

# THE BRAVE NEW ONLINE WORLD

AUTHORS MARK HADLEY AND DAVID HORNE

*We have experienced rapid and radical change as the 'New Media' impacts the very foundations of our learning, relating and most areas of everyday life. This article examines the dimensions of this change and the opportunities it presents for the church.*



**David Horne is the editor of christianity.net.au and a professional web consultant and developer.**



**Mark Hadley is the editor of sydney.anglicans.net, the manager of Anglican Media Sydney's New Media Division and a writer and speaker on modern communication.**



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We live in times of astonishing change. Since the launch of the Internet into the public arena in the nineties and the widespread adoption of mobile technology, our society has undergone a radical change in the way we gather information, learn, communicate and ultimately in the way we relate.

In a few short years these technologies, commonly referred to as the 'New Media', have become an integral part of our everyday lives. We use them for conducting business, for buying everything from groceries to holidays, for keeping up with each other and even for finding a partner.

Christians have never been afraid to use new technology to spread the Gospel. It was carried far and wide on the Roman roads of the apostles' world and still further on the back of the printing press during the Reformation. Radio has enabled the Gospel to travel into countries

that are closed to foreigners, and television has taken it deep into the private spaces of millions of homes.

So, what advantage, if any, do the New Media offer Christians today?

## Radical Change

There is little doubt that the New Media have changed not only the practical structures of our world but its mindset as well. In a longitudinal study of Internet use, the Center for the Digital Future<sup>1</sup> has concluded that more than three-quarters of the American population have Internet access and spend an average of 8.9 hours online each week. The majority of these users (80 per cent) perceive it to be a more important source of information for them than any other principal media, including television, radio and print.

More importantly, the study has

shown the increasing impact of the Internet on relationships. On average, those surveyed formed Internet-based friendships with 4.65 new people in 2007—people they had never met in the flesh. Furthermore, nearly half reported that the Internet had increased the amount of contact they have with friends and family.

For many, these interactions are taking place in online communities, with the number of respondents identifying as 'members' doubling over the past three years. Of that number, just over half log in to their communities on a daily basis, while 70 per cent of them interact with their fellow community members on a regular basis. A large and growing percentage (at present 55 per cent) feel as strongly about their virtual life as they do about their real-world life.

A consideration of just one aspect of the New Media demonstrates a similar

trend in the Australian context. Mobile telephone usage reflects a pervasive attachment to technologically mediated communities, particularly with younger generations. The recently released report from the Australian Communications and Media Authority stated that there were 21.26 million mobile phone services in operation at 30 June 2007, a 7.6 per cent increase from 19.76 million the year before.<sup>2</sup> In 2007 alone Australians bought more than 10 million new handsets.<sup>3</sup> Growing numbers are forsaking land-line services altogether in favour of mobile handsets.<sup>4</sup> One in two children—the next decade's customers—already use a mobile an average of 19 minutes a day.<sup>5</sup> The mobile is now an integrated part of our professional and personal communications.

The mobile has become much more than a tool for communication; it is increasingly the means by which we stay connected to our most personal communities, particularly among those under 30. For our younger generations, mobile phones have become a repository for life moments in the form of photos and frequently re-read SMS messages. They are also the music collections, address books, diaries and entertainment centres that help define their communities. Above all, they are a truly personal means of communication. The mobile can be carried to a private place or used to send sensitive messages. Most importantly, the younger generation may 'share' mobile content, but they don't tend to allow people—especially parents—to click through their mobile telephones at will.

The expansion of the New Media into the more private spheres of life shows little sign of abating. There is every reason to believe that relationships will increasingly be mediated by technology as younger generations replace our own. The challenge for Christians is to work out how to utilise these technologies—maximising their advantages while minimising the disadvantages—for the sake of the Gospel. To do this we first need to understand what it is that makes the New Media so influential.

### **Instant Easy Global Connection**

The popularity of the New Media stems from their ability to instantly and easily connect people. Before the nineties the ability to communicate with other people was restricted by certain concrete realities. If we wanted to contact someone, we could call them on the telephone, write a letter or send a telegram or fax. If we wanted to meet people, we had to pick a place and time that suited everyone. If we had a message to tell the world, we could either publish a book or write a paper. Or if we had the resources, we could broadcast a radio show or television program.

These choices had their limitations, including distance, time and cost. The advent of the New Media has freed up communication in several significant ways.

#### **1. The New Media give greater choice in the way we connect with others.**

Rather than write a letter we can write an email that is instantly delivered, easily stored, referred to and forwarded to limitless recipients. Rather than talk on a telephone fixed to a wall, we can talk from anywhere to someone who is anywhere via a mobile telephone. If talking isn't convenient, we can text them or send a variety of electronic documents. We can interact with anyone in the world using instant messaging programs (in text, audio or video), bulletin boards, chat rooms, forums and 'Web 2' style

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social networking sites. We can even dance and have a drink with someone in virtual worlds such as Second Life<sup>6</sup> or pursue a shared fantasy existence as a Elvish Mage in places such as WoW<sup>7</sup>.

The possibilities for communication are growing every year, and with them the number of people we can maintain a personal relationship with. With the New Media we are never far from anyone. So, for example, the way that Christian

mission organisations and their supporters communicate with their workers has been revolutionised. The 'global village' that was a source of great postulation in the seventies has finally arrived.

#### **2. The New Media are instantaneous.**

Emails arrive halfway across the world within seconds of being sent. Information put up on a website is available immediately to the world. We can 'google'<sup>8</sup> the Internet and expect thousands of results within seconds. People and updated information are at our fingertips. News of Princess Diana's death was available on the Internet at least six hours before it became available through conventional news sources.

The instantaneous nature of the New Media has bred in the modern user the expectation that they will be able to find out all they need to know about the world around them with a few clicks of the mouse. We are the 'instantaneous generation', experiencing frustration if we cannot find out what we want to know when we want to know it.

#### **3. The New Media have no boundaries.**

No one person or organisation controls the New Media. The technology that makes it possible is owned by various organisations, but they are unable to control the use to which the technology is put. The most successful business models that have led to its implementation and

growth are focused on the individual consumer rather than the corporate structure. The Internet is constantly shaped, expanded and 'owned' at a personal level. Possibly one of the better examples of this phenomena is the creation of Wikipedia<sup>9</sup>, the free online, collaborative encyclopaedia that is being developed, page by page, by users all over the world. At the time of writing this article the project included 75,000

active contributors working on more than 10 million articles in more than 250 languages.<sup>10</sup> It has more than 684 million visitors each year, with the number predicted to climb by 29 per cent over the next 12 months.<sup>11</sup>

The Internet's emphasis on personal access has resulted in a pervasive 'freedom of information' culture. The proliferation of New Media technologies at the individual level means it is impossible to effectively censor what a person can access. Third generation telephony<sup>12</sup> makes even a denial of access scenario increasingly unlikely. We can cross geographical and political boundaries at will.

It means we are free to talk to whomever we like and publish whatever we like. We can speak with a person in a country we would not be able to visit. We can say things to that person that would have us arrested if we were there. We can publish content that person can look at which is not available to them in any other form.

libraries step in to provide free access. But more than that, the cost of publishing in the New Media is inexpensive compared to more traditional forms of publishing. Rather than spend thousands of dollars publishing a book or producing a TV program, we can, for hundreds of dollars, publish the same content online and reach a much larger potential audience instantaneously.

Because of this, there has been an explosion of content on the Internet. At present there are more than 100 million websites and this is growing every day. We have a library of 100 million sources of information at our fingertips!

This has changed the way we access and consume information. Rather than accept what the traditional media present, we can do the research ourselves, find alternative points of view and decide what we want to believe. We are no longer constrained by the information 'gatekeepers' such as

has been the backbone on which innovations in the New Media have grown. These innovations aim to pack more into less, integrate several devices into one and make them easier to use. In the past few years mobile telephones have become Personal Digital Assistants with Global Positioning Systems that tell you not only when you have to be somewhere but how to get there.

These themes of innovation and change pervade the New Media. New technologies, tools and sites are being launched each day. Consequently the nature of the New Media and the way we use them are changing all the time.

The most recent advances in web technology have revolved around the emergence of Web 2.0. This is not a new technology but a new way of integrating and using existing technology to create websites and utilities that focus almost exclusively on the personal rather than the factual.

Blogs, wikis, forums, comments,

## A staggering one per cent of all time spent on the



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### **4. The New Media are cheap.**

The cost of getting involved with the New Media is comparatively inexpensive, and getting more so every day. In Australia a connection to the Internet or ownership of a mobile telephone is well within the budget of most people. And even where finances fail, community organisations such as

editors, publishers and producers. Information is becoming more democratised.

### **5. The New Media are changing.**

The rapidly changing nature of technology has meant that the New Media are rapidly changing as well. Faster, smaller, less expensive technology

podcasts and vodcasts are all tools web users have been developing to share parts of themselves online. MySpace, Facebook, Wikipedia, Flickr, WoW and Second Life have become the biggest names on the web because they have capitalised on the desire to interact. They are the virtual meeting places for people forming communities online. This 'version 2' of the web is, in short, the transference of our social lives online.

### **Community not just Content**

It is the New Media's ability to expand the way we interact with each other that has had the most influence on our society to date. Real friendships and communities are forming that are truly global.

As of July 2007, Facebook had more than 31 million registered users<sup>13</sup>, with one in two logging on daily to interact with their virtual friends.<sup>14</sup> Half a

million people are joining its virtual communities weekly—*every week*<sup>15</sup>. A staggering one per cent of all time spent on the entire Internet is being spent on Facebook<sup>16</sup>, and this is only one of the methods being used to interact socially online. Three of the top 10 Internet sites visited by Australians are social networking sites.<sup>17</sup>

What makes these sites different is the way they allow members to articulate and make visible the social networks they have with other members of the site, and then invite them to interact with each other. These interactions are made easier because they are not ‘stranger’ to ‘stranger’ but are facilitated by the ‘introduction’ implied by being on the same friend list.<sup>18</sup> Hence the term ‘social networking’.

These sites thrive because they provide an easy and convenient way for people to make and maintain community. Becoming a member is easy—making friends involves none of the offline issues of



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to make disciples of all nations through evangelism and edification.

### Evangelism

Firstly, the church and individual Christians are to proclaim the Gospel to the nations. This proclamation can take many forms but essentially falls into one of two groups. We can ‘broadcast’ the Gospel using mass media such as TV, radio, books and even large meetings. Or we can interact with individuals over the Gospel, either one-to-one or in small groups.

Broadcasting is efficient because it reaches many people, but is not necessarily effective because those people cannot interact with the broadcaster. Individual evangelism is far more effective because it is done in the context of relationship. Those contacted can observe a Christian’s life as well as his/her words, ask questions and discover for themselves the truth of the Gospel over a period of time. But it is not necessarily efficient due to the

of meeting online or not meeting at all, they are choosing to meet online. Social networking sites have become the modern form of the billiards hall or shopping centre for people to just ‘hang out’.

But the New Media do more than simply connect people—they also mobilise people to action.<sup>20</sup> Web-based organisations such as MoveOn.org and Avaaz.org have sprung up to rally the online world to speak out about all sorts of issues. MoveOn.org, for example,

## entire Internet is being spent on Facebook ...

finding suitable venues and getting introductions. Members can interact as if they lived next door. And since they have no boundaries, the breadth of these networks is truly global, offering an almost unlimited source of friends and a window into other worlds.

The evidence suggests, however, that while social networking sites can open up an opportunity to meet new people, many members are using it primarily to support existing social relationships. These relationships may have weak ties (such as a shared friend or class at school), but typically there is some common offline element among individuals who befriend each other online.<sup>19</sup>

More importantly in our busy, ‘time-poor’ society, these sites are being used as an alternative to meeting face-to-face. It’s not that people are rejecting the more traditional ways of maintaining friendships but rather, given the choice

organised a ‘Virtual Town Hall Meeting’ for their online community to meet and ask questions of the US presidential candidates.<sup>21</sup>

### Christianity in the Brave New Online World

So where does Christianity and the church fit into this ‘Brave New Online World’? The mission of the church is encapsulated in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20:

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Like all new developments, the New Media offer the church both an opportunity and a challenge as it seeks

limitations of time, resources and location.

The real challenge is moving between the two. We want to broadcast the Gospel and then draw interested individuals into a relationship where they can be involved in ongoing one-to-one interaction. We want to be both efficient and effective, but traditional methods of marrying the two have had qualified success. For example, we may ask an audience at a Christian event where the Gospel is ‘broadcast’ to fill out cards or identify themselves publicly in some way so as to engage them in a personal relationship. But the social factors involved make this a daunting and difficult prospect.

The New Media, however, offer us an alternative. For a fraction of the cost of a book we can proclaim the Gospel on a website that has the potential to reach millions, and then invite any reader to enter into a personal conversation at the

click of a button. And because the New Media know no boundaries, this reader could come from any country, creed or social group in the world.

Recently the evangelistic website Christianity.net.au received a question from a young Muslim man living in the United Arab Emirates. He had read the presentation of the Gospel and wanted to become a Christian. Pause and consider the implications of this single incident—a Muslim man, in an Islamic country, asking about Christianity without fear of sanction for either the enquirer or the evangelist. We have never been able to do this before.

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The anonymity of the Internet can also be helpful for evangelism. We can have a Christian conversation with someone we may never meet and this anonymity can help them to be more open and honest. We don't know each other, so we have nothing at stake in the relationship. We can both say things that, under different circumstances, we may feel constrained not to say. Over time this may change as we develop a relationship, but initially it is of great advantage.

#### **Edification**

However, if we saw the Internet as only a fantastic means of evangelism, we would be missing half of its potential. Discipleship-making is not only growth in numbers but also the spiritual growth of believers, and here the New Media have something more to offer.

The essence of church is community. We are a community that shares a common purpose and fellowship in Christ. It is not a passive community but an active one, in which everyone has a part to play. It is not a static, closed community but a dynamic, open

community that seeks to invite people to come and grow in Christ. This is the thrust of the 'body of Christ' imagery Paul uses in Ephesians 4:11-16.

The most effective way we maintain this community is by meeting together in large groups, small groups and one-to-one. But such meetings are, by their nature, limited to the local area. It is difficult to maintain a sense of community among people who are geographically dispersed.

Our modern 'time-poor' lifestyle also means, unfortunately, that many of us are too busy to meet more than once a week, too busy to stay after church for morning tea, too busy and distracted to

simply 'hang out' with each other. As a result, the sense of community in our churches is breaking down. Parishioners routinely express to the authors of this paper that they do not feel a part of the church they have been attending for years.

The New Media, being unbounded by geography or time, can help overcome these limitations and enhance our Christian communities. We can help people feel more informed and part of the church by making information available on websites or in emails. We can send thought-provoking questions or encouraging biblical insights to our Bible study group during the week. We can encourage ongoing Bible discussion through a blog or online forum. We can SMS friends to remind them of meetings or see how they are going.

These are simple ideas but they can have a profound effect. At one particular medium-sized Anglican Church in Sydney's western region, members belong to an email-based prayer group. They regularly receive requests for prayer and when they arrive via computer, PDA or mobile telephone, they can stop where they are and pray for the matters

mentioned. At that point they are being an active member of their local church, without having to be anywhere near the church building.

But the communal effect of the New Media goes beyond the local church. They can be used to connect congregations and give us a sense of the wider Christian community. As an example, sydneyanglicans.net exists to encourage the individuals and ministries of the Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church to remain focused and connected. But more than that, any person who finds themselves in circumstances where they cannot find the spiritual support and encouragement they need locally now has a means of joining an online community where these things are available. In practice, this has resulted in a significant proportion of the traffic to sydneyanglicans.net originating from outside the Diocese's geographical boundaries, pointing to a sizeable number of people who are 'virtual' Sydney Anglicans, if not 'actual' ones.<sup>22</sup>

But we do have to be careful. For example, the mainstream public interest in the appointment of David Horne as the first paid e-evangelist for the Sydney Anglican Diocese centred on whether he could achieve something generally referred to as 'e-church'—an online version of the local Anglican congregation. David Koch from the Seven Network's *Sunrise* program cheekily suggested that the Diocese could have online communion with BYO bread and wine. Indeed there already are online churches on the Internet. But is this going too far?

While it is possible to have an online church and give those who come a virtual sense of community and belonging, the New Media should not be seen as offering an alternative to the local Church but rather a way of extending its outreach and effectiveness. It should complement rather than compete. After all, we are created as physical beings who crave physical contact. God created Adam and Eve and walked with

generations of scientists. More importantly, however, remembering the limitations of natural theology reminds us of the urgency of evangelism.

Romans 1 reminds us that humanity's failure to respond in worship and with thanksgiving to what God has revealed of himself in creation results in the judgement and wrath of God. It is our calling, as followers of Christ, to hold out to others the 'spectacles' of Scripture, which, when illuminated by the Holy Spirit, will enable them to truly see God. ©

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Erickson, Millard J. (1998). *Christian Theology*. Michigan: Baker Books, p181.
- 2 See, for example, Philipp, Wolfgang (1967). *Physicotheology in the Age of Enlightenment: Appearance and History*. In *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 57, pp1233-1267. 'God appears to the doubting Job "clothed with terrible majesty", in order to give personally the physicotheological proof of his existence and of his divine attributes' (p1259).
- 3 It should be noted that this isn't the only point being made in these chapters. They are also about Job realising why God is God and why he (Job) isn't, and the relational implications of this for Job as he relates with God. Job comes to understand that God is the creator of all, has complete knowledge of all of his creation and is sovereign over his creation. This leads to Job's repentance in Job 42:1-6 for his questioning of God and his self-righteousness (as seen in chapter 31 of Job). In Job 42:1-6 Job responds

- to God by acknowledging that he was completely out of place in questioning and challenging God, that God should be the one who speaks and accuses (not him), and that, interestingly, Job now saw God, as opposed to just hearing of him and by repenting.
- 4 Op cit, Erickson (1998), p195.
  - 5 Wilkins, John (1678). *On the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, pp394-5.
  - 6 Elwell, Walter A. (Ed.) (2001). *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, p82.
  - 7 Ray, John (1691). *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation*. London, unpaginated preface.
  - 8 Ibid.
  - 9 See my book review on *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment* in Case #13.
  - 10 McGrath, Alister E. (2004). *The Science of God*. London: T&T Clark, p113.
  - 11 Polkinghorne, John (1998). *Belief in God in an Age of Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pxi.

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## Christianity in the Brave New World: The Opportunity and the Challenge

However, we should not let this deter us from taking advantage of the opportunities the New Media offer. Each new advance in technology brings its own possibilities. We would be poor stewards of the Gospel if we ignored it. The real tragedy would be to consider that the methods of spreading the Gospel had solidified with the Gospel itself. Imagine the outcry if a new country were to be discovered on the verges of our own that had never heard of Christ, but our missionary societies decided not to send someone to take the Gospel to it. A new 'country' *has* been discovered with a population of hundreds of millions and it is just on the other side of the screen.

So let's get on with it.

Anyone with an Internet connection can be involved. We are bound only by our imagination. The New Media are virgin ground, changing all the time. We need to think outside the square, be prepared to try anything, be willing to make mistakes and learn from them, much like the Internet industry itself. It is a Brave New Online World out there but, with God's help, we can utilise it in our task of disciple-making. ©

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8. them in the garden, and while we may only perceive God spiritually now, we long for the day when we can see him face-to-face. Consequently, though it is probable that we will see increasing amounts of our lives transferred online, the physicality of our existence is related to our spiritual wellbeing in a way that is hard to deny. In short, the conducting of our whole lives online in some *Matrix*-style network is a prospect best left to the movies. A balance between the online and the offline worlds needs to be struck. The integrity of our Christian lives is seen not only in what we say but also observed in the way we live—a witness that is presently difficult to replicate in anything but a limited way in the online world.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Center for the Digital Future. <http://www.digitalcenter.org/>.
- 2 Australian Communications and Media Authority, (2008). *Number of mobile phones now exceeds Australia's population*, [http://www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD/pc=PC\\_311135](http://www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD/pc=PC_311135).
- 3 Ibid, <http://www.amta.org.au/?Page=184>.
- 4 Ibid, <http://www.amta.org.au/default.asp?Page=327>.
- 5 Ibid, <http://www.amta.org.au/default.asp?Page=1541>.
- 6 Second Life. <http://secondlife.com/>.
- 7 World of Warcraft. <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/>.
- 8 Note that the ubiquity of this practice has transformed this word from a noun referring to the international conglomerate, Google, to a verb that permeates popular usage.
- 9 Wikipedia. <http://www.wikipedia.org/>.
- 10 Ibid, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About>.
- 11 Compete. <http://siteanalytics.compete.com/wikipedia.org/?metric=uv>.
- 12 Third Generation Telephony refers to telephones that have access to web applications at speeds comparable to broadband.
- 13 Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook>.
- 14 Kulveer Taggart's Blog. <http://www.kulveer.co.uk/2007/02/>.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Alexa. [http://www.alexa.com/site/ds/top\\_sites?cc=AU&ts\\_mode=country&lang=none](http://www.alexa.com/site/ds/top_sites?cc=AU&ts_mode=country&lang=none).
- 18 Boyd, D. M. and Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. In *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13 (1), article 11, <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 The Centre for the Digital Future research (<http://www.digitalcenter.org/>) found that participation in online community had a particularly dramatic effect on participation in social causes. Three-quarters of online community members said they used the Internet to participate in communities related to social causes. 44 per cent reported that they participated more since they have joined.
- 21 MoveOn.org. [http://pol.moveon.org/townhall/iraq/report\\_back.html](http://pol.moveon.org/townhall/iraq/report_back.html).
- 22 At the time of writing this article less than 60 per cent of total site traffic to [sydneyanglicans.net](http://sydneyanglicans.net) originated from within the physical boundaries of the Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church. 83 per cent originated from Australia as a whole, with approximately 17 per cent originating from 128 other countries or territories.