. Online creative and versatile social media practices can function to augment and deepen the spiritual verve of individual devotion and organizational outreach. Yet at the same time, there are concerns about the role of the social media in fraying religious ties as individuals choose to consume online religious experiences and withdraw from houses of worship.

Monism in social media use is debunked in light of the paradox of the internet, which facilitates greater individualism in religious practice at the same time that it facilitates new conviviality and communities. Social media use may also lead to further fragmentation rather than promoting growth and ecumenical unity if online connections are made only to echo one’s beliefs or politically charged interpretations of the gospel message.

Furthermore, the increase in mediated communication options via a growing array of social media necessitates the investment of time and resources by religious groups and can exact a toll on individuals who now are potentially available for ‘24/7’ ministry. Indeed, from my past studies on religious leaders over the past decade in Asia and North America and current research on the practices of mediated authority, it is not uncommon to hear of pastors’ concerns about the internet and how it affects their position, work and ministry life. Many pastors have voiced their difficulties of meeting the rising expectations of their staff and congregational members, who now ask and even demand for them to be contactable online, and be more available and contactable via new and social media.

Religious leaders also face increasing pressures to learn new skills in order to keep abreast of the latest technological developments and appear credible to young and wired populations. Beyond weekly sermon preparations, many pastors are now also performing their authority via blogging, podcasting, and authoring multiple forms of digital content for various media platforms. Several clergy have also shared that it is no longer adequate for them to preach their sermons without the incorporation of multimedia, including the use of flash graphics in powerpoint and youtube videos during church services.

In some cases, didactic and ambient religious communication takes the form of constant message streams. Twitter streams are projected on electronic screens in church while the pastor presents the message and poses questions to congregational members who are asked to respond via tweets. Given the enlarged menu of digital media and increased connectivity, it can be a challenge to manage one’s communication, and the presentation of
one’s identity. Indeed, my research shows that many leaders now have to take deliberate measures to manage their work. They need to engage persistently in processes of ‘strategic arbitration’ where they intentionally negotiate their online and offline presentations of self. This management process in some cases, involves the implementation and negotiation of private and organizational norms and regulations to handle multiple media flows in order to (re)construct their authority and credibility.

It appears that although social media have been aggressively promoted, less articulated and even muted in popular discourse, are the more challenging issues related to the cost of social media engagement. As monies are diverted to support growing media ministries, potential drawbacks of intensified investment in social media may occur as resources which may be channelled to other forms of ministries like face to face counselling and charitable aid are dampened.

Indeed, what does judicious stewardship mean in a mediated culture as new expenses and hours are added to constantly maintain and sustain social media communication? Does attention to newer media take away the support of foreign missionary work via older media particularly to vast populations of the world who still are unconnected to media technologies like the telephone and radio, not to mention the Internet?

Contrary to popular belief, social media work is not effortless or completely virtual. To paraphrase Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s explication on grace, what is the cost of mediated discipleship? Social media may allow the seemingly ‘free’ exchange of information but it is not cheap. In fact, several commentators have pointed to the electronic escalator effect as more and more costs are needed to sustain new media engagements.

It is noteworthy that some organizations that I have studied have more staff members employed in the recently erected ‘media and communications’ department than any other departments. It is also interesting to observe debates among groups and organizations which are struggling to budget for expensive computer hardware and software, and experience difficulties in recruiting staff and volunteers to create digital content or constantly monitor and regulate the flow of web traffic.

Social media practices also raise complex dilemmas with regard to privacy and surveillance. As more and more so-called private and personal information is made by default public via algorithms of social networks that are not revealed nor understood by the general public, how do we manage information disclosure that may hurt the lives of individuals, families and communities?

Instances of misunderstanding whereby fragments of online information are taken out of context also point to the malevolent possibilities of swift information sharing on social media where multiple and persuasive versions of ‘truth’ are produced and reproduced. Most recently, the phenomenon of cyberbullying and negative, even fatal outcomes of individuals being teased online, highlight yet another emerging negative facet of social media as it affords communication platforms to virally circulate hostile behaviours that can intimidate and harm others.

Mod Web?
Mod or modification is a term applied to digital games and virtual worlds, where players make partial or total content conversions to add replay value and interest. In highly mediated contexts whereby believers are connected or are constantly compelled to engage new and social media, it is timely to consider how we may make changes in our digital connections. In other words, how to disconnect to reconnect may represent a new spiritual discipline for those distressed and fatigued by overwhelming social media connections.

www.waccglobal.org
Digital disconnections can manifest in practices of social media ‘sacrifice’ like the seasonal abstinence from certain social media practices or surrender of technological gadgets mobile media or laptop technologies. Some organizations and leaders have advocated reduction in mediated communication. For example, periods of silent mediation during Lent or a weekly withdrawal from the internet on the Sabbath to encourage the cultivation of quiet reflection.

As microblogging and blogging in a convergent culture accelerate the circulation of information flows, modifications and breaks from social media engagement may prevent information overload or data smog which has been said to dull moral sensitivity and acumen. With the world ‘at our fingertips’, it is hard to withdrawn from the many opportunities as well as distractions in virtual worlds.

Alterations in the temporal conditions of one’s digital engagement can set limits on its reach and influence, to more positive effects. In today’s mediated age, shalom or the restoration of wellbeing may necessarily entail rhythmic connections and disconnections with new and social media.

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