



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#41 - May 2014

Communication Technology and Adult Faith Formation

Last month we began a reflection on the role and use of information and communication technology in parish (and arch/diocesan) ministry today. We looked at:

- how technology has vastly changed our lives in a short period of time
- the necessity and benefits of communication technology in ministry
- some questions and hesitations that sometimes are expressed regarding the use of technology in ministry

In this issue, we'll take a little time to explore a few questions - and sometimes reluctances - that are encountered as we utilize the continual advances in communication technology in ministry, especially adult faith formation:

- Is community really possible through social media?
- Is it possible to prevent people being offended by something that is posted?
- How do I know that I can trust a website (or social media source)?

A Cultural Shift

Before we explore some of these specific questions, perhaps it would be helpful to remind ourselves where we are: we're in the midst of a cultural shift.

What's interesting is that whenever there is change, whenever there is a cultural shift (particularly in the history of media and technology), there are hesitations and/or denunciations. Plato argued that writing would disconnect people from the important presence that comes with face-to-face interactions (sound familiar?)

When the bicycle was first produced, it was critiqued. Churches condemned this new technological mode of transportation for they saw it disconnecting people from their local community and distracting them with the dangers of the outside world: e.g. the cinema and roadhouses.

The automobile also received criticism about creating social distance and an acceleration of culture.

About the same time, in 1926, the Adult Education Committee of the Knights of Columbus investigated another emerging technology: the telephone. Their meetings were dominated by questions, such as,

- "Does the telephone make men more active or lazy?"
- "Does the telephone break up home life and the old practice of visiting friends?"

The video, [Medieval Helpdesk](#), (a junior monk instructs a senior monk on the finer points of using a printed book) is a delightful look detailing what happens within us when there's change.

In the video, the orientation of the senior monk implies that knowledge is engaged within strict modalities. The 20th French century philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, spoke about the concept of "habitus" as

- our taken-for-granted assumptions about our world which are implicitly derived from our social structures
- our lifestyle, values, dispositions and expectations that are acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life

The senior monk, in the video, cannot turn the book's page because his "habitus" involves the use of scrolls. Another profound change, depicted within this story, is that the junior monk has the specialized knowledge with which to instruct the senior monk.

For a real-life, humorous look at the paradigm shift we are experiencing, watch:

- [Kids React to Rotary Phones](#)
- [Kids React to Walkmans](#)

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For a recent look at the use of communications technology within our ministry, you might want to visit:

- [Are We Old-Fashioned When It Comes to the Internet?](#)
- [5 Characteristics of an Online Presence that is Ministry](#)

Are similar shifts occurring for us (or being resisted) as we encounter the rapidly changing technologies in our personal and ministerial lives?

How do we respond to the cultural shift in which we find ourselves?



Is community really possible through social media? It has often been said that *“Social media has opened up yet another portal for seeing and being seen, for knowing and being known, for being in and belonging to community.”*

Some communities are extensions of already existing physical communities. Others are completely virtual – created, gathered, developed, and sustained exclusively online. Still others are communities where the boundaries between what is ‘real’ (i.e. physical) and what is ‘virtual’ (i.e. online) are permeable...” (*The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways* by Meredith Gould. Liturgical Press, 2013)

Yet, the question remains for many people: is it **really possible to form community via social media?**

The question has been answered in many ways, from many different lens and focal points. A few of them:



In 2011 a research study from the [Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project](#) investigated questions such as:

- Do the social media technologies isolate people and truncate their relationships?
- Are there benefits associated with being connected to others in this way?

The most pronounced finding across all social networking sites (SNS) was that active social networking participation does not, as is commonly opined, result in social isolation or a lack of relational intimacy.

Further, SNS participation tends to enrich rather than diminish participation in face-to-face relationships.

Some key findings of the report focused on the dominant site, Facebook, where some 92% of social network users have a profile. Among a long list of findings, Pew researchers found that:

- Facebook users are more trusting than non-SNS users.
- Facebook users have more close relationships than non-SNS users.
- Facebook users get more social support than non-SNS users.
- Facebook revives “dormant” relationships that are lost to non-SNS users.



This TED talk, [How the Internet enables intimacy](#), shares some research and ideas concerning the connectedness among people because of today’s social media.



Another experience (explained in some length), was shared by Cathleen Falsani at [Where two or more are gathered ...on Facebook](#):

“There is no distance in the Spirit.” After nearly 30 years as a believer, I experienced, powerfully and indelibly, the truth of that statement in an unlikely place: Facebook.

Like so many of its 350 million (and growing) members, I signed up for Facebook, the social networking site, a few years ago out of pure curiosity -- to check in with old friends, boyfriends and former colleagues from a safe distance. With its plethora of personal photos, videos and regular ‘status updates’ from members, it was a voyeuristic paradise, not to mention an excellent place to kill time.

I am a journalist, author and blogger and had grown accustomed to sharing glimpses of my life in print and online. Facebook was just another venue to do that, but little more.

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That is, until early one morning in April 2008 when I signed on to my account, wiping sleep from my eyes with coffee in hand, and noticed the status update of a friend from college: 'David is really sad that Mark died today.'

The words ripped a hole in my heart. Our friend, Mark Metherell, a former U.S. Navy Seal who was working in Iraq training Iraqi Special Forces, was gone. He had been killed instantly by a roadside bomb outside Sadr City.

Sitting in bed with my computer on my lap, tears streaming down my face, I sent David an email asking what had happened and how I could help, joining him in prayer for Mark's family and the rest of us who loved him (even if we hadn't seen him in more than 15 years).

In about 48 hours, as news of Mark's death began to spread, dozens of fellow classmates from our alma mater, Wheaton College, joined Facebook to share stories and pictures of Mark. Facebook became the place where we could mourn together and reconnect.

A couple of weeks after Mark was killed, I sent a group email on Facebook asking for responses to a column I was working on. That email started a 'thread' -- a discussion among a group of people. There were 20 of us from all over the world -- Southern California, Chicago, Hawaii, Spain, New York, Atlanta, Florida, North Carolina and Dubai.

More than 18 months -- and almost 20,000 posts -- later, the thread is still going. We call ourselves 'Wine & Jesus: The Communion of Sinnerly Saints,' and our cyber-community is, in a very real way, church for us. Our conversations were mostly about Mark at first, and about faith, loss, God's will and grieving. But they soon turned to the rest of our lives, the mundane and the transcendent.

We brought each other up to speed on what had transpired in the years since we were students at Wheaton. Collectively we are husbands and wives, brothers and sisters (in law and biologically), Protestant, Catholic, Anglican, conservative and liberal, Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, Green Party, vegetarian, entrepreneurs, musicians, stay-at-home moms, married, divorced, widowed, mothers and fathers, adopted and adopters, seminary graduates, pastors, chaplains, writers, filmmakers, artists, lawyers, church members and church-averse and believers all.

Some of us were close friends in college, some were acquaintances and some had never met. But we are now, I would dare say, utterly and wholly committed to one another.

As Bono said in U2's theological opus, 'One,' we are one but we're not the same; we get to carry each other ...

A few of us have even begun to rediscover (or exhume) our faith. If you had told me even two years ago that I would find community -- real, authentic, deeply connected, deeply faithful community -- online, I would have scoffed. I'm not, by nature, a joiner.

Had someone created and invited me to join a group of Wheaton alumni online to talk about faith and life, I would have declined. But this happened organically. And here we are, a year and a half of daily interaction later, with a communion of 20 souls around the world. In the last year, we've walked with each other through sickness and pregnancies, the death of parents and siblings, job losses and career changes, adoption, divorce and even a marriage between two friends who met through the thread.

A few months back, we had a conversation about how hard it has been for some of us to reach out, ask for help and be willing to receive it. 'Being merciful to ourselves,' is how Shani, the hospital chaplain, put it. In response, Brian, a filmmaker who was in the midst of relocating across the country with his wife, Sara, and their newborn and toddler, wrote: 'Sara and I quote Henri Nouwen frequently of late: 'The weakest among us create community.' Somehow, I feel I'm on the receiving end in this thread considerably more often than I am giving out. So thanks to all.'

*For me, the thread has become what the sociologist Ray Oldenburg, in his book *The Great Good Place*, described as a 'third place.' Most people have two primary places -- home and the workplace. Then there is a third place where they feel part of a chosen community. It might be a bar (illustrated beautifully in the television series *Cheers*) or a restaurant, a house of worship or a bowling alley.*

For me, Facebook is that place. One of the persistent criticisms of Facebook and other online social networks is that they provide a false sense of intimacy and community -- all of the interaction with none of the commitment. While that may be the case with some folks, nothing could be farther from my experience.

Rather than satisfying our need for connection and leaving it there, our Facebook community has made us yearn to be in one another's physical company. About five months after the thread began, eight of us got together in Chicago for a long dinner. Some of us hadn't seen each other in almost 20 years, while others were practically next-door neighbors.

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We were nervous about meeting, wondering whether the connection we experienced online would translate into the 'real' world. It took about a minute to realize that it did. Beautifully. When we sat down to dinner, we stopped to pray together.

We knew that our friends on the thread who could not be with us in person were with us in spirit, praying with us, sharing in the love and transformative power of sacred friendship (and awaiting updates about the dinner on Facebook).

In July, my family moved from Chicago to Laguna Beach, Calif., so that we could live near several of the members of the thread. David now lives about four minutes from me, and I see him and his family almost daily – we even worship together at the same physical church -- but we still connect each day on the thread.

The constraints of Facebook limit the membership of any thread to 20. But I think I speak for all of our members when I say there is a 21st member: the Spirit of God. Jesus said whenever two or more are gathered together in his name, he's there, too. And he is, in all of his glory and grace, right there with us. On Facebook."



An [interesting debate from various people](#) sheds some additional thoughts and reflections on the reality of community (or not) via communications technology.



When we come to Lent next year, here is an interesting reflection which looks at the community, connection and formation that can be created through social media: [End The Lenten Social Media Exodus](#).



Many people have experienced and remarked that because of the intermediate connections online, it brings people closer when they meet face to face. This [resource on technology ideas in adult faith formation](#) recounts a parents' Baptismal preparation program which includes a closed online discussion group before the parents meet IRL (in real life) at the parish.

A Wondering GEM: Could you use and tweak this idea for other groups and other adult faith formation opportunities within your parish?



As you reflect on and discuss the possibilities, you might also want to consider how this idea of [Flipped Churches](#) might be applicable for some of your adult faith formation opportunities.

“Social media tends to connect rather than isolate users. Relationships starting as conversations via social media frequently lead to in-person meetings as geography and time allow. Email exchanges and phone conversations usually, but not always, pave the way to meeting IRL (in real life).

Do not assume that whatever begins on social media stays on social media. Now that social media has become a normative tool for communication, it's common for individuals who first meet in a physical environment (e.g. church) to 'friend' and 'follow' each other to continue the conversation via social media.”

Meredith Gould in *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways*



Another question can be summarized by this real life comment found on [7 Ways Pastors Can Overcome Conflict in Social Media](#):

“As a Pastor, social media is very dangerous for me in the sense that what I post, **somebody will inevitably be offended** (even if there is nothing clearly offensive in the matter). I find it challenging to post anything on Facebook without somebody managing to shoot me down or get upset.

Relational engagement through social media, in my experience, tends to lead to people being able to tear another down in a safe way. Suddenly, it becomes much more confusing about the depth and significance of social media. When engaged in conversation through comments and the like, we often end up with people saying things that would be 'socially unacceptable' face to

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face. Suddenly, we begin wishing that people were hitting 'Like' instead of adding a 'Comment.'"



Paul Steinbeck, on this blog, suggests *7 Steps to Developing a Healthy Online Culture*. The full explanation of each can be found [here](#).

1. Set the ground rules up front.
2. Start with a series of posts about love.
3. Continue with a series of posts about online etiquette.
4. Set a positive tone.
5. Give serious thought to what you post.
6. Have a thick skin.
7. Address offenses privately.



Another frequent question that is asked is: **"How do I know I can trust a website (or a social media source)?** How will I know it is accurate, up-to-date, and providing sound, healthy theology and faith practices within our Catholic tradition?



Two helpful sites to embark on the question are listed below. These two sites do not look at Catholic accuracy but the principles are a beginning place to become more aware of evaluating sites.

- [Critical Evaluation - Kathy Schrock's Guide to Everything](#)
- [Evaluating Internet Sources](#)



Years ago the Adult Faith Formation Committee of NCCL (National Conference for Catechetical Leadership) adapted and posted the following criteria on their website. (It is no longer posted on the site.)

This list of evaluation criteria was adapted from *Elementary CC's For Evaluating Internet Sites* which was adapted by Maggie Roche (teacher-librarian), with permission from Betsy Richmond, May Gibbs Memorial Library, Neutral Bay Public School. (This original list and its adaptation is also no longer available on the web.)

25 CC's for Evaluating Religion Internet Sites

1. **Credibility:** Who is the author? Is there information about the author? Can you find it? Is the author a current Catholic?
2. **Credentials:** What qualifications does the author have in this subject? If this is theological material, is the author in good standing with the Church?
3. **Contact and Communication:** Can the author or web master be contacted with comments or questions?
4. **Clues:** Where is the web site located? Does the domain name end in .com, .gov, .edu, etc.? Did a Church organization publish these pages or only an individual?
5. **Commendation:** Has the site been recommended or reviewed by a reliable source, such as a bishop or Church organization?
6. **Content:** What is the purpose of the information on the site? Is it genuine and trustworthy, or is it opinion and bias?
7. **Catholic:** Is this Catholic content and does this information reflect an ecumenical understanding of religious tradition and teaching?
8. **Coverage:** What is the scope? Is the topic covered in depth: Is it full and comprehensive or is it trivial?
9. **Copyright:** What is the copyright? Is this material current or dated?
10. **Comprehension:** At what level is the material? Is it too complicated or too long?
11. **Critical Thinking:** Can you treat this material the same way you would treat a published book? Does it drift from the main topic?
12. **Citation:** Does the author give credit for cited work? Is this "public domain" or is it protected by copyright?

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13. **Currency:** Has the information been updated recently? Is there a date for "last updated?"
14. **Continuity:** Will the site continue to be updated? Can you rely on the site over time?
15. **Connectivity:** Does access to the site require special software? If it is popular, will it be accessible in the time you have?
16. **Clarity:** Is the design appealing, with elegant simplicity, or is it fussy, crowded, or complicated? Does too many fancy or large graphics make it slow to load?
17. **Context:** No matter how deep you go into the site can you return to the home page to determine the source? Has the author shown where all of the information came from?
18. **Cruise Control:** Is there a site map, table of contents, or outline of topics? Is there a search function in a large site?
19. **Completeness:** Is there a comparable source either online or in the real world? Is the internet version complete?
20. **Correctness:** Are the facts correct? Web sites can contain unchecked information. Does the site provide guidance?
21. **COPPA:** (Child Online Privacy Protection Act). If the site is intended for a child, is the author asking a child under age 13 to reveal personal information without parental permission?
22. **Quality Control:** Has the site been proofread, checked, edited?
23. **Compassion:** Are people treated with fairness and tolerance? Or do you see bias, stereotyping, loaded language, racism, or other hurtful ideas?
24. **Care and Caution:** Do you remember to keep an eye open in case something is not appropriate for you?

25. **Comparability:** How does this online information fit into your subject and search? Does the Internet fill a gap or would it be easier to use another source?



Similar questions arise concerning social media sites. Sr. Susan Wolf, SND recently replied to a question about “quality control” on parish Facebook pages. Sr. Susan poses ten questions to ask when considering [Quality Control for Parish Facebook Pages](#). The questions are below; for further considerations (and possible answers), check the entire article.

1. Who is your audience?
2. What is the purpose of your parish Facebook page?
3. What will you post?
4. How often will you post?
5. Who will monitor and respond to comments, questions and messages that come from followers?
6. How often will you change your Cover Photo and who will select the next one?
7. Will you customize the Tabs underneath the cover photo to link to information on your website?
8. What kind of comments will you delete or block and who will be responsible for that?
9. Who will be able to make posts to the site? (Facebook allows for multiple authors on its pages.)
10. If multiple people can post to the site, who will coordinate the timing of those posts?

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Up-date Notes about Two Previous Newsletters

In the [GEMS #40](#) issue, our previous one on technology in adult faith formation, there was a typo in “How’s Your Basic Geek” Quiz. As you probably caught by now, it should be “QR” rather than “GR” (Quick Response code, a type of matrix barcode).

[GEMS #38](#) featured the best practice of movies at the parish. The question always arises (and it should) about use of copyrighted materials. These websites provide some helpful information:

- [Copyright Guidelines for Showing Movies](#)
(<http://www2.wlu.edu/x36055.xml>)
- [Showing Films and Other Media](#)
(<http://copyright.columbia.edu/copyright/fair-use/practical-applications/showing-films-and-other-media/>)



Golden Nuggets From You

“Oh, Janet, thank you for the breath of fresh air ([GEMS #26](#)) that finds me in this outpost. It is always a blessing.”

- *Mary Tardif, St. Gerard Parish, Lansing, MI*

“Sister Janet, I just finished making copies of this edition ([GEMS #30](#)) to share with my DREs tomorrow at the Vicariate meeting. Know that your labor is bearing a hundredfold. Thanks a gazillion.”

- *Cris Villapando, Director of Faith Formation, Diocese of Charlotte, NC*



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at www.janetschaeffler.com

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found at:

- <http://www.ecatechist.com/ebooks/> Scroll down for *40 Tips: Getting Started in Adult Faith Formation*
- www.pastoralplanning.com Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation.*