Show Me, Help Me, Tell Me, Sell Me:

Leading Christian Renewalist Ministries' Use of the World Wide Web for Evangelizing, Fundraising, and Merchandising

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Abstract

This research is an analysis of visual, operational, informational, fundraising, and merchandising content of World Wide Web sites of 13 leading renewalist Christian ministries. Renewalist Christians espouse a "Health and Wealth" theology that is embraced by increasing numbers of believers worldwide. A content analysis, coupled with the application of media framing and constant comparative analysis allowed for quantitative and qualitative findings. Visual and operational content was found to be oriented mostly toward communication, while informational content was oriented mostly toward evangelization. Most renewalist sites eschewed traditional Christian symbolism and emphasized positive themes and "can do" encouragement. Fundraising and product sales were key components of online efforts to solidify relationships with followers. It remains to be seen whether the methods used by renewalist ministries will transfer to mainline denominations.

Key words:

Religion, Christianity, evangelism, ministry, renewalism, megachurch,

World Wide Web, Web sites, fundraising, merchandising

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in popularity of Protestant Christian religious organizations that embrace a "Health and Wealth" theology. Known as renewalist ministries (*Spirit and power*. . ., 2006), these groups believe God grants health and prosperity to the faithful in accordance with the promises of Jesus Christ (Olsen, 2006). A recent *Time* magazine poll found that 61% of Americans believe God wants Christians to be materially prosperous and 17% identify as members of a like-minded group (Biema & Chu, 2006).

The increase in popularity of these groups has been manifested in part through growth in what are termed megachurches. Where the neighborhood church of old was a quiet place with stained glass windows, glowing candles, wooden crosses and a prayer room, the megachurch of today is big, brightly lit, with upbeat music and multi-media entertainment. Hundreds or even thousands of people attend a typical megachurch service. Three of the four biggest churches in the U.S. are Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church, T. D. Jakes' Potter's House, and Creflo Dollar's World Changers; each claims tens of thousands of members. These, and smaller megachurches elsewhere, frame their messages around renewalism themes (Biema & Chu, 2006).

Within Christianity, renewalist ministries have been among the most active in their use of the World Wide Web to communicate with followers. Even as traditional religious organizations often fear the Internet will "lure people away from local churches" to join in an "inauthentic" online experience (Campbell, 2004, p. 87), individual Christians have embraced the Internet in large numbers. Renewalist evangelicals have taken note, and "are among the most fervent" to make use of the Web (Hoover, Clark, & Rainie, 2004, p. 5).

Since more than 80 million Americans report using the Internet for faith-related information gathering (Hoover, Clark, and Rainie, 2004) it seems appropriate to investigate the extent to which Christian renewalist ministries use the World Wide Web to communicate with the growing population of believers who are attracted to their theology. This research is an effort to address this issue through a content analysis of Web sites hosted by leading Christian renewalist organizations. The research will

allow generalizations about the content, functionality and value (See Swanson, 2001) of this online communication. Since the organizations studied are as well known for their merchandising and fundraising as they are for their religious messages (Eskridge & Noll, 2000), the research will also examine how renewalist ministries are balancing their presentation of religiously-themed messages with messages focusing on fundraising and merchandising. This research will provide some insight into how "Health and Wealth" ministries use this Web to frame messages that are on the one hand spiritual, and on the other hand centered in the "American materialism" (Biema & Chu, 2006, para. 21) that the Internet has already come to represent so well.

Literature review

In the years immediately following the U.S. Civil War, urban revivalism took shape as a distinct institutional form. Entirely separate from the established Protestant churches, this revivalism was part evangelism, part showmanship, and part entrepreneurism. It held to the idea that if great events could be staged, souls could be saved, and "people will lift themselves out of poverty" (Hadden, 1987, p. 9).

Those who led the movement were tireless in their planning and organizing. They were not just waiting for God to bring revival – they were producing it. Urban revivalists such as Charles Finney, Dwight Moody, Aimee Semple McPherson, and Billy Sunday added "the roles of entertainer and celebrity to the evangelist's repertoire" (Hadden, 1987, p. 11). The evangelists believed that advertising was essential to the furthering of the movement. Calls for churches to actively advertise began in the early 1900s, and grew in strength and number through the 1920s with the publication of *It Pays to Advertise* (1915), *Advertising is Not a Waste* (1917) and other similar articles directed at religious leaders. Proponents argued that religious groups that adopted aggressive, strategically-designed advertising efforts would gain attention, build attendance, and fulfill the Great Commission (See Smith, 2000).

Before long, television came on the scene. Although there was plenty of religious television in the 1950s and 60s, at least one researcher observed that most religious TV programming was formulaic and dull (Bluem, 1969). Broadcasting done well, Bluem believed, would help restore relevance to the genre of religious programming.

During the Reagan years, the U.S. federal government's deregulation of broadcasting increased the potential for using religious broadcasting to turn ministries into social-political movements. Mainline denominations, uncomfortable with the idea of asking people to give their life to Jesus while giving their money to the church, did not make effective use of the medium. Evangelicals, on the other hand, adapted readily to TV. Their mastery of the medium was aided by the parallel growth of other electronic media and increasing public attention to the growing social and economic influence of televangelism.

Evangelical broadcasters' emphasis on health and prosperity integrated well with Americans' cultural ethos of individual achievement (Himmelstein, 1984). Therefore, when viewers both individually and collectively embraced a "Health and Wealth" doctrine (Biema & Chu, 2006) it served as a positive affirmation of the "trusted, familiar relationship" established between the evangelist and the audience (Howley, 2001, p. 27).

It didn't hurt that televangelists had learned to politically mobilize their followers (Hadden & Shupe, 1987) and, along the way, learned to use broadcast licensing policies to their advantage. According to Howley (2001), religious broadcasters' ability to get their hands on low-power TV stations allowed those stations to be linked and subsequently transformed into powerful networks for evangelizing and fundraising. Such was the case with Pat Robertson's acquisition of a failed UHF television station in Virginia that led to the Christian Broadcasting Network and its popular *700 Club* program. Indeed, the rapid growth of broadcast ministries of Robertson and others like him provided proof of an observation by the president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion that "evangelical proselytizing zeal and the commercial free-enterprise system go together well" (Hadden, 1987, p. 17).

The success of today's renewalist evangelists and the megachurches they often preach from is modeled "unabashedly" on business, with "by-the-book marketing tactics" including attention to detain in the areas of themed church architecture, worship service planning, entertainment, and other amenities to draw in the faithful through effective product packaging (Symonds, Grow, & Cady, 2005, para. 5, 7). The success claims made by the larger ministries rival anything one would hear in the business sector.

Just as they took advantage of the medium of television in years past, ministries today have taken advantage of the World Wide Web to initiate and strengthen ties with followers. Any organization can use a Web site to make a credible public presentation of its mission and values (See LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). But this task is especially important for a Christian ministry because it must communicate relevant, factual information about the ministry to believers and unbelievers in a world in which many people are skeptical of the motives of religious groups (Barron, 1993; Barr, 1988). It must also evangelize, or minister to the public about issues of faith. Among Christian groups, renewalist ministries have repeatedly identified as among the most expert at seeking out opportunities to evangelize (Olsen, 2006; Hoover, Clark, & Rainie, 2004; Eskridge & Noll, 2000).

A Web site allows a religious movement to build a dialogue, encourage righteous thought and action, solicit volunteers, raise money, and sell merchandise to further the ministry's objectives (See Swanson, 2004). Because little is known about the ability of large renewalist ministries to accomplish these aims via the World Wide Web, this research is a starting point.

Research Design

Web site content issues can be somewhat subjective. Individual users can interpret Web content in different ways. For that reason, the design and methodology used to guide this research was created to be as objective as possible.

The presence or absence of content elements (visual, operational, and informational) was be verified through quantitative scoring. Analysis of subjective content was addressed through the use of media framing as a means of analysis. The constant comparative method was used to organize themes that arose through the analysis. This allowed the researcher to deal as dispassionately as possible with the objective and the subjective content from Web sites analyzed.

It is common for researchers to identify the presence of media content frames, particularly in regard to communication in the context of news and public relations (Brewer, 2002; Moody-Hall, 2002; Knight, 1999; Scheufele, 1999). Use of framing as a method of analysis allows researchers to isolate and critique use of text (Scherer, 2002), or electronic images (Hung, 2001). By using framing analysis,

researchers can evaluate communication messages for issues of consistency, accuracy, and validity (Cutbirth and others, 1983). Researchers can also isolate content issues that seem salient for public discussion from those that are not (Tankard, 1997) and judge media creators' efforts in "selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of experience or ideas over others" (Andsager & Smiley, 1997. p. 2). Research conducted within the perspective of framing helps scholars better understand the choices made by media managers and the organizations they communicate for (Shah, Watts, Domke, & Fan, 2002).

While much of the frame analysis research focuses on frame choice and construction by members of the media, it has also been argued that media consumers look for frames as they seek out order or "organization of experience" that framed messages provide (Jah-Nambiar, 2002). Individuals can be persuaded to reproduce beliefs about social, cultural, and economic power as a result of media discourse that frames issues in terms that people can identify with (Tucker, 1998).

Existing research clearly demonstrates that frame analysis is an appropriate means for assessing content of online messages. While frame analysis does not allow us to learn how Web users will act on information from Web sites, it does allow us to make some inferences about likely communicative intent of Web site creators (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) allows researchers to "render discriminably different things equivalent, to group the objects and events and people around us into classes" (Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1972, p. 16). In this research, a cross-case analysis allows identification of themes established by ministries' Web content (See Patton, 1990).

The research design chosen for this study reflects an effort to overcome valid criticisms directed toward other recent research in mass communication. These include claims that most mass communication research in recent years has lacked sufficient theoretical development (Kamhawi & Weaver, 2003) and/ or failed to have adequate hypotheses or research questions (Riffe & Freitag, 1997). It has also been noted that the vast majority of the research published in major communication journals has been quantitative in nature (Cooper, Potter, & Dupagne, 1994; Perloff, 1976). This suggests a limited opportunity for scholars to discuss findings that cannot be expressed in numeric terms. As a result, at least

one researcher has called for scholars to do a better job of combining quantitative with qualitative methods (Weaver, 1993). The present study attempted to do that by using methods that result in both quantitative and qualitative findings and useful balanced interpretation of those findings.

A final criticism of other studies in mass communication has to do with the fact that existing work is overwhelmingly focused on traditional media, chiefly print journalism and television broadcasting. Despite tremendous popular interest in the Internet, Kamhawi and Weaver found that less than 7% of published research in the 1980s and '90s addressed the Internet. More than 70% of the work in this time period addressed traditional print and/ or broadcast media (Kamhawi & Weaver, 2003). The present study, although preliminary in nature, addresses an aspect of Internet communication not previously dealt with in the literature and does so using commonly-accepted research theory, research design, and methodology.

Research questions

This research was conducted to answer key questions about how prominent Christian renewalist ministries use the World Wide Web to communicate with the general public. Four research questions are posed:

RQ1: What similarities and differences exist in the ways prominent Christian renewalist ministries use Web sites to visually represent their organizations and leadership?

RQ2: What similarities and differences exist in the ways prominent Christian renewalist ministries structure Web sites to allow maximum operational functionality?

RQ3: What similarities and differences exist in the ways prominent Christian renewalist ministries use Web sites to provide text-based information about their ministries?

RQ4: What similarities and differences exist in the ways prominent Christian renewalist ministries balance Web site content between evangelistic messages, fundraising messages, and merchandising messages?

Methodology

A Web-based search was conducted using popular search engines, to identify renewalist Christian ministry Web sites that might qualify for the study. Relevant search terms used in recent publications about renewalist ministries (Biema & Chu, 2006; Olsen, 2006; Symonds, Grow, & Cady, 2005; Winzenburg, 2001) were used. An initial group of 28 evangelistic organizations was identified. This list was narrowed through disqualification of any ministry that did not have a prominent leader and address a worldwide audience (See Howley, 2001); identify as independent and unaligned with any mainline religious conference or denomination (see Symonds, Grow, & Cady, 2005); and, have an operational Web site that is sponsored by the host organization. These qualifications assured that the study population represented the largest and most relevant renewalist ministries rather than local churches, political action committees or religious interest groups. After disqualifications, 13 ministerial organizations remained in the population for study.

A coding sheet was used to systematically verify presence or absence of visual, operational, informational, fundraising, and merchandising content. The coding sheet was based on a concept by Mitchell (1986) later refined by Swanson (2001, 1999). The coding sheet allowed for recording of additional observations, including number of subordinate pages, number of inoperable hyperlinks (if any), number of products offered for sale on the main page, and so forth. The coding sheet allowed for more subjective and reflective observations by the researcher, including comment on subjective issues such as site design and color, graphic layout, symbolic illustration, and rhetorical hyperbole. Observations of this type were organized for analysis and presentation through the constant comparative method that allows for making generalizations about consistencies and themes (Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1972).

Access and analysis of Web site content was done in a systematic manner, in alphabetical order by ministry name and on a single day, Thursday, June 14, 2007. The selection of a single date not on a Sunday and not adjacent to a Christian holiday afforded the opportunity for a reasonably objective review of content on the different sites. Since there was just one researcher involved in the project, access to each site was limited to a timed 20-minute period to provide balance to the analysis, so that more visually

interesting and complex sites did not receive a disproportional amount of coding attention. Identification of the presence or absence of content elements was contingent on the time available to locate those elements, and therefore findings should be viewed with this restriction in mind. An electronic copy of the front page of each site was recorded. These electronic copies were referred to later as a memory refresher as the researcher completed the discussion of findings for this research.

Results

Of the 13 Web sites analyzed, seven represented renewalist ministries that are based at least in part around a church; six did not identify with a particular congregation as their basis of support. Table 1 offers an alphabetical listing of the ministries, their Web site URLs, and marketing slogans as displayed online.

RQ1: What similarities and differences exist in the ways prominent Christian renewalist ministries use Web sites to visually represent their organizations and leadership?

Visual enhancement scores were determined by the presence or absence of 14 visual enhancements as shown in Table 2. Summary visual enhancement scores ranged from a high of 12 (Hinn, Houston) to a low of 9 (Hickey). The average number of visual enhancements was 10.69.

The majority of visual enhancements (11 of 14) seemed oriented more toward communication than toward evangelization, fundraising, or merchandising. Visual elements of background color, fonts, font color, icons, other illustrations and photos help a Web site establish an online identity for its host ministry and communicate symbolically about the ministry and its beliefs. For users, this results in perceptions of the ministry's credibility, as well as the symbolic communication of a mood by way of the use of graphic elements and selected colors (See Griffin, Pettersson, Semali, & Takakuwa, 1994; Burgoon & Saine, 1978).

For six of these sites (46%), the dominant color displayed was deep blue – a color that symbolizes security, dignity, and truth-telling. Sites that featured blue as a dominant color were Crouch, Dollar, Hinn, Osteen, Parsley, and Tilton. Four of the sites (31%) chose pastels as their dominant colors – symbolizing joyousness, neutrality, chastity or femininity. Sites that featured pastels as dominant colors were

Copeland, Hickey, Meyer, and Roberts. The T. D. Jakes site uses black, white and gray as its dominant colors – symbolizing power, mystery, wisdom and atonement.

Two sites chose bright colors for their backgrounds. Juanita Bynum's Web site is framed in purple with blue, green, and white accents. Brian Houston's Hillsong Church frames its Web page in red, purple, and gray. While the majority of the sites (10, or 77%) used animated graphics, the Bynum and Houston Web sites were loaded with animation – more than 50 items were found on the Bynum site, and more than a dozen on the Houston site.

All the sites used a variety of different text fonts and colors. With the possible exception of the Bynum and Houston sites (as already noted), each site used fonts, font colors, icons and related illustrations in ways that were consistent with expert opinion on good visual practice for the Web. Each site had a distinctive appearance that was applied consistently throughout the site (Scherpereel & Skutski, 2003) and a design that was "intellectually and artistically understandable" in accordance with typical user expectations (See Swanson, 2000, p. 73).

All but one of the ministries prominently displayed photographs of their ministry leader on the front page of the Web site. Use of this type of enhancement would be consistent with the renewalist idea of closely tying a ministry to the symbolized personality of its leader. The most number of minister photographs (15) was found on the Juanita Bynum Ministry front page; the only page that contained no leader photos was the Crouch/ Trinity Broadcasting Network front page. The average number of front page photos of the minister was 5.15.

Most ministers were photographically portrayed as happy and involved in a variety of activities. For example, Juanita Bynum was seen in 'snapshot' type poses singing, cooking, relaxing at home, and playing tennis. She was also shown in several formal poses. In each, she appeared smiling, happy and relaxed. Creflo Dollar and his wife Taffi were portrayed together in multiple shots of smiling embraces, and separately while speaking, preaching, and praying.

At the other end of the spectrum, Oral Roberts was shown in only one photo on his Web site front page. Photographed from below and in poor light, Roberts appears pasty-faced and perhaps ill. On Robert

Tilton's Web site, Tilton and his wife Maria were shown in a front page photo that was replicated throughout the site and digitally altered to have different backgrounds with each use. Though the Tiltons are smiling, the smiles seem constrained due to a lack of observable muscle movement around their eyes. So while most ministry leaders were portrayed to be happy, active, and expressing themselves in positive ways – others were shown in a way that they could be perceived by users to be (perhaps) poorly connected with their ministry and/or constrained and artificial (See Burgoon & Saine, 1978).

Other people also appear in photos on ministry Web sites. Most images appeared to be stock photos rather than portraits of congregational members. Although no quantitative measurement was made, observational notes reflect that sites displayed only a handful of photos of non-Caucasian people (other than ministry leaders), children, or senior citizens. When children or elderly people are portrayed, it was often in the context of being unempowered recipients of a mission or charitable offering.

Equally absent from Web sites were examples of traditional Christian symbolism. The glowing candle, the stained glass window, the cross of Jesus, the crown of thorns, and the icthus, or symbol of the fish were not in prominent display on any Web site. When a traditional Christian symbol was found, it was buried in a subordinate page or included as part of a larger and more 'modern' icon. The lack of visual representation of traditional Christian images is consistent with renewalism's marketing philosophy that traditional symbols scare people away (Symonds, Grow, & Cady, 2005).

RQ2: What similarities and differences exist in the ways prominent Christian renewalist ministries structure Web sites to allow maximum operational functionality?

Operational enhancement scores were determined by the presence or absence of 24 operational enhancements as shown in Table 3. Operational enhancement scores ranged from a high of 15 (Meyer) to a low of 5 (Tilton). The average number of operational enhancements was 11.40.

The majority of operational enhancements (17 of 24) seemed oriented mostly toward communication in that they exist to help users navigate through Web sites. However, lesser numbers of operational enhancements seem oriented toward evangelization (6 of 24) in that they help users access

content related to a Christian message. Five of the 24 enhancements are more oriented toward fundraising, merchandising, or both – because they help users give an offering or purchase a product.

The first measure of operational enhancement was the use of subordinate Web pages to control content and offer depth that users need when seeking detailed information (Zuckerman, 2000). The greatest number of subordinate pages identified in this analysis was 67 (Houston) and the smallest number was 7 (Tilton). The average number of subordinate pages was 24.85.

Use of a site map helps users navigate easily and find information they seek when Web sites are large (Scherpereel & Skutski, 2003). Nine of these Web sites (69%) employed a site map to provide this assistance. Other technical assistance for users was far less common, however. Only one of the sites offered information about software compatibility; an access counter or date of last content revision was not found on any site.

Four of the most commonly observed operational enhancements related to fundraising and merchandising, while many of the less commonly observed enhancements relate to users' ability to broaden their spiritual growth. For example, only six sites (46%) offered multi-lingual text translation. Only one site (7%) offered Christian music for downloading. A chat room for users to talk about spiritual development could not be found on any of the Web sites.

By contrast, ten sites (76%) had a bank account auto debit option for donations. Ten sites (76%) would accept funds through a secure credit card entry point. Seven sites (54%) allowed users to create a personal identity and log in for access to more tailored information and merchandising offers.

RQ3: What similarities and differences exist in the ways prominent Christian renewalist ministries use Web sites to provide text-based information about their ministries?

Informational enhancement scores were determined by the presence or absence of 23 text-based informational types as shown in Table 4. Informational enhancement scores ranged from a high of 19 (Hinn) to a low of 9 (Bynum). The average number of informational enhancements was 14.20.

The majority of informational enhancements (15 of 23) seemed oriented mostly toward evangelization in that they exist to help users learn how to strengthen their Christian faith. A slightly

lesser number of enhancements (13 of 23) seemed oriented mostly toward communication – in that they supported the evangelistic message but did not necessarily contribute to it. An example of this would be an informational display about a ministry's TV broadcast schedule. A total of five of the informational enhancements were oriented exclusively toward fundraising or merchandising.

Most ministries made an effort to provide basic information about their organizational structure. Twelve of the Web sites (92%) included the host ministry's contact information and mailing address. An equal number provided a mission statement, an online newsletter, and information about missionary work. Ten of the sites (76%) included biographical information about the ministry leader and/ or other staff. Seven sites (53%) included an organizational chart and six (46%) included a description of facilities.

Much less common on the Web sites analyzed was text-based information relating to spiritual concerns. Only eight sites (62%) offered to accept a prayer request, either through a special e-mail address or phone number to call. Only about half the sites (7, or 54%) offered text-based testimony from the ministry leader, and even fewer (3, or 23%) offered testimony from followers. Only two (15%) offered sermon notes. Only one site offered an online Bible. Information to aid users in attending a local church could not be found on any of the Web sites.

RQ4: What similarities and differences exist in the ways prominent Christian renewalist ministries balance Web site content between evangelistic messages, fundraising messages, and merchandising messages?

The analysis of Web sites searched for and coded presence or absence of 61 different types of visual, operational, or informational enhancements. Strong similarities were found among Web sites.

Fifty-six enhancements were observed in use on at least one of the 13 Web sites. Most enhancements (39, or 70%) were perceived to be primarily oriented toward communication with site users. Twenty-three (41%) were perceived to be primarily oriented toward evangelizing – to persuade users toward Christianly thought, belief, and action. Ten of the enhancements (18%) were perceived to be

primarily oriented toward fundraising, or merchandising – in place to encourage users to donate money or make a purchase.

There are strong similarities in the way the 13 Web sites presented their evangelistic content. All of the renewalist ministries focused content attention to the "Health and Wealth" doctrine, promising faithful followers that they will receive God's blessings of wellbeing and financial prosperity. All stated directly or through inference that Jesus is the son of God, and believers must be born again to enter into a righteous relationship with Christ.

Some rational support was provided for the ministries' spiritual claims. However, the rational support for evangelism was far outweighed by the level of support for concerns in other areas – primarily those of communication, fundraising, and merchandising. For example, all of the Web sites included the ministry leader's broadcast appearance schedule, and eleven (84%) included a personal appearance schedule. Juanita Bynum's Web site included links to her blog and her MySpace site. The Benny Hinn site was filled with links to "political news" subordinate pages, other political Web sites (mostly pro-Israel), and links to Israeli newspapers. Rod Parsley's Web site focused much of its content on book sales and political action. Oral Roberts' site was dominated by content about, and links to, Oral Roberts University. All of this, while interesting, seems to have little direct relevance to evangelizing the faithful.

Twelve Web sites (92%) included at least one text-based fundraising request. Routine requests were often categorized as "sewing a seed" (Copeland); others were categorized as an "urgent request" (Hinn). Nine sites (69%) offered "partnerships" with special perks for followers who would agree to give regularly. Often these came with pre-set giving amounts; the lowest level of giving for a Robert Tilton partnership, for example, was $100. Eight of the Web sites (61%) promised some type of free gift for those who contact the ministry with an offering or prayer request. Benny Hinn's site offers free pamphlets, CDs, bracelets, and a "faith plaque" for those who donate.

Ten of the Web sites (76%) included at least one merchandising solicitation. Among these, text-based descriptions were offered for as many as 23 products (Bynum) and as few as one (Roberts). The average number of individual merchandising solicitations identified among all 13 Web sites was six.

Many of the products offered for sale were traditional Christian self-help items including books, CDs, DVDs, pamphlets, and educational opportunities such as Gloria Copeland's "Healing School" and T. D. Jakes' "Potter's Institute." Other items offered for sale were more symbolic in nature. Benny Hinn's online store offered a $200 sculpture and a bottle of "anointing oil" for $75. Joyce Meyer's e-store offers a $20 tote bag and a $12 coffee mug.

The front page of the Juanita Bynum Web site was almost completely dedicated to merchandising and had more visual commonalities with eBay than it did with most ministry pages. It was a checkerboard of colorful links to purchase products and donate money. While the other sites were more restrained, all put fundraising and merchandising appeals in a position of high visibility.

Discussion

A. William Bluem's survey of religious television programming during the 1960s concluded that American programming showed churches were losing their relevance in society. He urged religious groups to develop new types of programming that would "establish clear priorities in communicative purpose" (1969, p. 171). This would include programs and messages showing people how their lives had meaning, reflecting the continuing impact of the religious experience on people, and supporting an ongoing dialogue between the church and the world.

It could be argued that evangelical ministries began this process in earnest in the 1980s, when they conquered the communications medium of television. By 1987, Hadden observed that evangelicals had made great strides to use media to "influence and reshape American culture" (Hadden, 1987, p. 1). The current study suggests that evangelicals continue to reshape American culture – and that they are doing so using sophisticated marketing strategies that include effective use of the World Wide Web.

This study's quantitative findings, along with the qualitative themes that became clear during Web site analysis, affirm previous observations that renewalist evangelical Christian ministries communicate "an upbeat message intertwined with a religious one" (Symonds, Grow, & Cady, 2005, para. 6). The primary orientation of this message on the Web is informational communication – to create

and maintain a positive organizational image and to engage users through opportunities to donate funds and purchase products.

We live in a world where war, pollution, poverty, and other social and economic ills present huge challenges to humankind. The 13 ministries in this study look beyond that, and urge followers to do so as well. Their Web sites offer a comfortable, friendly evangelism to motivate "a generation without limits" (Osteen). They claim that miracles take place every day (Hinn), including the raising of people from the dead (Copeland) and the "continuous flow of God's blessings" in a multitude of other ways (Dollar).

Though the Bible-thumping revivalist of old may have used fear to gain the compliance of his audience, these preachers are using the visual and informational enhancements of the Web to symbolize enthusiasm and offer positive reinforcement. They tell followers that God's people are "positioned to prosper" (Jakes) and that each person "can expect an abundant harvest in your own finances" (Meyer) because God wants his people to be wealthy (Dollar).

Unpleasant subjects such as sin and suffering were couched in positive, encouraging language. Rather than characterizing the Bible as a restrictive book of laws, it is called "the inspired word of God and the infallible rule of faith and conduct" (Copeland). It has "all the answers to man's problems" (Tilton). Even though references to the Devil, Satan, and hell are often heard in renewalist preaching (Swanson, 2007), they were seldom referenced on these ministries' Web pages. Instead, Web users were given frequent encouraging reminders such as "Christ is our hope and has a vital bearing on the personal life and service of the believer" (Jakes).

Web sites contained little traditional Christian imagery. The crucifixion of Jesus and its crown of thorns was neither mentioned in text nor shown in illustration. In its place were a multitude of photos of happy Christians – in cafes, in crowded auditoriums, on cruise ships, and in other brightly-lit social gatherings.

It was repeatedly made clear by all the ministries that a life of comfort is made possible, in large part, through gifts to God. Web users are reminded that donating money is really "sowing a seed" (Copeland). A monetary donation allows God to save and heal other people (Roberts). Donating is not as

much about benefiting the ministry as it is about helping the giver, because the act of donating "causes the blessings of heaven to be poured out" (Hickey).

These ministries offered a huge variety of products for sale – everything from books and videos to clothing, jewelry, collectables, conference and seminar attendance and leisure travel. There are a variety of reasons why people make purchases – basic need, convenience, ego stoking, niche identity, and keeping up with the Jonses are just a few. Regardless of what a follower's logical or emotional need might be, these ministries offer merchandise to satisfy it.

While Jesus was a humble man, the leaders of these ministries relish the online spotlight. Their smiling images were shown in a variety of poses while they were characterized as a world-wide comforter (Bynum) or builder with vision (Crouch). They "walk with God" (Hinn). They have a "contagious zest for life" (Houston). Their experience is so broad that one job title alone is insufficient. Rod Parsley's Web site, for example, lauds him as "pastor, author, educator, statesman, (and) humanitarian."

To be fair, of course, each of these ministries is a large, worldwide organization requiring expert leadership. The analysis of Web sites revealed a somewhat surprising openness about the inner workings of ministries. These organizations deserve praise for their use of the Web to present mission statements, doctrinal points, information about organizational structure and other details that relate to the business side of their operations.

It has been suggested that people tend to evaluate churches in "rational, utilitarian terms" (Bromley, 1988, p. 35). As a result, a ministry that does not define itself in rational, utilitarian ways may quickly be perceived as irrelevant. The findings of this research make it clear that renewalist Christian ministries frame their World Wide Web-based identity around a most utilitarian "Health and Wealth" theology. Their Web site content is focused first on communication, and then on evangelization. Fundraising and merchandising are important, as well, though the presence of these functions is not as significant as it often has been in traditional religious broadcasting (Winzenburg, 2001).

The ministries all frame their Web-based messages in positive ways, with upbeat themes that encourage the faithful to rely both on God and on personal initiative to live a life of good health and

material abundance. The ministries use the visual, operational, and informational enhancements of their Web sites to create a perception of inclusiveness, even though one questions an inclusiveness that has little visual representation of children, senior citizens, the poor, and people of color.

In their study of people who made donations to religious ministries, Korpi and Kyong (1986) concluded that people who viewed religious TV programming often found it a favorable substitute for attendance in church. The analysis of Web sites conducted for this research finds little content that would be seen as a favorable substitute for church attendance, although there is much content to supplement that activity.

Conclusion

This research does not represent a comprehensive content analysis of Web sites hosted by the world's Christian ministries, nor does it represent an examination of the totality of evangelical Web sites. What it does represent is an initial effort to make some generalizations about how leading "Health and Wealth" ministries use the Web to communicate with followers.

Any conclusions should be weighed against the reminder that, in the content analysis, identification of the presence or absence of Web site elements was time-contingent, just as it is for users in a 'real life' situation. The sites analyzed were large and complex; analysis and coding of each site took place in just 20 minutes. It is possible some enhancements were not identified. At the same time, navigational ease is a key concern of Web designers (Zuckerman, 2000). If a key site enhancement cannot be found within 20 minutes, the site may be too complex for its own good.

This research has provided only a tiny glimpse of Web content provided by a few Christian ministries. But we can say with certainty that renewalist ministries are making big changes in how Christian churches communicate with their followers. Even as mainline churches with their hushed sanctuaries, dim lights and traditional symbolism seem old-fashioned when compared to the brightly lit 'megachurch,' so the traditional church newsletter now seems a woefully inefficient and downright stodgy way to build communicative relationships with followers.

While the Web does seem to have tremendous potential for religious organizing, there are still many more questions that need to be answered. Not the least of which are the basic questions about the size of the religious Web universe and the scope of the content found there. To what extent are mainline denominations, non-denominational ministries, ordained individuals and laypeople using Web sites to connect with the faithful? What do these sites contain? To what extent do sites balance evangelizing, communication, and fundraising/ merchandising content?

It would also be helpful to engage a research effort that focuses on the processes at work inside the religious organizations. Without the knowledge of user responses that ministries hope to obtain from Web sites, and the development process that goes on behind the scenes, it is impossible to make accurate judgments about the viability of the online product. In short, we need to know more about the 'who,' the 'how,' and the 'why' of Web site production before we can make claims about the 'what' (the product) that results from the process.

Perhaps a most important overriding question is whether use of the World Wide Web is allowing ministries to widen the reach and personal impact of religious messages – or is simply further evidence of the march of consumerism into Christianity and the fragmenting of the body of believers. Much more investigation is needed before we can address this question with certainty.

Table 1
Leaders / Ministries / World Wide Web sites in population for study
n = 13

Leader/ Ministry / Slogan	Church-based	URL	No. of subordinate pages / Web site
Juanita Bynum *Women on the Frontline* "More than a ministry"		www.juanitabynum.com/	8
Kenneth Copeland *Kenneth Copeland Ministries* "Jesus is Lord"	✓	www.kcm.org	42
Paul Crouch *Trinity Broadcasting Network* "Touching billions now"		www.tbn.org/	14
Creflo Dollar *Creflo Dollar Ministries* "Making a mark that cannot be erased"	✓	www.creflodollarministries.org/	13
Marilyn Hickey *Marilyn Hickey Ministries* "Covering the Earth with the word"		www.mhmin.org/	13
Benny Hinn *Benny Hinn Ministries* "Winning the lost at any cost"	✓	www.bennyhinn.org/	46
Brian Houston *Hillsong Church* "The church that never sleeps"	✓	www2.hillsong.com/	67
T. D. Jakes *The Potter's House* "Reaching the lost and the broken"	✓	www.thepottershouse.org	38
Joyce Meyer *Joyce Meyer Ministries* "Enjoying everyday life"		www.joycemeyer.org/	28
Joel Osteen *Joel Osteen Ministries* "God always causes us to triumph"	✓	joelosteen.lakewood.cc/site/PageServer?pagename=JOM_homepage	10
Rod Parsley *Rod Parsley Ministries* "Back to Bible basics"	✓	www.rodparsley.com/	23
Oral Roberts *Oral Roberts Ministries* "Jesus' resurrection power"		portal1.oru.edu/pls/portal/ORMCCMGR.DYN_ORM_HOME_2.show?p_arg_names=p_id&p_arg_values=1082	14
Robert Tilton *Robert Tilton Success N Life Ministries* "Reaching the unreached: Bringing hope and destiny to a hurting world"		www.roberttilton.tv/	7

Table 2
Visual enhancements, enhancement orientation, and observed use of enhancements
14 possible enhancements

n = 13 Web sites analyzed

Enhancement	Primary orientation				Number of sites displayng	Frequency of use among the population
	E	C	F	M		
Icons		✓			13	100%
Illustrations		✓			13	100%
Lines/ borders		✓			13	100%
Text frames		✓			13	100%
Multiple fonts		✓			13	100%
Photos		✓			12	92%
Photos of minister	✓				12	92%
Recorded audio/ video	✓				12	92%
Background color not white		✓			11	84%
Ministry logo		✓			11	84%
Animated graphics		✓			10	76%
New content noted		✓			4	30%
Streaming audio/ video	✓				2	15%
Site 'construction' noted		✓			0	0
	3	11	0	0		

Enhancement's perceived primary orientation:
E (evangelism), C (communication), F (fundraising), M (merchandising).

Table 3
Operational enhancements, enhancement orientation, and observed use of enhancements
24 possible enhancements

n = 13 Web sites analyzed

Enhancement	Primary orientation				Number of sites displayng	Frequency of use among the population
	E	C	F	M		
E-mail link(s)		✓			13	100%
Link(s) to subordinate pages		✓	✓	✓	13	100%
Auto e-mail signup		✓			12	92%
Download info content for free	✓				11	84%
Automatic bank debit			✓	✓	10	76%
Link(s) to online magazine/ similar	✓	✓			10	76%
Secure credit card link			✓	✓	10	76%
Guestbook		✓			9	69%
In-site search feature		✓			9	69%
Download info for purchase	✓			✓	9	69%
Site map		✓			9	69%
Link(s) to other ministries	✓				8	62%
Personalized login/ ID		✓			7	54%
Multilingual text or links		✓			6	46%
Link(s) to secular charities		✓			3	23%
Link(s) to political organizations	✓	✓			3	23%
Music or audio plays at site access		✓			2	15%
Music/ mp3 available for download	✓				1	7%
"Best with" software info		✓			1	7%
Link to currency calculator			✓	✓	1	7%
Who's online monitor		✓			1	7%
Chat room		✓			0	0
Access counter		✓			0	0
Date of last revision noted		✓			0	0
	6	17	4	5		

Enhancement's perceived primary orientation:
E (evangelism), C (communication), F (fundraising), M (merchandising).

Table 4
Observed use of informational enhancements
23 possible enhancements

n = 13 Web sites analyzed

Enhancement	Primary orientation				Number of sites displaying	Frequency of use among the population
	E	C	F	M		
Products, services for sale info				✓	13	100%
Broadcast schedule info	✓	✓			13	100%
Contact info including mailing address		✓			12	92%
Mission statement	✓	✓			12	92%
Ministry news	✓	✓			12	92%
Education or missions outreach info	✓	✓	✓		12	92%
Giving solicitation in text			✓		12	92%
Leader's personal appearance schedule	✓	✓			11	84%
Leader/ staff biographies	✓	✓			10	76%
Policy info (privacy, copyright, etc.)		✓			9	69%
Giving partnership info/ request			✓		9	69%
Education or missions training opptys.	✓	✓			8	62%
Free gift offer or info			✓	✓	8	62%
Prayer help/ outreach	✓				8	62%
Organizational chart		✓			7	54%
Minister's personal testimony	✓				7	54%
Info about allied organizations	✓	✓			7	54%
Info about ministry's facilities		✓			6	46%
Believer testimonies	✓				3	23%
Sermon notes	✓				2	15%
FAQs	✓	✓			2	15%
Online Bible	✓				1	7%
Local church reference/ assistance	✓				0	0
	15	13	4	2		

Enhancement's perceived primary orientation:
E (evangelism), C (communication), F (fundraising), M (merchandising).

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