

***Religious contents in information flow and technology revolution:***

**They chose the medium; let us choose messages**

By Joshua M. Z. Stanton

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**Summary**

The media shapes the terms in which messages are conveyed. Religious organizations and leaders have the opportunity to amplify their messages by rooting them in traditional teachings but being mindful of the new dynamics created by the Internet. Ultimately, religious groups hold an edge over many other organizations in “bundling,” interpreting, and synthesizing ideas from the Internet into accessible and meaningful content for their communities. As such, they should expand their operations to include online components. Even as instantaneous media can at times foment controversy, leadership and forethought will enable many organizations to weather possible challenges in their online work. It appears that overall benefits outweigh costs for religious leaders and organizations that engage current and potential community members online.

**Introduction: Media in the Age of the Internet**

In a single line, brilliant and controversial scholar Marshall McLuhan defined the study of modern media: “The medium is the message.”<sup>1</sup> The technological means by which an idea is presented to the public can be more important than the very words used to do so.

McLuhan’s insight is more applicable now than ever before. Since it was first presented in 1964, the varieties of media have both grown exponentially and shifted fundamentally in their nature. Once-dominant television – and before that radio, itself preceded by the printed word – has since been challenged, if not outright subordinated, to the Internet.

According to Internet World Stats, a marketing research consultancy, approximately two billion people worldwide use the Internet.<sup>2</sup> Of great significance, these statistics indicate that Asia, not Europe or North America, leads the way in Internet usage, with well over 825,000,000 users. This shift in media usage not only reflects the economic development taking place in Asia,

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<sup>1</sup> *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, with Lewis H. Lapham. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> “World Internet Users and Population Stats.” <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>>.

but a point about the Internet in general: it is the most international form of media ever created. Friends “gchat” online across the world, conference call overseas using Skype software, and collaborate on multi-million dollar endeavors in corporate offices that span Hong Kong and New York via e-mail. Even Africa, the least economically developed continent, boasts well over 100,000,000 Internet users, many of whom engage online media by way of cellular telephones – an advance that has in good part obviated the need for more localized telephone and cable infrastructure.<sup>3</sup>

Compounding its internationality is the very nature of the Internet itself: interactivity. Unlike other forms of media, such as television or the radio, users actively engage in Internet media. They create new websites, weblogs, and articles, in doing so expanding and reshaping the Internet’s content. Its very vitality derives from personal relevance and content that can be updated, modified, or redirected at any time. The Internet is, in a sense, the most collaborative project ever undertaken. With two billion contributors and users, it is a work conceived of by few but influenced by all.

As a result of personal contributions to the Internet from around the world, a provocative 200-word posting on an informal “weblog” (more commonly known as a “blog”) can ricochet into a major international news story in a matter of hours. No longer do newscasters or television stations hold a monopoly on disseminating information. Individuals everywhere can command followings on their websites and break news stories that impact the way we understand world events.

Television and radio outlets have responded to the dramatic shifts caused by Internet media with live television “webcasts,” “live-streaming” online radio programs, Facebook “fan pages,” and blogs that feature comments made by viewers. Even as they reach their audiences in large part through unidirectional programs, they have created more personalized content and a means by which viewers can react to – and on occasion directly impact<sup>4</sup> – programs.

These careful adaptations have enabled television, and to a lesser extent radio, to preserve their roles in shaping public opinion; they merely do not maintain that ability exclusively. As the London *Economist* describes in its special report on television, “Even the technological futurists found it hard to imagine the explosion of websites, social networking and mobile phones that was to come. Yet these things have not displaced television. Rather, they have squeezed around it.”<sup>5</sup>

Print publications, by contrast, have not fared as well. Newspapers throughout the United States have lost significant market share and revenue, as Internet publications have seized

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<sup>3</sup> “World Internet Users and Population Stats.” <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>>. According to a stark reflection by bloggers for the World Bank, “94 percent of urban Africans are now near a GSM [Global System for Mobile Communications] signal” and over five billion subscriptions to cellular telephones exist around the world. For more, see: <<http://blogs.worldbank.org/africacan/more-cell-phones-than-toilets>>.

<sup>4</sup> “Reality TV,” in which viewers can vote for candidates online or by phone for various contests, is a quintessential example of interactive television.

<sup>5</sup> “Changing the channel: A special report on television.” *The Economist*. April 29, 2010. <<http://www.economist.com/node/15980859>>.

large segments of their readership and an overall willingness to pay for them has declined.<sup>6</sup> Print publications in other countries are likely to experience similar trends in the coming years, if they have not already.

At the same time as many traditional print publications have trended towards decline, entirely new subspecialties of media have emerged as leaders online. In particular, social networking websites (often simply referred to as “social media”) have become central to the Internet. The most popular among them, Facebook, now boasts “more than 500 million active users,” and “700 billion minutes per month spent on Facebook” by all of its users combined.<sup>7</sup> That means that nearly one in four overall Internet users is an “active user” of the Facebook website and that one in eight overall Internet users logs onto Facebook every day.<sup>8</sup> The website was only founded in 2004.<sup>9</sup>

Facebook and other social media – notably Twitter, MySpace, and Digg – owe their popularity to the ability to maximize the benefits that the Internet as a medium provides. Users of these websites create profiles designed to show their individuality<sup>10</sup>; they interact with other users immediately and freely, without significant interference from the websites’ designers<sup>11</sup>; they can communicate through a variety of formats, whether pictures or online videos, short messages to individuals or open letters to the public; and they enable individuals to interact with distant acquaintances for social or professional purposes. Individualism, instantaneousness, freedom, multi-media interactions, and the opportunity to engage in personal interactions with new people define social media, as well as the Internet itself.

As the quintessential forms of media so far developed in the Internet Age, social networking websites provide crucial lessons for religious, civic, and business leaders seeking to convey religious content online. The medium has changed in ways that appear irreversible. The question is how to seize upon the opportunities provided by the Internet in order to promote religious values and positive interfaith relations. The answer is complex, still in many respects emerging, and includes careful responses to challenges that rapid, public, and global interactions online entail.

## **Religious Movements Venture Online**

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<sup>6</sup> For more, see *The State of the News Media* 2009, produced by the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism. <[http://www.stateofthemedias.org/2009/narrative\\_newspapers\\_audience.php](http://www.stateofthemedias.org/2009/narrative_newspapers_audience.php)>.

<sup>7</sup> “Press Room.” <<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>>.

<sup>8</sup> These statistics were derived from a combination of those presented in the “Press Room” and “World Internet Users and Population Stats.”

<sup>9</sup> “Facebook Factsheet.” <<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?factsheet>>.

<sup>10</sup> These profiles include biographical information, photographs, personal interests, workplace and educational affiliations, and connections they have to others with profiles on the social media website.

<sup>11</sup> The frequent exception to this is patrolling to inhibit the exchange of pornography and messages that may be considered harassment.

McLuhan's adage, "The medium is the message,"<sup>12</sup> is incisive, but also has its limitations. The medium is not the message; it merely defines the terms in which a message can be conveyed. Ultimately, the person presenting that message maintains significant control over the message itself. The Internet will indeed select for messages that play into individualism, instantaneousness, freedom, and multi-media (or multi-sensory) interactions. But religious ideas can still be conveyed in those terms. It requires adaptation to the format of the Internet, not an internal change of the religious worldviews themselves.

If anything, the messages that the Internet selects for place religious groups and leaders at an advantage. The Internet simultaneously prioritizes individualism and connectedness to others – and ultimately the creation of online communities. Even as one maintains a personal profile on Facebook, one also joins "groups" and becomes "fans" of organizations, people, and ideas. In many respects, Internet users form online congregations around ideas or leaders who inspire them. While messages are often conveyed in a more concise or immediate way on the Internet, versatility and profound knowledge of core religious texts enables clergy and lay leaders to effectively share their messages. The fast-pace interchanges require, if anything, a greater depth of knowledge.

Religious websites, organizations, and personas also provide essential services to online communities. The challenge that the Internet poses to its users is an overabundance of information. Religious leadership naturally entails the three crucial services: the bundling, interpretation, and the synthesis of ideas. Religious organizations gather reputable sources of information and "bundle" them together for easier use, interpret these sources in order to draw out overall messages, and synthesize these ideas with current events and modern experiences to provide a salve for age-old existential questions and the challenges of contemporary life.

Without religious, spiritual, or philosophical guidance, many Internet users remain overwhelmed by information. As the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) notes, this overabundance even holds significant implications for entire countries and the ways in which their citizenry engages in matters of public policy:

The Internet and other media, as well initiatives aimed at building information repositories through the collaboration of individuals, such as wikis and blogs, make more information available to more people than ever before. Therefore, the ideal of a "fully informed decision maker" is far from the case: although citizens are constantly bombarded by information, this information is not necessarily translated into knowledge.... On the contrary, more and more people are overwhelmed and confused by the amount of information available.<sup>13</sup>

These trends online are of even great importance to religious communities, which have long spanned the globe and are now more interconnected than ever. Religious and lay leaders can play

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<sup>12</sup> *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, with Lewis H. Lapham. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> "Democracy in the 'information age': Opportunities and risks." Summary of findings in "Statistics and Politics in a 'Knowledge Society,'" by Enrico Giovannini of the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development. The report was released in May, 2007.  
<[http://www.oecd.org/document/7/0,3343,en\\_40033426\\_40037349\\_41319495\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/7/0,3343,en_40033426_40037349_41319495_1_1_1_1,00.html)>.

a critical role in helping adherents make sense of current events and information from within the framework of authentic religious teachings.

### **Case Study: Jim Wallis and *Sojourners***

A number of religious organizations already make use of the Internet to help practitioners contextualize their life's experiences and the information that abounds online. In the United States, Reverend Jim Wallis and the *Sojourners* magazine and community over which he presides, may be the most noted example.

After co-founding *Sojourners* in 1971, Reverend Wallis has guided the organization through a number of transitions, including political changes, demographic shifts, and technological revolutions. Even so, the organization has maintained its core religious values: "Our mission is to articulate the biblical call to social justice, inspiring hope and building a movement to transform individuals, communities, the church, and the world."<sup>14</sup>

The publication and community it sustains has effectively made the leap online. All issues since 1994 have been made available in full online – an early start, compared to other publications that remain ambivalent about Internet resources. *Sojourners* is now effectively hybridized, with a print publication, website, blog, e-mail listserv, and Facebook "fanpage" that together reach over 250,000 people.<sup>15</sup> The result of this transformation has not only been a voice for *Sojourners* and Reverend Wallis online, but the amplification of those voices in society as a whole. The Internet has created what some technological experts might term an "echo chamber" of ideas.

The reasons behind this increased reach are at least twofold. First, it is far easier to join the community; doing so no longer requires a subscription to the magazine or attendance at a public forum or presentation by Jim Wallis. It simply entails signing onto Facebook, going to [www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net), commenting on a blog post (article), or reading one of Jim Wallis' many columns in the *Huffington Post*, *Washington Post*, or other publications. Second, for those previously involved in *Sojourners* and its community, its messages have become more accessible and available in multiple, more up-to-date forms. Subscribers to the magazine can now read about it in print, take part in gatherings in person, and access up-to-the-moment information about it on their computers and Internet-equipped mobile telephones.

The result is a more intense, direct connection to the *Sojourners* community than was possible before. Members of the movement now absorb its values and content more regularly and are able to use it as a source of information about current events and the news, as well as for theological inspiration and religious guidance. These changes bear the mark of careful planning and leadership. The result has been an organization that combines the immediacy and

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<sup>14</sup> "Mission." *Sojourners*. Accessed August 22, 2010. <[http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=about\\_us.mission](http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=about_us.mission)>.

<sup>15</sup> "Jim Wallis: President and Chief Executive Officer" *Sojourners*. Accessed August 22, 2010. <[http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=about\\_us.display\\_staff&staff=Wallis?](http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=about_us.display_staff&staff=Wallis?)>.

personalized nature of the Internet with the age-old values to which it ascribes as a religious organization.

### **Caveat: The Internet is Prone to Controversy**

Even as *Sojourners* has in many respects thrived by harnessing the power of the Internet to reach new members and engage existing ones more fully, it has not been immune to challenges created by the Internet.

In March 2010, television and radio host Glenn Beck challenged the idea that social justice was a core tenet of Christianity, even going so far as to call it a “perversion of the gospel.”<sup>16</sup> Beck then singled out one of its major proponents, Jim Wallis, who had become even more of a public persona through his effective use of Internet technology.<sup>17</sup>

After strong interchanges (seldom in person or face-to-face), carried out in a series of newspaper articles, television segments, blog post (articles), and radio broadcasts, Jim Wallis and Glenn Beck appeared to be interlocked in a public dispute. Both had access to online and traditional media; both had strong followings; but one was an established religious leader, while the other was more of a political commentator, known for his provocative tactics.

Ultimately, and of great note, both appear to have benefitted from their public disagreement. Neither was censured within their organizations; their supporters – highly disparate in composition to begin with – remained loyal; and both used the opportunity to galvanize their base of support, either to advocate for them online or raise money for their causes. The controversy raised the profile of both figures, without undoing either, at least in the short and medium terms.

It is little surprise that Glenn Beck, as a television persona, weathered the media frenzy online – fuelled by parallel stories in print, on the radio, and on television. But what is noteworthy is how Jim Wallis, as a religious leader with a large and growing online following, managed to do the same.

Apparent in his encounters to Beck were three strategies: maintaining credibility as a religious leader through use of sacred texts, using facts to counter criticism, and responding rapidly to developments as they emerged. In essence, Wallis remained calm and reinforced his usual points about social justice being a core Christian value.

For example, when Jim Wallis offered to dialogue with Beck about the meaning of social justice to Christians, Beck responded with threats. The latter railed,

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<sup>16</sup> Much of this controversy was covered directly by *Sojourners*, including this and other statements made by Glenn Beck. < <http://blog.sojournal.net/2010/03/11/glenn-beck-responds-social-justice-is-a-perversion-of-the-gospel/>>.

<sup>17</sup> Wallis has been a prominent figure for decades and has published a number of popular books and countless articles – even before the Internet came into mainstream use.

So you go ahead and you continue to do your protest thing, and that's great. I love it. But just know — the hammer is coming, because little do you know, for eight weeks, we've been compiling information on you, your cute little organization, and all the other cute little people that are with you. And when the hammer comes, it's going to be hammering hard and all through the night, over and over...<sup>18</sup>

Though likely appalled at such a statement, Wallis maintained his composure and stayed on point. In article after article and television appearances replayed on YouTube.com and Facebook, he reaffirmed his belief that Christianity was fundamentally based on the value of social justice. He remained up-to-date with Beck's latest "hammer," responded by backing up his theological assertions, and increased his public profile by coming across as a moderate religious leader trying to live by his faith, even in the face of strident criticism.

On March 27, Wallis even went so far as to ask his followers to pray for Glenn Beck:

Jesus said that we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. So whatever Beck does, Christians who want to follow Jesus should not personally attack Beck but, rather, should pray for him, for the poor and for our country, which is being harmed by an increasingly poisonous public discourse.<sup>19</sup>

By rooting his actions and words in the core religious texts to which he adheres, Wallis managed not only to overcome criticism but also address it rapidly and effectively. In doing so, he increased his public persona and demonstrated that age-old wisdom from his religious tradition was more important than ever before to constituents on the Internet.

The Internet in large measure enabled the Reverend Jim Wallis to come across as a strong leader. By responding rapidly to Beck through multiple forms of media and with use of Scripture and facts about Sojourners, he weathered a controversy that was in large part also fomented by the Internet. Wallis' interchanges with Beck (which may well continue into the future) provide important guidance about how religious leaders and organizations can respond to challenges that may arise as a result of instantaneous and interactive media.

## **Conclusion: New media and sacred messages**

With care, thought, and grounding in one's own religious tradition, it is possible – if not advisable – to create online resources for fellow religious practitioners. While risks do exist, the apparent benefits far outweigh them, especially given the potential to interact with community members around the world in a personal and timely way.

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<sup>18</sup> This and other portions of the interchange between Beck and Wallis have been covered extensively by *Sojourners*, including this piece on March 15, 2010. < <http://blog.sojo.net/2010/03/15/in-spite-of-glenn-becks-new-threats-my-invitation-to-dialogue-stands/>>.

<sup>19</sup> "Christians Stand Up to Beck." March 27, 2010. *Washington Post*. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/26/AR2010032603630.html>>.

Religion may in time become a singular means by which to bundle, interpret and synthesize information online in order to make it more accessible and less overwhelming to Internet users. Given its potency and widespread use, the Internet will profoundly impact religious practice in the coming century; the open question is how much the reverse will be true.

Drawing from the Jewish mystical (*Hasidic*) tradition that I respect and admire, I sense that the Internet is not as daunting as it sometimes seems amid the flood of information. As Rabbi Hayim Heikel of Amdur expressed through verse, “The basic principle is that you should not do anything – great or small – without first thinking about its Divine source.”<sup>20</sup> The interactive nature of the Internet may be the single greatest collaborative project ever undertaken by humankind. It is, in my mind, a manifestation of our innate creativity, which is itself a gift from our Creator. Given the Internet’s potential to link people and provide them with knowledge of themselves and each other, it is upon religious leaders to engage with the Internet and ensure that it can be seen and used as an enterprise reflective of the Creator who made it possible.

The revolution of information technology is well underway. Its greatest undertaking – the Internet – should be approached by religious organizations with care rather than apprehension.

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<sup>20</sup> “Emotional Mindfulness.” Or Rose and Ebn D. Leader. *God in All Moments: Mystical and Practical Spiritual Wisdom from Hasidic Masters*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2004: page 121.



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