

# Evangelism, Mission, and that New-fangled Interweb Thingy



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“The colour of the world is changing day by day” – *Les Miserables*

## Introduction

It is mind-blowing to examine the dramatic way that technology is transforming our lives for ever. In the first 50 years of the 20th century, the new engineering arrived: electricity, cars, planes, and sadly, mechanized warfare. Then the second half of the century brought us the new electronic media – radio, TV, tapes and CDs. And finally, affordable home computers, the Internet and ‘go-everywhere’ phones.

## Communication cultures

An equivalent far-reaching media revolution hit the world 550 years earlier: Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press. As books became vastly cheaper and easier to distribute, Western society was transformed. Education, science, the written arts – the Renaissance blossomed. The Bible was unlocked for the masses. The Reformation was enabled. The ministry of the Church was dramatically enhanced and changed. Because it was now easy to codify and distribute concepts and information on paper, the way that people actually thought and communicated – **even when not using paper** – was transformed too. The West moved from an ‘oral communication culture’ [1] to a ‘print communication culture’.

By about 1950, radio, TV and record-players were increasingly impacting our lives. Communication at a distance was no longer confined to the written word, usually read by one person at a time as an individual experience. It became oral or visual, and was very often a shared experience. However, like print, it was still a one-way linear medium, with the audience as mainly passive consumers. This was the era of the ‘broadcast communication culture’.

The quantum leap came in the last decade of the 20th century. The Web, computers and mobile phones became cheap and mainstream. The speed of adoption of the Web has been faster than any previous medium. Radio took 38 years to achieve the market penetration that TV achieved in 13 years, yet the Internet did it in only four. The ‘digital communication culture’ [2] was upon us. By the end of 2009, researchers claimed that 1.75 billion people were using the Web [3], and over 3 billion people owned a mobile phone. This is – remarkably – 25% and 50% of the world’s population respectively, with the majority of users outside the West.

Those who grew up with home computers and other electronic gizmos can be regarded as ‘citizens’ of the digital age. To them, digital is natural and instinctive. But over-25 adults came to these things later in life. They are the ‘immigrants’ to the digital world, some of them only occasional, even reluctant, ‘tourists’.

It is vital to understand the nature of our new digital communication culture, because it is shifting the way we think and communicate, **even offline**. Christian writers such as Shane Hipps in *Flickering Pixels* [4] and Rex Miller in *The Millennium Matrix* [5] reveal that our digital culture is rapidly becoming nearer to the oral communication cultures that have survived in countries where literacy or availability of reading materials are not high. Story, visual imagery, dialogue and community are key elements of the digital communication culture.

## **Not just 'print on a screen'**

The Internet is not just 'print on a screen'. And more than any other medium, the user is in control, free to choose her path through any of billions of websites, blogs, video clips or Twitter streams and interact with them. The Web is far more than the biggest reference library in history (though it is indeed that – an incredible 'ask the planet' repository of knowledge). It's a market place, a strategic connecting communication system just as Roman Road network was in New Testament times, and almost anything else you need it to be.

Concurrent with the emergence of the digital media has been the transition to the new postmodern post-Christian worldview [6] across the West and beyond. Truth is perceived as relative and personal rather than absolute and universal.

Christians were quick to see the significance of this new communication medium, though slower to use it in evangelism. The vast majority of Christian websites are 'insider' resources for other Christians – the same situation that pertains with books and DVDs [7]. Even when we create evangelistic sites, we may instinctively try to use the Web in the same way we used previous mediums, for example writing one-way linear material more like online tracts and booklets (so-called 'brochureware'), or as an equivalent of church sermons. Only those who really 'get' the nature of the Web as a postmodern medium can use it effectively.

The 2008 US presidential election illustrates this graphically: it was the first election where digital media were decisive. The Obama campaign instinctively understood the Web, how to integrate it with mobile phones, social networking, other media and people on the ground [8]. They created a bottom-up, grass-roots campaign that gave a sense of ownership to millions ('together we can do it'). News was often announced to people first by text message, and only later to the news media. Inquirers were quickly linked with follow-up from volunteers on the ground. The McCain campaign perceived the Internet as just another top-down one-way advertising medium like TV, and suffered accordingly.

North America has had the critical mass to pioneer much of the digital revolution, and is still the centre of gravity for the English-speaking Christian Web. In USA the *Internet Evangelism Coalition* (a partnership of major ministries, including the *Billy Graham* organization and *Campus Crusade*) was strategic in the early days to envision people for online evangelism, using conferences and other initiatives. One spin-off was *Internet Evangelism Day*, which is both an annual web awareness day each April, and a year-round resource guide on all aspects of digital outreach.

## **Online evangelism is for anyone, not just techies**

It's important to correct a common misconception: that online evangelism is only for technical people. This is completely untrue! Not only are there many opportunities [9] within e-mentoring and social networking that only require normal keyboard skills, but modern CMS (Content Management) software [10] allows the easy creation of blogs and websites using online text-editing boxes. The *TruthMedia* outreach sites (referred to later) are built entirely on the Wordpress CMS system. Anyone can create a blog or simple website using a CMS system.

## **Properties of the Web as a medium**

### **1. *Non-linear and interactive***

Unlike a novel or video, there is no real start or finish point to a website. Users pick and choose what they want to do online and usually go directly to resources that relate to them, often by using a search engine and bypassing the homepage.

One of the key attractions of the Web is interactivity. Users choose what webpages they view. Each person will have a unique route of personal choice though any website, and across billions of webpages around the world.

The two-way nature of the web means that the user is no longer a passive recipient. When we listen to radio, the experience is one-way – unless we can phone in or write a letter. But the Web makes it easy for users to express opinions and interact with others by email or instant messenger, online forum or blog comment. At last, 'my opinion counts'. The Web is essentially relationships, and this is reflected increasingly in the whole field of social networking – Facebook, Twitter, etc. Since effective biblical evangelism and ministry is also highly relational, there is rather a close fit here!

### **2. *Pull medium***

Outreach literature is a 'push' medium: for instance, people place tracts into others' hands. Radio too is largely a push medium – within a limited range of available stations, the user listens (or turns off). The Internet however is a 'pull' medium. It draws people in – but only within the topics on which they wish to be drawn. It is therefore more like a reference library or shopping mall rather than a literature distribution program. There is no automatic audience for a website. Many Christian websites aspire to be evangelistic, yet in fact largely 'preach to the choir'. To engage with not-yet-Christians, particularly those who are not already seeking, requires us to meet people on their ground, rather than ours, on the basis of their felt needs or particular secular interests. This is termed the 'Bridge Strategy' [11]. Research suggests that at any one time, around one third of any population are suffering some level of personal life issue more serious than the inevitable day-to-day minor knocks [12]. The Web can be a fountain of hope to those who are hurting.

A very helpful modification of the Engel Scale, called the Gray Matrix [13], helps us to visualize what a person (or grouping) feels about the Gospel, both in terms of attitude and knowledge.

### **3. *'Anonymous intimacy'***

People can ask questions online they might not dare to raise with even their closest friend. This is hugely significant, especially in 10-40 window countries where being seen publicly to inquire about faith can result, at minimum, in considerable disapprobation from family and the community [14].

## **Opportunities around the world**

There are many online opportunities to share the good news of Jesus internationally. Yet in many non-English languages, there is little evangelistic outreach designed for outsiders. Even in some European languages, particularly Eastern Europe, there is almost nothing.

Japan is a highly-wired nation of sophisticated web users with an advanced mobile phone network that is used to access the Web more often than desktop PCs. It is also a nation

where Christianity is mainly regarded with benign indifference and ignorance rather than active hostility, and where most Japanese people are unlikely to know a Christian personally. In this context, digital media can be crucial to building relationships with Japanese, starting them thinking and moving into a spiritual journey [15]. But in comparison with the huge need in Japan, these God-given tools are not yet being used sufficiently.

Surprisingly few mission agencies are yet involved in online outreach (though the Web has transformed all mission communication, recruitment, prayer support, news distribution and research). *Campus Crusade* is a major exception, with ministry (not just to college students) in a range of languages. Their Canadian *TruthMedia.com* team has a portfolio of websites designed for different audiences, such as men, women and students. These sites are highly outsider-friendly, frequently addressing felt-needs and life issues. A comparison between their women's outreach site *WomenTodayMagazine.com*, and an outwardly similar site they operate for Christian women, makes a valuable case study [16]. They have also created a valuable e-mentoring system, so that any inquirer who contacts the site is linked with a volunteer mentor to answer their questions by email, build a relationship, and lead them on in their spiritual journey. Real-time chat follow-up is used too.

The Middle East is one area where mission groups are effectively engaged online. They also network together with other media and local churches to integrate ministry and follow-up. An annual conference helps to build and maintain these partnerships. There are a growing range of similar informal networks and conferences for other countries too [17].

One remarkable inter-mission multimedia project for a Himalayan country demonstrates the potential. The team took an existing bible-storying DVD called *The Hope Video*, and with permission added new scenes in that language and culture: contextualized artwork, music and dance, interwoven with the existing acted narrative of the NT story from the *Hope* video. Filming in another Himalayan country used diaspora nationals for dancing, music and the spoken story. This project integrates the distribution of the new DVD with a three-language website, radio ministry in the target language, and believers on the ground. It's an approach that could be adapted for other countries and cultures.

The Web also provides retired and returned missionaries with a unique opportunity to continue to minister to their country of service. Through blogs, websites, Facebook, forums and discussion groups, chat-rooms or other forms of social networking, former missionaries can build redemptive relationships across the continents.

It is worth noting that in the 21st century Western church, there is a growing awareness that we must now use here the same insights that the mission movement has long understood:

- understanding and relating to an alien non-Christian culture needs respect and sensitivity – any attitude of entitlement to preach is misplaced and off-putting
- finding areas of redemptive analogy in popular culture and using them as starting points (see below)
- using their language, not ours
- evangelism as a two-way dialogue and story-telling, not one-way lectures of abstract concepts
- no quick fixes – evangelism is long-term relationship-building
- social service and ministering to felt needs are integral to the Gospel
- an outwardly homogenous society is actually made up of many different people- or affinity-groups, and each may need a different route to reach them

All these conceptual changes are key to online and offline evangelism, even in the West. We can note wryly that there may still be churches very happy to send missionaries out to other countries to use these principles, but who would regard such approaches as dangerous and un-necessary innovations for home ministry! Equally, it is sad to see that in some nations where the national church was planted by missionaries, the church may have replaced these insights with Western models of ministry acquired via, for example, Christian TV, leading to 'quick fix' preaching or a prosperity gospel.

Dave Hackett of *visionSynergy* sums up effective evangelistic communication: "Appeal to their authorities, speak their language, use their imagery."

## **Popular culture**

Suppose God sent you a letter. And in it, He offered you a gift – a simple evangelistic approach similar to the parables that Jesus used. Something that would engage with people's interests, and employ a common language and experience. Would you want to use it?

We are convinced that this is exactly God's heart, and that He does indeed offer us a resource which is grossly under-used for ministry: contemporary culture – that is, the world of film, TV, music, theatre, books. Just as missionaries look for embedded parallels in their host cultures, we in the West can equally find many compelling redemptive illustrations from secular culture [18].

## **Mobile devices**

By 2020, experts predict that the majority of web access will use mobile devices. In the mobile arena, developments are proceeding at lightning speed. Desktop PCs and laptops are much the same as five years ago (just a bit faster with more memory), and the chances are that you are reading this on a computer several years old. But mobile devices and applications are advancing month by month. What will the mobile world look like by 2020? *Pew Internet* suggests that mobiles will be 'More Computer Than Phone' [19]. We need to be ahead of the curve, and develop strategies that will match the new mobile context [20].

## **Social networking**

Much online evangelism is intentional and attractational, based on a website and aiming to entice people to read, interact and respond, hopefully entering into dialogue with a real person.

However, the growth of online social networking introduces a different area of potential. If Facebook was a country, it would be the fourth largest in the world. Social networking can be visualized as a highly-leveraged extension of the natural relationships we build in the physical world – friends, family, co-workers. We do not constantly preach at them, but our incarnational presence in their lives may be a route to sharing truths at appropriate times. Gentle references to faith on a Facebook page can also start such a dialogue, with those we already know (or even with friends of friends) who visit our page. There is even an annual 'Online Missions Trip' for young Christian people using Facebook [21].

Social networking sites can also be used to find people of another nationality or ethnic group. If done appropriately and sensitively, this 'Facebook hopping' can build real bridges. For instance, a literature outreach ministry for a certain ethnic group in West Africa is finding Facebook a great way to make new contacts, and point them to evangelistic material in their language, online or available by post. By searching on Facebook for various family names which are unique to this people group, it is easy to make one-to-one contact with them,

giving an invitation to become 'friends' with a Facebook page carefully designed for this purpose. (This has to be done slowly, so that it does not trigger Facebook's spam filters.)

The microblog service Twitter became mainstream during 2009 [22]. It first gained widespread public awareness when Twitter users shared news and pictures of the Airbus ditching in the Hudson River, well in advance of the news media; and when actor and broadcaster Stephen Fry tweeted his plight of being trapped in a broken lift (elevator)! As users have probed its potential, Twitter has evolved into various niches. In young tech-savvy churches and conferences, it is common to find an ongoing conversation being conducted by Twitter during a sermon or conference session. College lecturers may invite real-time feedback and questions about their session via Twitter. Nothing illustrates the digital 'citizen/immigrant' divide more graphically! 'Citizens' brains are truly wired up differently – they find it natural to send frequent short text messages (often with one hand) while listening to something else.

New Twitter tools seem to come online almost daily. Twitter has a similar potential to Facebook for evangelism and relationship building. Because people's 'tweets' are public, it is also possible to make contact with people tweeting, for example, about a certain life problem, and who are in a particular geographical location, using publicly-available web tools. This enables churches or ministries to make contact with people who may be open to receiving help. (Once marketers start to exploit this opportunity too much, this avenue will doubtless be increasingly restricted or blocked.)

### **Church websites**

Church sites represent a huge opportunity to reach the community. Without a web presence, a church is almost invisible, yet the Internet can offer the wider community a unique 'shop window' into their fellowship. Unlike a normal evangelistic site, a church website has to straddle two very different groups: Christians (members or potential members), and non-yet-Christians.

Church sites can fail to effectively relate to both groups. Yet when they do, they find it is possible to engage with non-Christians. A major conceptual problem for many church sites is that they position themselves as a building where meetings happen, a place where 'we'll preach the answers at you'. This impression is often reinforced by the homepage, where the only graphic is a photo of the building! It is far more effective (and biblical) to portray the church as a family of people who long to be inclusive, saying: 'we welcome you to join us on our spiritual journey'.

*Internet Evangelism Day* offers a self-assessment questionnaire, to help churches develop their sites to be more outsider friendly [23]. *Redcliffe College* student Ceri Longville recently completed an insightful research study on church sites called *Reaching the Community with Church Websites* [24]. There is a great need for research into many areas of digital evangelism, otherwise we are 'flying without radar'. Check our page of research studies, including Dave Bennett's vital 'How Adults Become Christians' [25] which demonstrates the paramount importance of relationships.

### **Helping you: the Guide Network**

The *Guide Network* [26], in which *Internet Evangelism Day* and *visionSynergy* are lead partners, exists to help missions and other groups find opportunities using the web and mobile platforms. We also have a speaker panel [27] offering a wide range of strategists who can speak at Bible College seminars or conferences, or provide consultancy help to mission agencies and other groups.

We also want to encourage Bible Colleges to consider ways to develop web evangelism modules within their courses [28], and we also hope to create ready-made course material for this purpose if there is a demand.

Our *Digital Evangelism Issues* blog [29] and email newsletter *Web Evangelism Bulletin* [30] supplement the growing resources at *Internet Evangelism Day*.

### The challenge for the future

We believe that the Web and digital media are God-given tools with a huge potential to integrate with other forms of Great Commission evangelism around the world. We need the 'Issachar Factor' – to be like the men of Issachar, "... who understood the times and knew what Israel should do..." (1 Chronicles 12:32).

Let George Verwer have the last word: "The Internet is one of the most key tools that God has given us in the church today. Internet Evangelism is a dynamic, effective, cutting-edge ministry that more people should get involved in!"

### Footnotes

- [1] [www.internetevangelismday.com/oral-communication.php](http://www.internetevangelismday.com/oral-communication.php)
- [2] [www.internetevangelismday.com/digital-communication-culture.php](http://www.internetevangelismday.com/digital-communication-culture.php)
- [3] [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com)
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Tony is available for consultation or networking on any area of digital evangelism. For more information please visit [InternetEvangelismDay.com/feedback](http://InternetEvangelismDay.com/feedback)

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