

Expressing Faith in a Digital Age

Dr. Shantanu Dutta



I. INTRODUCTION

Christians, like other religious communities, have for long wrestled with changes in modes of communication and what that means to the expression of faith. To begin with Christians have felt that the sacredness of the word is tied to its form and later Christians pondered whether the word of God and the mission of the church were perhaps compromised by changes to that form. We saw similar struggles in explorations of whether the word of God could be conveyed through film and television, in deliberations about the significance and challenges of Bible apps, and in conversations regarding whether the Christian church can be sustained in digital spaces and using various forms of social media. While some Christians are not comfortable with new media, others accept media change without looking at the way that their faith claims and practices will alter in new media eco systems. They envision new media as the coming of increasingly customized amplifiers permitting an unchanging message to reach ever larger and distant audiences. However, in fact, different media make it feasible for many unique ways of thinking, relating and coexisting at the same time.

II. EVOLUTION OF MEDIA

The arrival of writing, the shift from scroll to codex, the printing press, the spread of education, the advancement of electronic media (radio, telephone, film, and television), and the later upsurge of digital interaction (social media, websites, digital publishing) offer clear examples of the changes in forms of communication. Opposition to new media and its influence is long recognized. Jeremiah (chapter 36) reports that the prophet embraced the new form of the scroll to send a word of the Lord to King Jehoiakim, and that the king reacts by throwing the scroll into the fire. In Scripture, this is the first documented act of religious defiance to new media and its power. Judaism was founded in the era of scroll, and the Torah as scroll has a ritual act not substituted by the codex, in which pages are attached between covers. The early church adopted the codex, the new media of its time. Later printing made it feasible to put multiple translations of the Bible within the reach of ordinary people and forced the church to consider the implications of this change. We might explore this further by unpacking the intricate links between publishing, literacy, and the upswing of modern understanding of the individual. Print didn't merely put the scriptures in more people's reach. Learning to read gave them a new experience of scripture, enhancing the possibility that they now saw themselves as interpreters of the word. In the same way, in the age of televangelism some Christians welcomed the technology, and the genre of the television crusade, without realizing the ways in which they would be dragged into the shapes and extremes of celebrity culture.

*...different media
make it feasible for
many unique ways
of thinking, relating
and coexisting at
the same time.*

III. CHRISTIANS AND DIGITAL MEDIA

Today Christians are living a digital culture. It won't be possible to either oppose it as incompetent of supporting real Christian life or to accept it without thinking through the changes it brings in Christian identity and community. Digital culture presumes that communications are two-way. Whether one blogs, tweets, or posts sermons, digital culture believes that this post is the start of a conversation in which it is feasible for others to act in response, and believes that the original poster is listening in. Given this truth, if

pastors and leaders can establish frameworks for deep conversation, they can assist the community draw on its legacy. It would be significant if church leaders and structures adopt the devices of digital communication even as they try to understand the digital culture in which they seek to preach and practice their faith meaningfully and effectively.

Consider the usage of the term ‘new media’: these technologies and networks maybe ‘new’ for some of us of a certain age but they are a normal everyday feature of the lives of younger generations in India at least and, increasingly, in everywhere else too. Today to talk of ‘new media’ is to date oneself, and to risk declining

Our ‘ecclesia’ cannot sustain; the body of Christ will not be a place of fellowship and belonging, if we do not promote those kinds of conversations that encourage a sense of connection and participation.

to appreciate their ‘ordinariness’ in the day to day lives of so many. There is a need to admit that those who have come of age with digital communications do not live with strong divisions between their ‘on-line’ and their ‘off-line’ existence. The connectivity aided by these gadgets has restructured their existential ecosystem and allows them to live their lives in the environment of networks and models of friendships, association and community that would have been inconceivable till a few decades ago

Moreover, these associations have become major points of reference for young people in their pursuit of news and information, for self-expression, for influencing public opinion and for dialogue and debate. Given the value of the networks and the associated media environment in the lives of individuals today, it is very crucial that the church should seek to create a presence in the ‘digital world’.

Besides, interaction is also at the centre of our daily lives as believers.

The church is a community, it is the coming together of those who been called together by Christ. Our ‘ecclesia’ cannot sustain; the body of Christ will not be a place of fellowship and belonging, if we do not promote those kinds of conversations that encourage a sense of connection and participation. We must learn to comprehend the capacity of social media to make sure that people are being listened to, consulted by, engaged with and valued by the church and their pastors. This is also a matter of tactics and strategy to ensure that the Church can give witness and voice to the faith of the whole people of God gathered together by Christ.

IV. COMMUNICATING IN THIS EVOLVING SPACE

The Church does not only connect with people through those traditional means with which we are most accustomed. If we do not communicate the Gospel in the digital domain in our current times, then we run the risk of becoming unconnected to the lives of many millennials and post millennials and fail in the mandate to bring the gospel to all corners of the earth. The medium is no longer confined to pulpits, radio, TV, newspapers and the internet; we obviously communicate in every facet of our lives. Communication is also a key aspect of our worship liturgies and celebrations. Communication is achieved by how we live out our faith, run our schools hospitals and other ministries, and of course how we treat the poor and vulnerable. The most important message is the strength of our witness to the Gospel – our testimony makes it credible and appreciated in the lives of others, or not. It is our life, our witness, our thoughts, our approach to persons that speaks the loudest, for better or for worse. Social media lets us to see ourselves as others see us. If we are responsive to the comments, assessments and thoughts of those who visit our sites and connect with our postings, we can discover much about how we are understood. We need to get better at discerning how our message is being received and understood, and how we are viewed, by different audiences. We have always, and correctly so, cantered on the substance of our teaching; these days we must pay more attention to our audience, or the multiple audiences we reach out to and

It is our life, our witness, our thoughts, our approach to persons that speak the loudest, for better or worse. Social media lets us to see ourselves as others see us.

understand their worries and queries. We need to recognize better and take note of the situations and environments in which they will meet us and the Gospel we seek to make known in word and deed.

Theologians must help the Church in finding a ‘language’ suitable to the new media environment formed by the technologies and the social networks. This is particularly vital if we are to be faithful to our obligation to speak to those who are not members of our community – to other Christians, to those of other religions, to non-believers and to others who have moved away from any expression of faith. In speaking of language,

...an understanding of the social and communicative effects of digital media would be indispensable for usefulness today among Christian congregations, particularly vis-à-vis the engagement of young people whose life experiences have always been incorporated into the virtual world.

we need to examine our styles of engagement, our means of communication and our lexicon.

We also need to understand that our typical mode of expression was very text dependent while the digital culture leans towards more of visual and multi-media content. Words and text are of course still essential, but our communication will be more helpful if we also gain expertise with images, video, music and animation. We have to rediscover the power of art, music and other emerging forms of creativity to express the foundations of our faith if we have to touch minds and hearts. Just as the stain glass images of the medieval cathedrals spoke to an unschooled congregation, we need to locate digital forms of expression that are apt for a generation that has been labelled as “post-literate”. We have long being become accustomed to telling our story; now we need to figure out how we seek to serve and how our lives are graced and blest. In

speaking of language, we need to recognise that much of our Church vocabulary – particularly our theological and liturgical jargon - can be difficult and bewildering for our contemporaries. We are required to identify simpler words and to use more simple metaphors if we are to catch the attention of the general public.

From a theological standpoint, Christian congregations are interactive at their core, focusing on both relationships with one another and a relationship with God. Effective communication (especially the declaration of the gospel message) is crucial to the Christian mission. Then, it is as clear as day that an understanding of the social and communicative effects of digital media would be indispensable for usefulness today among Christian congregations, particularly vis-à-vis the engagement of young people whose life experiences have always been incorporated into the virtual world. But insight into those social effects is not easy and requires a level of critical thought that may be alien to many churches.

V. PROBLEMS OF THE DIGITAL AGE

Digital media has ushered us into an age typified by individualism and consumerism in ways never previously experienced and that change has eroded trust in established social foundations. At the same time, the digital age has altered and is altering social identity and social relationships. People relate in new ways, people understand themselves and others in different ways, and of course they connect to others daily and globally through these new tools. The significance and experience of friendship is no longer the same; friendship is not so much about mutual responsibility and accountability; personal choice is also not so much about freedom from coercion as it is about one’s ability to do and to buy what one wants. In a digitally connected culture exemplified by rising levels of fear, society has decided to exchange liberty for security. Social life has experienced and is continuing to experience remarkable shifts.

If digital media contributes to the commodification of society as has been examined thus far, including religious features of social life, the outcome is heightened secularization of church life. The reaction of many church leaders to the digital revolution has been in a knee jerk style, by advocating for the increased use of digital media in church life (especially in worship and preaching) without asking crucial questions about how the congregation is transformed by the media. Without these questions being asked and discussed, the use of media may actually accelerate the church’s decline. After all, digital technologies are

changing much of human social life. For much of the twentieth century, it was assumed that the most important basis for understanding religious change was secularization theory, but later on, it became abundantly clear that secularization alone was an inadequate explanation for understanding religious change.

VI. A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE CHANGES

In the twenty-first century, renewal is not just a solution to church decline. Theologically and sociologically, renewal would mean assertively wrestling with the questions being asked today in ways that give meaning and which figure out the re-shaping of personal and corporate identity in a digital society. Church growth will be characterized by an understanding of the effects of the interplay between virtual reality and actual reality on faith, on community on identity, and a relevant expression of the Christian faith and witness.

Theologically and sociologically, renewal would mean assertively wrestling with the questions being asked today in ways that give meaning and that figure out the re-shaping of personal and corporate identity in a digital society.

Jesus lived out the divine command to “love the Lord your God with all of your . . . mind” (Matt 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27) as he dealt with the questions of his day (e.g., Luke 2:47; 5:33; 10:25; 17:20; John 3; 8:33). It is also demonstrated by the apostle Peter in his explanation of the events of Pentecost (Acts 2:14–36) and his address to the Sanhedrin about the identity of Jesus (Acts 4:8–14), by Stephen’s defence of the gospel (Acts 7), and by the apostle Paul in Athens (Acts 17:22–31). Paul mentions the renewal of the mind (Rom 12:2) and Peter asks his readers to have “minds that are alert and fully sober” (1 Pet 1:13; 4:7; 5:8) as they followed Jesus amid a hostile culture. Digital media alters space in a manner that clashes with conventional notions of sacred space. Virtual experiences combine with physical ones, even as virtual spaces take on and sometimes overshadow the

significance previously attributed to the physical world.

A generational line has separated church members with what has been called digital natives on one side and the older generation traditional members on the other. Pastors have to avoid the urge for an “us versus them” culture to grow in their church. As the pastor of both groups, their goal must be to always strive for win-win scenarios. “If one member suffers, all suffer together” (1 Cor. 12:26, ESV). Many of the older members may oppose the use of technology in study or worship by those more digitally adjusted. They may see the presence of devices and technology as a disrespect not only to the validity of godly worship but also to God Himself during worship. This response becomes even more emotive when the digital experiences occur within the sanctuary.

Both sections have the same theological beliefs and want the same spiritual development, feeling the call of the same Lord. They confess their dependence on the same Saviour. Yet, they still find themselves at a stalemate—not one of belief but one of the culturally driven expectations of worship. Those born into the age of digital technology around the year 2000 or later are called ‘digital natives.’ They appreciate and are happy with all things digital. Those born before the new digital technological age and who are now having to shift from an analogue culture to a digital culture are termed ‘digital immigrants.’ Most churches will have people of both groups.

Reacting to member needs in the digital age does not necessarily entail a digital response. We must never lose the human touch as we seek to serve people in this digital age. Indeed, there is a

need to strike a balance between being reactive and being responsive. For today’s pastor, the impulse with digital contact is to promptly reply to each and every notification, message, or prompt. That will prove too much for anyone. Yet there is a cause for optimism. Our digitally strong friends may seem digitally fixated or aloof. Still, they are relentless in their search for God, beyond the four walls of the church and within

We must never lose the human touch as we seek to serve people in this digital age. Indeed, there is a need to strike a balance between being reactive and being responsive.

their interconnected world. Armed with their phones and tablets, they are already connected with God before they arrive at church. The task then is not to introduce them to God. It is an opportunity for the church to revamp its ministry framework, enabling digital natives to retain their connection with the Lord while at worship.

VII. DIGITAL MEDIA AND OUTREACH

Just how much have pastors have had to undergo a paradigm shift? A local church pastor no longer preaches to his immediate congregation sitting a few feet away and connects to their concerns alone. As YouTube and Spotify amplify his message across the globe, a paradox ensues. Those carefully prepared sermons minister at once to the whole world and to no one in particular at all -just anonymous sound bites

Today people seek a connected, on-demand, and responsive church atmosphere. Hoping for instantly approachable support and answers from the church, they look for a spiritual ecosystem that they can quickly relate to.

floating across cyber space. Today's pastors face a choice: look at the changing digital backdrop as gates of opposition to be sulked at or doors of opportunity to be hit on. The shifts in digital technology have radically altered the world. It has become an interlocked ecosystem of continuous data exchange between people, devices, services, platforms, and brands. Today's increased appetite for the immediate, on-demand preference for data, action, and reaction shapes the digital environment. This swiftly growing digital landscape, rife with dangers and opportunities alike, envelops both our present and future church members.

Today's on-demand pastors need to learn how to navigate this world so that they can take a breath, think clearly, and act prayerfully. Bugging into that possibility in a restrained and reasonable way allows clear interaction, good use of time, and

reliable spiritual support for all. The sharing of His Word has risen at every advance of human communication. Today the blessing comes in the form of digital media. The shifting landscape has inspired newer expectations of what the church should be. Today people seek a connected, on-demand, and responsive church atmosphere. Hoping for instantly approachable support and answers from the church, they look for a spiritual ecosystem that they can quickly relate to. The onus that digital growth has placed on church leaders is for them to be as vigilant to their flock as the digital world has come to be.

VIII. GUARDING AGAINST DIGITAL TYRANNY

However, pastors and leaders also must guard against the faux community that can build up in these virtual meeting places. How often have we been at church or lunch or a family event — enjoying real community — only to be side-tracked and pulled away by a text or Facebook post or tweet? In such situations, real community and real connection — is usurped by virtual community which then weakens real community, because it deprioritizes the people we are really with. **And let us be careful not to become addicted to technology, filling our lives with all the latest gadgets and devices that open up new experiences and possibilities for us. One of the disadvantages of living in a high-tech society is to get so**

One of the disadvantages of living in a high-tech society is to get so carried away with constant exploring of all the wonderful things one can do with the latest upgrades and inventions on the market, that we have no time left for the things of God.

carried away with constant exploring of all the wonderful things one can do with the latest upgrades and inventions on the market, that we have no time left for the things of God. While every additional piece of technological equipment is supposed to enable us to do more things, and to have more time, very often we may find ourselves spending too much time: in trying to learn how to use all the fascinating and sophisticated capabilities of each equipment, in maintaining them in good working condition, and in looking for the latest upgrades or enhancements for them !

IX. CONCLUSION

Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram and their ilk have made spontaneity a new social standard. This is definitely at odds with what God asks of us and wants for us and the manner in which He wants us to do life. We're not expected to be regulated by whim or the tyranny of the minute. We're meant to reason and abide in Him and live abundantly. Churches must therefore shield themselves against abusing technology or becoming slaves to it. Because technology provides instant information and response, churches have indeed the challenge of constantly maintaining a fine balance. Because our technical-driven culture needs productivity, expediency and enjoyment, churches are expected to provide that. The result can be a worship experience of seclusion and entertainment rather than one of veneration and active involvement.

...believers should never be afraid to use technology- it can help us reach the lost and expand the Kingdom- but we should never put our faith in it alone.

On the other hand, digital advances have refurbished our thinking. Our tech fuelled age has produced changes in the way we relate with the information-rich world around us. These things can definitely help the church. But it demands an uninterrupted flow of appropriate, shareable, spiritual, and useful insights to disseminate to the church's network of information-

hungry members. With such means in the adept hands of today's digitally active members, we will uncover a treasure-trove of personal ministry activity, possibly forming the most strongly inspired delivery network for the gospel that the church has ever known. The Barna Group insightfully makes this point: "*Generation Z's lower cognitive regions, which stimulate impulse, are constantly being activated by the bombardment of neurological arousal provided by text messages, Facebook updates, and video games. At the same time, the so-called Google culture of learning—finding answers to any question within seconds—continues to change the way Generation Z youth concentrate, write, and reflect. . . . Their capacity for linear thinking has been replaced by a new mode of thinking, in which they need to take in and dish out information in a fast, disjointed, overlapping manner.*" Certainly, this trend spreads beyond just Generation Z. Each generation—from the youngest to the oldest—that employs digital technology may, potentially, experience disruption – both positive and negative. But I believe that believers should never be afraid to use technology — it can help us reach the lost and expand the Kingdom — but we should never put our faith in it alone.

Dr. Shantanu Dutta is a Doctor, Blogger, Author. He serves as the Director of 'Thought Leadership Initiatives' at IJM. He is based in Delhi and is also the Chairperson of TRACI.



The "Christian Mind Series" (CMS) is the TRACI venture to promote Christian thinking and understanding. Our Christian vocation today calls for a critical dialogue between the Word and the world. Only then can we be a people of understanding.

In our media-dominated age, the world is too much with us. We derive most, if not all, of our insights from such sources. We are thus totally immersed in the surrounding or emerging culture and are conditioned by it. There is a great need hence, to develop a Christian counterculture. The CMS aims just at this timely task, no matter how dispersed this fellowship may be.

