

Social media: Friend or Foe, Google or Hornswoggle?

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USCCB Communication Committee

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Thank you for this time today.

I often hear people, both in my work and in my circle of friends, who dismiss social media as frivolous and shallow. Who can blame them?

Twittering.

Status updates.

Blogs.

The very words used by the practitioners seem to beg for ridicule. Their light-hearted twisting of the language suggests that these are the latest fad in a culture that picks up and drops fads quicker than the time it takes me to figure out my cell phone bill.

I am here today to suggest that you should not allow yourselves to be fooled by its appearance. Social media is proving itself to be a force with which to be reckoned. If not, the church may be facing as great a challenge as that of the Protestant Reformation.

That sounds like more hyperbole, doesn't it? But the numbers are compelling.

There are more than 500 million active users on Facebook. If it were a nation, only India and China would have more citizens. The American Red Cross reported that it raised more than \$5 million dollars, \$10 at a time, through a text messaging service. One out of eight MARRIED couples in the United States say they met through social media. It took 13 years for television to reach 50 million users. After the iPod was introduced, it took only nine months for 1 billion applications to be downloaded.

Pope Benedict XVI calls the world of social media a Digital Continent, with natives, immigrants, and even missionaries. He encourages Catholics, especially our priests, to approach this culture of 140 characters and virtual friendships as a great opportunity for evangelization. We are asked to respect the culture of these Twitterers and Facebookers, and to engage on their terms to bring Christ into their “brave new world.”

The opportunities can be incredible. As I stated previously, the participation in this new form of media is staggering. Media ecologists and other communication experts cite several reasons for the phenomenal growth:

1. a low threshold of investment, both in user knowledge and finances, especially given its reach
2. the opportunity for immediate dialogue and conversation that transcends geographical and other physical barriers
3. and the speed in universal adaption.

Let me give you one example. The USCCB started a community on Facebook last August. There are now 25,000 ‘fans’ associated with that community. Every day, USCCB staff provides at least four items of information to those 25,000 people: the daily Scripture readings, news releases, links to information on our marriage and vocation websites, and other information. Furthermore, if those 25,000 are like the average profile of a Facebook user, they have 130 friends, or contacts, on Facebook. With one click they can share the information they receive from USCCB. If only 10 percent of the USCCB fans share what they receive from USCCB, we are reaching 325,000 people. Multiple times a day. All it costs us is staff time.

And these are not just young people. Almost half of Americans classified as the baby boomers – born between 1947 and 1964 – have a Facebook account. Social media may have started with the younger generation, but it is now a very useful tool to reach Catholics of all ages.

Although social media has been around for less than 10 years, it doesn’t have the makings of a fad. We’re being told that it is causing as fundamental a shift in communication patterns and behavior as the printing press did 500 years ago. And I don’t think I have to remind you of what happened when the Catholic Church was slow to adapt to that new technology. By the time we decided to seriously promote that common folk should read the Bible, the Protestant Reformation was well underway.

Because it is so different from mass media and mass communication, social media is creating a new culture on this Digital Continent. Young people use it as their first point of reference. In other words, they're not even going to their email to get information. The news, entertainment, their friends – are all coming to them through their mobile devices and through their social networks. The implications of that for a church which is struggling to get those same young people to enter our churches on Sunday are staggering. If the church is not on their mobile device, it doesn't exist. The Church does not have to change its teachings to reach young people, but we must deliver it to them in a new way.

When the Church does attempt to evangelize the Digital Continent, it has some serious challenges to overcome. Most of us don't understand the culture.

One of the greatest challenges of this culture to the Catholic Church is its egalitarianism. Anyone can create a blog; everyone's opinion is valid. And if a question or contradiction is posted, the digital natives expect a response and something resembling a conversation. We can choose not to enter into that cultural mindset, but we do so at great peril to the Church's credibility and approachability in the minds of the natives, those who are growing up in this new culture. This is a new form of pastoral ministry. It may not be the platform we were seeking, but it is an opportunity of such magnitude that we should consider carefully the consequences of disregarding it.

Secondly, the Church cannot abandon legacy communication outlets while it invests in the new media. Although the baby boomers may be going to Facebook to

stay in contact with their grandchildren, they still use newspapers, radio, television and books. Those media have attributes and strengths that social media does not. Not to mention the fact that most financial donors to the Church still rely on these legacy media. So the Church needs to continue investing in those efforts, while also investing in social media.

Finally, if as bishops you acknowledge that social media is not the latest fad, but a paradigm shift, please accept the fact that your staffs – and perhaps you as well – will need training and direction. In the past, the church would often build new parish structures, knowing that people would recognize the church architecture and start showing up. On the Digital Continent, “if you build it, they will come” does not hold true. It takes careful strategizing and planning to make social media an effective and efficient communication tool, not only for your communications department, but for all of the church’s ministries. We digital immigrants need lessons on the digital culture, just as we expect missionaries to learn the cultures of the people they are evangelizing. We have to be enculturated. It’s more than just learning how to create a Facebook account. It’s learning how to think, live and embrace life on the Digital Continent.

This past month the USCCB Communications Department, at the direction of the Communication Committee, conducted a survey of diocesan communication directors which focused on their use of social media and their needs.

An executive summary is available to you on the table outside, and it is posted on the password-protected website for the bishops. The survey showed that

your staffs have a strong desire to engage new media – only two percent of the responders say that they personally avoid using social media. But it came across loud and clear that they want help in engaging. They want to be enculturated in this missionary world.

I hope you are relieved to learn that, when asked what they needed to use social media more effectively, they didn't say more money. They *are* looking for staff who are trained – or can be trained – in the use of social media, however.

You may also be happy to hear that they don't need you to learn how to use Twitter or Facebook. They do need a vision and leadership from you. Is this something that is important to you? Is it a tool that they should be using to reach young people and others who are unchurched? Do you want them to be developing ways to integrate social media into the diocese's communication and evangelization planning? What about fundraising? How much attention should they be giving social media and how do you want to use it?

Depending upon the skills and experience of your staff, they are also seeking support from you as they work in social media. This could be translated as any or all of the following: your affirmation of their efforts, including allowing discussion/dissension/dialogue on your diocese's social media; financial resources for training; and the permission or direction to devote a specific number of hours of their work week to social media. That final item could mean a discussion with them about what do they not do to make room for that time in their day.

When the Communication Committee decided to ask for this time on the agenda, we made it clear to the USCCB Communications Department staff that the presentation should include not only why it was important for bishops to take social media seriously, but also what USCCB would provide to help them and their staffs. The survey provided some direction for us in that regard, but not as much as I had hoped. When asked to identify the single most important issue facing them in the area of social media, no clear answer emerged. The two most common answers were the need for more staffing and resources and the need to identify how to most effectively use social media.

When they were given a list of seven possible resources and asked to rate them as being most useful to their diocesan efforts, nearly six out of ten chose all seven resources as useful or very useful.

What we have been able to discern from these responses is that there is a realization that, even though many dioceses may be beginning to use social media, the church's communication professionals are not devoting the time or expertise that it deserves. By committing to ongoing analysis and research, continued compilation of best practices and guidelines, and education and training opportunities, the USCCB Communications Department intends to assist their colleagues and to support your ministry as bishops on the Digital Continent. They welcome the challenge and hope that we can one day have all of you as our friends on the USCCB Facebook page.