Evangelicals, Social Media, and the Use of Interactive Platforms to Foster a Non-Interactive Community

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Evangelical online churches, which harness public preaching to spread the word of the Christian gospel, have quickly adapted to online social media as their most effective form of mass communication. Bringing in members from around the world together in a single democratic space on the web, either on a Facebook page or a chatroom forum, these churches seemingly promote free interaction between their members in an effort to cultivate the community that is fundamental to all church groups. However, the authority of these churches, their large sizes, and the problematic user interfaces of the social media platforms that they use encourage non-interactive communities, rather than interactive ones. Through a content analysis of the Facebook and Twitter pages utilized by Evangelical online churches and by drawing on case studies previously conducted by scholars examining religious online communities, this essay will look at social media and its role in discouraging interaction between members in favour of interaction only with the church itself.

Before starting an observation of social media communities, a clarification on the definitions of the terms “social media” and “community” is necessary, as both have multiple meanings. This paper will be using Volker Eisenlauer’s definition of social media as “social Software-based Websites whose primary aim is establishing and maintaining online communities by asking participants to present themselves and to connect and communicate with other
With this definition in mind, which identifies the creation of communities as the primary focus of the online service, it is valid to consider chatrooms that accompany streaming video, as well as Facebook and Twitter, as social media platforms.

Heidi A. Campbell defines the term community in the digital age as “loosely bound, dynamic networks of relations based on shared interests and preferences.” This definition strays from the traditional notion of community as a geographically bound, static affiliation based on needs or familial ties. The community cultivated by Evangelical online churches instead falls within Campbell’s revised definition; though they are not tied by their interaction with each other, the members of online churches relate in their shared interest and preference for the church to which they belong. The members do not have to interact or have relationships with each other in order to be considered part of an online community.

Historically, preachers of the Evangelical faith, or more specifically, televangelists, have been known to engage, captivate, and persuade mass audiences with their charismatic personalities through audio and/or visual media. More recently, new forms of communication technology focusing on the streaming video preacher, or as Denis J. Bekkering calls it, the “intervangelist,” have become the basis of Evangelical online churches. Chatrooms are also commonly active beside these video streams, allowing for members of the church to potentially engage with others watching at the same time. The centrality and authoritarian framework of Evangelical online churches become apparent in both the charismatic rhetoric of the

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3 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
“intervangelists” and the way in which these chatrooms are moderated by authorities of the church.

One case study done by Tim Hutchings focuses on the chatroom accompanying a video stream at LifeChurch.tv – one of the largest Internet-based Evangelical churches existing today. Hutchings found that the chatroom was dominated by enthusiastic responses to the video’s worship and preaching style, but sustained conversation was rare, and even discouraged by the volunteers and pastor who monitored the chatroom.6 It is noted that when a self-proclaimed atheist mentioned the Dead Sea Scrolls in the chat, both the volunteers and the pastor responded with, “the chat is built around the video message to the left,” and that comments must “keep on track with the teaching going on.”7 Hutchings’ findings are not so much about religious authorities disregarding the views of an atheist, but speak more about the concept of directing the conversation and attention of the viewers towards the “intervangelist.” By maintaining control of the chatroom in this way, interaction between members is inherently discouraged. This sort of control may be in reaction to the de-centralized and democratized nature of the Internet – a potential threat to the church’s stability as an authoritative unit.

Though it would be untrue to say that member interaction within these chatrooms is completely non-existent, a content-analysis of a chat that took place on LifeChurch.tv on Thursday March 27, 2014 revealed that member interaction seemingly did not go any further than greetings and goodbyes.8 Robert Glenn Howard conducted a similar case study in 2011,

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7 Ibid.
which observed how individuals belonging to various churches used social media profiles. He found that most users were utilizing web space on sites such as MySpace to make their own authoritative claims about Christianity instead of trying to interact and create dialogues with other users who belonged to the same churches. One example includes the MySpace profile of a thirty-six year old user named “Kenneth,” who utilized blog posts and the comment space to make claims about the End Times phenomenon, one of his comments noting, “The end times are near… come quickly Lord Jesus!!!” “Kenneth” demonstrates a kind of user who became deterred, or even removed, from group-based church chatrooms for making authoritative claims distracting from the central conversation, and instead came to favour the personal profile format of MySpace, where he could voice his own claims without being censored. This could be a result of the charismatic video preacher distracting members from participating critically in the group chats, and also due to the moderation of the chat by the church authorities. The size of the group, however, is also a factor influencing effective discussion.

Tim Hutchings conducted another case study on a small online church called St Pixels, which he found to be much more interactive and encouraging of member debate and friendship on the churches web-based forum. This interactivity is also reflected on their Facebook page; though members comment much less on the content, the times that they do are primarily in response to other member’s comments. This was evident in the comments on a post that shared one journalist’s experience at St. Pixels: one member responded to another’s comment agreeing with article, adding a criticism of their own, which was then followed by a third member asking

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10 Ibid, 121.

11 Ibid, 122.

12 Hutchings, “Considering religious community through online churches,” 166-170.
what a “Young Earth Creationist” was, to which a fourth member replied, “Someone who believes the earth is 6000 years old!” This kind of interaction and community formation is more easily attainable on the St Pixels Facebook page, which has only 518 Likes. It seems that the fewer comments there are, the more chance there is that another member will see the comment and respond.

This is in contrast with the Evangelical online mega church atmosphere of LifeChurch.tv, which discourages interaction between members as a by-product of its immense size. LifeChurch.tv has 140,467 Facebook Likes, and 24,000 Twitter Followers. After an analysis of the LifeChurch.tv Facebook page, it became evident that the extremely large following of the church was prohibiting member interaction as individual comments were quickly becoming lost amongst the many posts that filled the page. Of the 87 comments left on LifeChurch.tv’s page requesting members to comment with their own personal prayers, only two of the comments were replied to by other members of the church.

This problem is linked to the user interface that is unique to Facebook, which helps the Evangelical online church to maintain authority over its members. The framework on which the template software for Facebook Pages is based allows members to easily interact with the content being posted, but limits user interaction with other members. Small forums or chatrooms do not exist on Facebook, and though members do have the option of replying to others’ comments, a majority of members seemingly just hit the Like button instead as the user interface.

framework makes that the easiest and most accessible option of interaction. In addition, the Facebook Pages interface condenses the amount of comments shown to only the two with the most Likes; a link to “view more comments” is available at the bottom of the module, but it is very small and easily missed. Here, hiding the majority of comments not only insinuates the fact that member comments are less important than the content being posted by the page, but also creates the illusion that there are less comments than there actually are, which ultimately discourages members’ responses to each other due to the fact that they are possibly unaware that the comments actually exist.

This is compounded by the visual template of Facebook Pages: the content that is posted by the page itself is larger in size, and the comment sections are much smaller. This difference in size directs members to Like, share, and comment on content that has been posted by the content creator, in this case the church that operates the page, and not so obviously or easily do the same for other members’ comments. Is this symbolic of the authority that the Facebook page posits? Though it is a form of social media, it does not necessarily encourage social interaction between members, for the inherent design of the user interface makes it too difficult. While the content posted is not necessarily authoritarian in itself, as LifeChurch.tv primarily posts bible verses and advertisements for upcoming “intervangelist” programming, the way in which the Facebook user interface and visual template structures the content posted in comparison to the member comments is reflective of an authoritative nature, which discourages interaction between members.

The factors hindering interactivity between members of the specific Evangelical online churches looked at in this essay achieve the same result: the reinforcement of the authority of the church itself. Online churches use the social media platform almost as a disguise, to give off
the illusion of an interactive community. However, in maintaining a controlling authority through heavy moderation of these social media, the communities are quite the opposite. Despite this lack of interaction, members of online churches can still recognize themselves as part of a community, though not in the traditional definition that is based on tight-knit interpersonal relationships, but rather in the unity created from the church to which they belong. In this way, the church is able to maintain both its authority and its notion of community.
Bibliography


