

# The Church and Social Media

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**ABSTRACT:** As nearly half of the global population is on one or more social networks, the churches need to relate to this rapidly expanding phenomenon. The churches have regarded social media primarily as a tool to fulfill their ministry, so generally in positive terms. However, the negative side of social media requires a proper response from the church, perhaps mainly by serving those who are directly affected by it. But social media is more than just a tool, according to the theory of mediatization, social media deeply influences all aspects of personal and public life. This paper explores what the appropriate response could be on the part of the church to this new reality which poses difficult challenges.

**KEYWORDS:** church, social media, mediatization, ministry, technology

## Introduction

As recently as October 2020, out of the 4.66 billion people who are active internet users and make nearly 59 percent of the global population, over 3.6 billion are active social media users, which represents around 49 percent of the global population (Statista.com 2020). Six social networks reported over 1 billion active users: Facebook (2.7 billion), Youtube and Whatsapp (each with 2 billion), Facebook Messenger and Weixin/WeChat (1.3 and 1.2 respectively) and Instagram (over 1.1 billion); another five social networks have between 500 and 700 million active users (TikTok, QQ, Douyin, Sina Weibo, QZone), while another seven are under 500 but above 300 million active users (Snapchat, Reddit, Kuaishou, Pininterest, Telegram, Twitter, Quora). The average time an internet user spends daily on social media networks is 144 minutes (Statista.com 2021).

These figures are relevant to all dimensions of the life of any society but our focus is on their impact on the churches. The latter have grown into regarding social media as an effective tool to fulfill their ministry and do yet need to address the challenges posed by the new developments of a more integrated reality, of which social media has become formative. Cultural studies initially neglected the interaction between religion and social media as, according to the prevailing secularization theory (Rotaru 2006, 251-266) which wrongly foretold the collapse of the religious phenomenon (Horsfield 2007, 59). Things have changed within the last couple of decades and this paper is intended as a contribution to the field as it aims to explore the dynamics of the relationship between the church and social media suggesting two levels of depth on which the two entities interact.

## Social media as a tool

As mentioned above, religion was not considered a significant factor in the quickly changing scene of the second half of the twentieth century. The growing importance of media was not looked at from the perspective of the religious phenomenon because they were independent one from another, the former on the rise, the latter towards an alleged extinction; Stewart Hoover identifies in that period ‘a particular way of looking at both media and religion: as separate and separable entities that could be seen as acting independently of one another and as of having impacts or effects on one another’ (Hoover 2002, 47). The overlooking of religion by the cultural and media studies theorists was very likely rooted in an Enlightenment sociological thought which envisioned a complete secularization of the western world (Hoover & Venturelli 1996, 252). On the other side, the religious entities were disregarding media on different grounds: at

work there was still an inability of understanding the fundamental changes that were taking place in the western societies and which were having a ravaging impact on the religious behavior of post-wars generations. This meant that the churches were at large trapped in a modernist approach to the surrounding world and to the way in which there were supposed to fulfill their calling. This modernist approach refers to the expectation of the church to still be acknowledged as one of the main players within or as the center of the society.

At the same time and perhaps linked to what we just mentioned, another important factor is the sinuous relationship between church and technology in general. Pattison (2005, 1) admits that 'technology as such has rarely been thematized as a matter of theological reflection' and this is a significant failure given the importance of the technology to the dynamics of the society in the present and more so in the future: 'it has left a gaping hole in the theological literature – and precisely at a point where, as seems more and more certain, the future of humanity itself is at stake'.

This neglect of the technology from the theological reflection – for which George Pattison offers convincing explanation but which goes beyond the scope of this paper – can be related to one of the main ways in which the church responds to technology.

Barbour (1993, 3-23) identified three such ways: technological optimism which, of course, means that the church acknowledges a positive role to technology in what regards the development of humanity and also as a support for the church by offering a platform which enables a wider impact; the technological pessimism points to a negative role of the technology inasmuch as it disrupts the wellbeing of the human person and community; the technological ambiguity looks at the context of the usage of technology emphasizing the changing moral value of the acts done with the help of technology.

The church has a tradition of being suspicious about the new developments of technology, but sooner or later it adjusted and ended using the latter to serve its purposes. Media made no exception to this; however, the church was right in regarding the media as a competitor. For nearly four decades of the second half of the twentieth century the main media types were TV and radio as well as print media; the first were the newer developments, out of which the first one was a paradigm shift. But TV individualized all experiences – initially these were related to spreading the information and offering entertainment, then slowly it reached out to many other areas of life: education, economics (business enhanced by advertising) etc. The actualization of the church in actual meeting of the congregation was threatened by being replaced by the screen of the TV.

It was surely the televangelists of the 70s, 80s and 90s the ones who saw the potential of using the media for developing their intended ministry, but the churches at large did not use it in a significant way. Media could not be avoided any longer as it became 'social': the internet revolutionized communication, the sharing of information, business, all aspects of human life.

The online interaction between people has become 'personal' and the increasing number of people connected made the churches to see the potential of this new development. Social media has been regarded as 'a place' where people can be found and subsequently it has been used primarily as a *tool* to fulfill the church's ministry to those people. This approach can be seen when looking at some of the influential books about the dynamics of the relationship between the church and social media. In *Trending Up: Social Media Strategies for Today's Church*, the book edited by Forrester (2017), the articles move from enquiring the usefulness of the social media for the church to offering suggestions to maximize the alleged benefits of the former to the latter.

In *The Social Media Gospel. Sharing the Good News in New Ways*, Meredith Gould argues convincingly that social media cannot be overlooked by the church, but used for an effective ministry; more than that, the author offers very practical advice for churches in order for them to choose the right platforms to be on and to make them profitable for their own purposes (Gould 2015).

But the social media is not only an evangelistic field, a means to reach people whom otherwise churches could hardly get to, or a means to enhance the internal life of the faith community, but it also points to the need to serve people who suffer because of their presence on the social media. One of the studies which makes the connection between having negative experiences on social media (which the study calls SNSs – Social networking sites) and depression and anxiety; one of the main reasons for that is not straightforwardly negative: ‘social comparisons’; these refer to the fact that the user compares himself or herself to a *projected* image of the lives of the others, that is presenting selectively only the accomplishments and not day-to-day struggles and perhaps failures (Seabrook, Kern, and Rickard 2016).

Baccarella et al. (2018, 431) warn about what they call ‘the dark side of the social media’: the spectacular increasing popularity of the social media platforms causes not only advantages for the individuals and society in its complex networking, but they are also ‘undermining the freedoms and the well-being of the individuals and communities they serve’.

Kietzmann et al. (2011, 241-251) suggest that the complex social media phenomenon which now consists of people not only consuming but also creating content on the Internet can be grasped by taking into account seven ‘functional building blocks’: identity – whether users reveal themselves, conversations – how much users communicate, sharing – the dynamics of content exchange, presence – the transparency of the users’ presence online, relationships – how users interact, reputation – access to the standings of the other users, and groups - whether users form communities. Baccarella et al. (2018, 432-435) argue convincingly that each of these ‘functional building blocks’ can be perverted by various users and therefore become part of the ‘dark side of the social media’: identity of the users is not respected but exploited, conversation is not positive, but a way to promote fake news and being aggressive to other users, sharing harmful content, knowing the location of users anytime, instead of cultivating good relationships, users can be threatened, abused, reputation can be deeply and sometimes irreparably damaged and, finally, users can experience exclusion and rejection from members of specific groups. The authors go on calling for a much more thorough analysis of the phenomenon which will desirably grow awareness and lead to action, though the latter is not detailed.

This indeed is a very complex and serious issue; social media is becoming more and more a world in which people take refuge or simply make it their new main world. Experiencing its dark side can have deep impact on people’s existence: stalking that determines moving houses or cities, cyber-bullying which sometimes leads to suicides etc. In this context the church should serve the online ‘neighbor’ by being present online, offering support – counselling, shelter, a voice, etc. With this aspect, we are moving towards a new development within social media, which has been growing for the last fifteen years, surely the period of the outbreak of global social networks.

### **Social media as the new reality**

Hoover (2012, 30) asserted that the separation between the two spheres which we also mentioned earlier claiming that it had described the relationship between the two entities in the initial phase, is no longer real nor possible; he claimed: ‘I want to argue that it is no longer possible to think of religion and media as separate spheres. The two are now converging on one another. This convergence is being brought about by important changes in “religion” and in “media”. The question is more complex than only how the media frame religion or how religions and religious people use media’. This phenomenon has developed initially between media and politics; the former has changed the way the latter is now done in most parts of the world. As early as 1979, in their seminal work, *Media Logic*, Altheide and Snow (1979, 136) claimed that ‘political life is

being recast to fit the demands of major media.’ D.L. and R.P. The fundamental change that was undergoing then was that media was becoming an instrumental factor which reshaped politics with all its aspects: communication, values, advertising, conflicts, decisions etc. This process has extended to all social and cultural dimensions and institutions. Hjarvard (2008a, 106) articulated this new development asserting that ‘the media are at once part of the fabric of society and culture and an independent institution that stands between other cultural and social institutions and coordinates their mutual interaction’. This process is called *mediatization* and Hjarvard is also one of the leading scholars who propose this understanding; he defines mediatization as ‘the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic’ (Hjarvard 2008a, 113). Therefore what is at work now goes beyond the simple *mediation* of content to an audience which is not physically present; there rather a process by which the media becomes the *environment* in which we exist. The mediatization creates a reality of which media is *one of the* if not *the* driving force, the most important institution which shapes all areas of life on personal and public levels. While the concept was initially advocated by Nordic European countries and German media theorists, there is a growing awareness that the process is underway and mediatization might as well be the suitable manner of defining it.

Religion has made no exception and the impact of the media has become more and more significant; in the words of Hjarvard (2008b, 4): ‘through the process of mediatization, religion is increasingly being subsumed under the logic of the media, both in terms of institutional regulation, symbolic content and individual practices’. In order to explore the concept of the mediatization of religion, Hjarvard describes the manners in which media is to be understood by using three distinctions proposed initially by Joshua Meyrowitz: media as conduits refers to its function of conveying symbols and messages from the senders to the receivers; media as language emphasizes the fashion in which the media molds the messages and media as environments looks at the ways in which media institutions create patterns of communication and interplay. The impact of media on religion is significant on all these three levels because it influences ‘the amount, content and direction of religious messages in society’; more than that, it affects the reshaping of the religious representations and in the reassessment of the place and the authority of the institutionalized forms of religion. As a result, the media has turned religious symbols, representations and practices in banal religious representations which do not perform the same function but actually only to communicate new meanings, often times a non-religious one. (Hjarvard 2008b, 5-6).

## Conclusion

Social media is indeed a tool but it should be not regarded exclusively as such; the rapid changes in the societies that are increasingly connected support an understanding of the new reality as a mediatized one. The increasing importance of media within the construct of this new reality revolutionizes the way in which the message of the church is communicated (Rotaru 2014, 21), its content as such, as well as by whom it is conveyed. With communication that is instant, universal (globalized) and basic, the church needs to revisit its public discourse as well as the agents that share its messages. Social media should become the mission field, ‘the ends of the earth’ in which the church must be present sharing, loving, serving. Also, it is becoming essential that the church seeks to understand the dynamics of the life of the individual and the community, the society at large. In the end, perhaps that likes of the books that we mentioned above, in which Christian leaders strive to work out effective ways to be church online is a good starting point in facing the unprecedented challenges that lie ahead of the church.

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