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Douglas Swanson
California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo, djswansonapr@gmail.com

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Digitally Enhanced or Dumbed Down? Evangelists' Use of the Internet

Douglas Swanson

Introduction

Everywhere we look, digital technology is having an increasingly profound change on the way people gather information about life. Television news, formerly available only at certain times of the day, is now a round-the-clock buffet. Instead of being delivered from a big box tied to an antenna, TV news is now viewed from a handsome picture frame and is moderated by TiVo (I'll take mine without commercials, thanks).

The rolled-in-a-rubber band newspaper that was a staple of so many breakfast tables (unless, of course, you subscribed to a now-extinct afternoon paper) is now, for many, a scan-and-click item on the World Wide Web. Sometimes it's hard to separate the news from the colorful advertisements, promotional items and other digital clutter that splays across the computer screen.

All of this got me thinking about how our traditional social institutions are transitioning to increased use of digital communication with their publics. I have a general interest in the subject because I spent the '80s and early '90s working in broadcast journalism. Like many journalists, I eventually left reporting and went into the public relations field. Much of my PR work has been with nonprofits, and my research has largely focused on how organizations that fall within a "social service" framework use media to communicate positive images to communities and publics.

The increasing political and economic influence of Christian renewalist evangelist ministries prompted me to examine some of the means used to communicate digitally

with followers. What I found causes me to wonder whether ministries are widening the reach and personal impact of their messages, or just plugging more consumerism into Christianity.

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 evangelical ministries, these groups believe God grants health and prosperity to the faithful in accordance with the promises of Jesus Christ. A recent Time magazine poll found 61 percent of Americans believe God wants Christians to be wealthy; 17 percent of Americans identify with a prosperity-themed Christian ministry.[1]

The increase in renewalists' popularity parallels the growth of Christian megachurches. Unlike the neighborhood church of old, the megachurch is big, brightly lit, with upbeat music and multimedia entertainment. Thousands of people attend a typical megachurch service; televised services may have audiences of millions more.

Paralleling the growth in renewalist ministries and megachurches is an increasing use of the Internet by religions groups to build relationships with followers.[2] Though some religious organizations remain afraid the Internet will lure people away from local churches to partake of an "inauthentic" spiritual experience,[3] individually, Christians have embraced the Internet in large numbers. Evangelicals are said to be the most fervent of these digital media consumers.[4]

Since renewalists' prosperity theology is embraced by growing numbers of Christians,[5] and since evangelical Christians are among the most active Internet users, it seemed appropriate to investigate renewalists' use of the World Wide Web to reach followers. In the summer of 2007, I conducted a detailed content analysis of Web sites and podcasts produced by leading renewalist ministries (See Table 1). My theoretical grounding was in framing theory;[6] I used constant comparative analysis[7] to help organize themes that were prevalent in the media content. I identified ten areas of concern that relate to technology use, message issues, and listener responses called for by evangelists. What follows is a summary of my findings, and the obvious questions they raise as we consider whether digital media 'dumbs down' the Christian experience.

Technological Issues:
Asynchronous, On-Demand Technology

Digital technology used by renewalist ministries allows access to media content at any time, day or night. This provides unlimited opportunities for the faithful to interact with a ministry, individually yet collectively, through a Web site or podcast. Users can seek spiritual comfort at their own pace, in their own way, using information they find most relevant.

At the same time, the religious media I analyzed seemed a poor substitute for 'real

world' interaction of the faithful. Web sites tended to be visually attractive but theologically superficial, with almost no detailed information such as sermon texts, related notes, or scriptural selections. Merchandising and fundraising is the primary focus of most Web sites and podcasts. (It should be noted that only five of the 13 ministries offered free podcasts. Others either had subscription-only podcasts or offered no such programming.) Podcasts consisted almost entirely of rehashed television audio; some podcasts in series featured multiple repeats of the same sermon content. Episodes were released sporadically; production values were generally poor.

In a 1986 study of people who made donations to religious ministries, researchers found people who viewed religious TV programming often found it a favorable substitute for attendance in church.[8] While the continuously developing digital technology embraced by renewalist ministries offers the promise for increasing levels of interaction between ministries and followers, I question whether the quality and quantity of the product currently available through the leading ministries makes it a reasonable substitute for in-person church attendance.

Integration of technology and 'real life'

The renewalist Web sites I analyzed appeared to be structured to integrate with the lives of followers, though superficially. Sites were accessible, colorful, and had a variety of informational content areas and services. Most offered links to inspirational e-mail and text message services (often available by paid subscription), allowed online product purchase, and had similar technological elements to those found on commercial Web sites. Likewise, podcasts were structured for ease of downloading and use by "on the go" followers.

At the same time, the media content could foster the perception of a somewhat unnatural "reality." Glamour photos of Benny Hinn, Joel Osteen and others are splashed across their Web sites; often, dozens of different poses are featured. Web site praise for ministers is almost unending. Juanita Bynum's Web site calls her "a world-wide comforter." Benny Hinn, we are told, is allowed to "walk with God." Rod Parsley's Web site trumpets him as "pastor, author, educator, statesman, (and) humanitarian." It would be easy to perceive that these ministries and their leaders are awfully ethereal and, perhaps, very far removed from the concerns of people most needing spiritual comfort.

Encouragement of User Interactivity

Christian renewalist media encouraged users in a multitude of ways to interact with the host ministry through visual, informational, and operational content dimensions.[9] Each ministry had a detailed Web presence, often with dozens of subordinate pages below its site's opening page. The ministries that made podcasts available produced a total of 67 podcast episodes in a one-month time frame. All of this content presented plenty of

encouragement for interaction with the digital messages.

At the same time, it can also be argued that the most spiritually significant interaction within the church comes as followers can align their values with the church, reflect emotional investment in it,[11] and participate in relationships organized through it.[10] These personal interactions within the church connect participants, their values, and activities in socially meaningful and supportive ways.

In much of the user response I found, renewalist ministries asked for product purchase or financial donation. None of the Web sites had content to help users find a local church. All podcasts included some sort of product purchase solicitation and one in four asked for a financial donation. Only a small fraction of all podcast episodes identified Bible reading as an important response; an equally small fraction identified church attendance as important. This lack of encouragement for followers to be involved in scriptural study or church attendance would seem to deny the importance of a personal level of interaction necessary for followers' faith to take root.

Message Issues:
Preacher Personality

Each of the ministries framed its media content in positive terms, with upbeat themes that encouraged the faithful to rely on God and personal initiative to be healthy and wealthy. Most often, this message came from the ministry leader or an immediate family member. It is consistent with the renewalist Christian idea that a ministry should be closely aligned with the personality of its leader, and with few exceptions the leaders of these renewalist Christian ministries are friendly, folksy and charming. Joel Osteen is the consummate example. His smiling face is at the top of his Web site, and his friendly Texas drawl welcomes the faithful on his podcast.

Though Osteen's megachurch church is the most popular in the land—with 14,000 people in attendance at a typical Sunday service—one must question whether the congregation is there to worship, or simply to participate in what's pleasantly popular. Osteen never broaches unpleasant subjects such as war, sin, sickness or death. Everything is a vision of sweetness and light, sprinkled with messages of "can do power" because, as he frequently boasts in podcasts, "there is nothing in your future you cannot accomplish."

As with many of his contemporaries, Osteen converses in what's called "preacher-speak," using a sing-song tone and over-emphasizing particular words and phrases. It is unnatural when compared to the cadence used in conversation. The problem with this is that people new to the faith "see it as performance, not as heartfelt communication."[12] Because of the perception that Osteen and the other renewalist preachers like him are so theatrically-focused, there's a risk that followers may see them as disingenuous and, perhaps, manipulative.

Prosperity Gospel

The Bible-thumping revivalist of old used fear to gain the compliance of his audience. Today's renewalist preachers use the Web to symbolize enthusiasm and offer positive reinforcement. All the Web sites I viewed focused on the "Health and Wealth" doctrine, promising faithful followers that they will receive God's blessings of wellbeing and financial prosperity. T.D. Jakes told followers that God's people are "positioned to prosper." Joyce Meyer promised that each person "can expect an abundant harvest in your own finances" while Creflo Dollar said "God wants his people to be wealthy." It has been argued that renewalist Christian ministries use claims like these because they integrate well with Americans' cultural ethos of individual achievement.[13]

The success of today's renewalist evangelists and the megachurches they often preach from is rooted firmly in a business marketing model. It features intense, almost paranoid attention to detain in the areas of church architecture, worship service planning, entertainment, and other amenities to draw in the faithful through the appearance of prosperity and success. [14]

In recent months, several prominent renewalist evangelists have been criticized for allegedly secretive or deceptive financial reporting.[15] For that reason, it is easy to see how the prosperity gospel may not sit well with some faithful who may perceive that "prosperity" for the preacher means being more interested in the ministry's appearance and receipts than in followers' faithfulness.

Contemporary Symbolism

In the U.S., most religious groups' identity has traditionally rested on two foundations—"a commitment to religious beliefs and practices and a feeling of kinship with a social group united by a common religious tie."[16] This identity is maintained through the use of religious symbols that allow ministries to identify themselves and comfort the faithful.

My analysis found that leading renewalist Christian Web sites are almost completely devoid of traditional symbolism. The crucifixion of Jesus and his crown of thorns was neither mentioned in text nor shown in illustration. The same was true for the cross, the ichthys, and other imagery Christians have identified with for centuries. Instead, Web sites are decorated with bright colors and cheerful illustrations, along with a multitude of photos of happy Christians—in cafes, in crowded auditoriums, on cruise ships, and in other brightly-lit social gatherings. The message here is that Christian worship is primarily an upbeat social experience, one that brings prosperity and, in turn, asks the faithful to give so the ministry will prosper.

Without exception, ministries take what could be symbolically negative images and issues and turn them into positive affirmations. Rather than characterizing the Bible as a restrictive book of laws, Kenneth Copeland calls it "the inspired word of God and the

infallible rule of faith and conduct." Robert Tilton says the Bible has "all the answers to man's problems." Joyce Meyer says giving a financial donation to the ministry is not a burden; rather, it is "sowing a seed." This symbolic flip-flop is especially important in regard to donations; Kenneth Copeland admonishes his followers that "people can't be blessed until they give."

Message Redundancy

Any time that people are asked to receive a message, understand it, believe it, and base their future actions on it, some degree of message redundancy should be included as part of the process. Messages must be repeated so people can learn from them and accept them into their value system. This has been the case for centuries in the Christian world. The Bible itself is a collection of stories told and retold to help people make value decisions that are consistent with the teaching of Jesus Christ.

But the ministries that produced the digital media content I analyzed go well beyond what would be expected in terms of message redundancy. This is particularly evident in the ministries' podcast programming. Podcasts promised listeners that their faith will be rewarded through lifestyle improvement, emotional satisfaction, and receipt of God's blessings—all key renewalist ideas. Also to its credit, even the longest podcast ran only about 30 minutes, which is appropriate for a medium designed for "on the go" use by consumers.

During my month-long analysis of podcast programs, a single "personal example" evangelical story was told by three different ministry leaders who presented the story as if it were theirs alone. While some degree of redundancy is important, the excessive level of content redundancy, along with poor attention to originality and detail, makes me question whether, over the long term, Christian listeners would be sufficiently challenged to continue listening to renewalist podcasts in hope of hearing something new and different.

Believer Response Issues:
Evangelizing vs. Promotional Communication

Any organization can use a Web site to make a credible public presentation of its mission and values. But this task is especially important for a Christian ministry because it must communicate relevant, factual information about the ministry in a world in which many people are skeptical of the motives of religious groups.[17] One would expect that a ministry's key mission would be to evangelize—to communicate to the public its position on issues of faith. Among Christian groups, renewalist ministries have repeatedly identified as among the most expert at seeking out opportunities for this behavior.[18]

Despite renewalists' ability in this area, I found most Web site content is focused on communication of a promotional nature, announcing conference dates, public appear-

ances, new books, and so forth. Among all Web site enhancements, support for promotion far outweighed support for evangelism.

In a similar vein, the vast majority of the podcast episodes framed persuasive communication toward already-committed believers. While 9 percent of the podcasts included what's known as a "come to Jesus" opportunity for followers to dedicate their lives to Christ, this opportunity always followed program content directed toward the already-committed. Thus, it is easy to get the impression that creators of digital media content used by these ministries were more concerned with promotion and merchandising than they were with evangelization.

Political Mobilization

During the Reagan years, the U.S. federal government's deregulation of broadcasting opened up a great opportunity for evangelicals, who adapted readily to TV and quickly learned to use it to politically motivate followers.[19] Evangelicals also learned to take advantage of federal broadcast licensing policies. Religious broadcasters' ability to get their hands on low-power TV stations allowed those stations to be linked into powerful networks.[20] Such was the case with Pat Robertson's acquisition of a failed UHF television station in Virginia that led to the Christian Broadcasting Network. 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."[21] Today's renewalist ministries use electronic media not only in an effort to encourage righteous thought and action, but also to continue the political influence that has changed the entire U.S. political landscape in the past three decades.

My analysis of digital media showed that the Kenneth Copeland and Benny Hinn ministries give the most emphasis to political issues. Copeland's Web site is fairly benign, but his podcast is a fiercely political program that regularly attacks secular political targets. Typically, this comes through a question-and-answer format where Copeland's opinions are echoed by a compliant guest. During the podcast analysis period, Copeland attacked "ungodly state schools" whose teachers he characterized as "dummies." He criticized federal judges who he called "knuckleheads," claimed the ACLU "is used by Satan to oppress people," and proposed aggressive conversion of Muslims to Christianity.

Benny Hinn's Web site was by far the most political of all. It was also the most detailed of the Web sites, with 46 subordinate pages. Some of those subordinate content areas were "Religion in the News," "Inside Israel," "One Nation Under God," and "Prophesy." All of these content areas offered information and advice to followers on how to increase their political involvement.

It has been suggested that people tend to evaluate religious organizations in "rational,

utilitarian terms."[22] As a result, a ministry that does not define itself in rational, utilitarian ways may quickly be perceived as irrelevant by adherents and potential followers. Undoubtedly, the renewalist ministries that preach to the faithful on political issues feel political issues and faith issues are inseparable. At the same time, these ministries may be confusing new followers by offering the prosperity doctrine in folksy, pleasant tones—and delivering political criticism in sharply negative ones. The ministries may also be scaring away followers whose own views don't align with the ministry's political views, or who believe that Christianity should not mix politics and preaching.

Product Consumption

Renewalist ministries devote a lot of their digital media content to the merchandising of products. Of the 13 renewalist Web sites analyzed, ten (76 percent) included at least one merchandising solicitation. The merchandising leader was Juanita Bynum, whose site had 23 individual solicitations. The site was a checkerboard of colorful links to purchase products and donate money; it had more visual commonalities with eBay than it did with most ministry pages. Many 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 were more symbolic in nature. For example, Benny Hinn's online store offered a $200 sculpture and a bottle of "anointing oil" for $75.

Among podcasts, 61 of the 67 episodes (97 percent) included a solicitation for product purchase. The dedication to fundraising and merchandising in podcasts was found to be higher than what was found in a 2001 study of religious TV programs.[23] That study found TV ministries spent an average of seven minutes an hour on fundraising and marketing. While my sampling of podcast content is much smaller than the 150 TV broadcasts analyzed in that 2001 research, the proportion of time dedicated is much higher—in the range of 15 to 20 percent for most podcast episodes.

No one would deny the importance of merchandising. Ministries must financially support themselves. Ministries do operate within a consumer culture in which people have a great desire to "buy in" to ideas and groups they identify with. But one must question whether the merchandising of the leading renewalist ministries facilitates a deeper connection with the gospel, or simply serves as a way to separate the faithful from their funds.

Conclusion

A few years ago, a researcher wrote that the Internet supplements rather discourages religious participation, by allowing people "an otherworldly space...to experience or re-engage with spiritual pursuits."[24] Despite opposition from some traditional Christian organizations, it was argued then that religious culture was moving toward a loosening

of boundaries and changing associations among believers. In other words, more non-traditional means of communication would become the accepted norm. Clearly, the technological world we live in now reflects this view. It is easy to see the benefit of using digital media to help people build an understanding of, and communicate about, issues of faith.

At the same time, it has been argued that the prosperity theology offered by renewalist ministries is just another measure of Christianity's "descent into full-blown American materialism."[25] What I discovered in my small research effort supports this conclusion. I found that positive, hope-filled messages delivered by folksy preachers on their Web sites and through their podcasts do have potential to bring people together in pursuit of faith. At the same time, though, the renewalist media I examined offered little spiritual substance and displayed an almost total disregard of the value of local church involvement. Fundraising and merchandising seemed much more important than evangelization.

The ministries I studied are among the most publicly prominent; each has a worldwide outreach effort and a following that numbers in the tens of millions. And yet each presents media product that puts more effort into promotional communication, fundraising and merchandising than into evangelizing. If this trend is taking shape throughout the realm of modern-day Christianity, one has to question whether ministries will be able to meet their key responsibility—to fulfill the Great Commission put forth by Jesus Christ and referenced repeatedly in the New Testament: Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations.

Table 1: Christian renewalist ministries in study population (n = 13)

Leader/ Ministry / Slogan	Church-based	URL	Analysis incl. Web site (*) Podcast (+)
Juanita Bynum *Women on the Frontline* "More than a ministry"		www.juanitabynum.com/	*
Kenneth Copeland *Kenneth Copeland Ministries* "Jesus is Lord"	x	www.kcm.org	* +
Paul Crouch *Trinity Broadcasting Network* "Touching billions now"		www.tbn.org/	*
Creflo Dollar *Creflo Dollar Ministries* "Making a mark that cannot be erased"	x	www.creflodollar ministries.org/	* +
Marilyn Hickey *Marilyn Hickey Ministries* "Covering the Earth with the word"		www.mhmin.org/	*
Benny Hinn *Benny Hinn Ministries* "Winning the lost at any cost"	x	www.bennyhinn.org/	*
Brian Houston *Hillsong Church* "The church that never sleeps"	x	www2.hillsong.com/	* +
T. D. Jakes *The Potter's House* "Reaching the lost and the broken"	x	www.thepottershouse.org	*
Joyce Meyer *Joyce Meyer Ministries* "Enjoying everyday life"		www.joycemeyer.org/	* +
Joel Osteen *Joel Osteen Ministries* "God always causes us to triumph"	x	joelosteen.lakewood.cc/site/ *PageServer?pagename=JOM_* homepage	* +
Rod Parsley *Rod Parsley Ministries* "Back to Bible basics"	x	www.rodparsley.com/	*
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	*
Robert Tilton *Robert Tilton Success N Life Ministries* "Reaching the unreached: Bringing hope and destiny to a hurting world"		www.roberttilton.tv/	*

Notes

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