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What a Friend We Have in Facebook: Norwegian Christian Churches' Use of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Christian churches in Norway use social media. The key finding is that the churches do not take extensive advantage of the opportunities for two-way communication offered by the platforms, but primarily use their social media channels to promote church activities or broadcast content without inviting a dialogue. Based on the churches' own stated appreciation for building relationships, as well as existing research from media and communication studies, media and religion studies, and studies within strategic communication, this article argues for a stronger focus on the ritual and relational aspects of online communication from the church organizations.

The tools and strategies for how an organization may communicate with its surroundings have changed significantly after social media became a common part of daily life. In the business world the new media platforms affect behavior such as information acquisition, sharing of opinions and attitudes, post-purchase communication, evaluation, etc. Previously, organizations were, to a high degree, in control of the communication processes they initiated themselves, but in the era of social media, marketing managers' influence on the content, timing, and frequency of information is being severely eroded (Mangold & Faulds, 2009, p. 360). Scholars within the field of integrated marketing communications (IMC) describe the new situation as a new paradigm (Arora & Sanni, 2019; Georgescu & Popescul, 2015; Vernuccio & Ceccotti, 2015) because the practice which has worked well for the past century is no longer reasonable as social media has become such an important marketplace for sharing ideas between organizations and their target audiences, as well as between the members of the audiences themselves.

The changes in how communication takes place affect nonprofit organizations as well. This article will examine how Norwegian Christian churches adapt to the new circumstances when it comes to social media. The aim is to point out what practices and purposes churches have when it comes to social media, and how practices can be developed in light of existing research within communication studies, media and religion, as well as strategic communication.

The history of Christianity is a two-millennia long story of a church which expands both geographically and numerically. Church history scholar Andrew Walls points to *translation* and *conversion* as two significant characteristics within the history of Christianity (Walls, 2000).

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Translation points to the very nature of Christianity as something that has been constantly adapted and made relevant for new audiences. Moreover, these translations and re-translations are appreciated because they reveal new aspects about Christ. The first step in this long chain of adaptations is described in the Bible itself, in the story about the gospel being presented to a Greek audience for the first time. The result was that new questions arose for discussion, a new way of practicing the religion was developed, and a new terminology was launched to a certain extent. It was risky, but it led the church to new encounters with Christ that would hardly have been possible within a Jewish terminology and tradition, Walls argues.

The second characteristic, as argued by Walls, is how Christianity makes converts. Before the time of Christ, Jews had welcomed people from other nations who recognized the God of Israel. These foreigners adjusted their way of living and started to follow Jewish laws and traditions. The Christian church, however, solved this issue of conversion quite differently from the very beginning. The New Testament reports from a council in Jerusalem which decided that gentile believers were not required to be circumcised and keep the Torah but should be left to find a Christian lifestyle within their own culture (Acts 15). They were not to be proselytes, but converts, Walls concludes. Walls points out that this distinction is important, because, if the church had encouraged gentiles to leave their own culture and lifestyle, they might have been devout religious people, but the impact on their local societies would have been less significant than the pages of history describe.

So, the concept of translation of the Christian message to make it culturally relevant for new audiences was introduced already in the New Testament and has followed the church ever since. In current missiological literature, this approach is often labeled "contextualization" (Moreau, 2018). It shows a functionalistic and pragmatic way of thinking where it is more important to find a way of communicating that works well than keeping hold of the traditional way of doing things.

Currently, the challenge for churches is to convey the Christian message so it reaches contemporary people who are accustomed to being oriented and connected by modern means. According to data from 2019, 98% of Norwegian households have internet access, 93% of Norwegians use internet on the move, and 86% of Norwegians take part in social networking (Digital economy and society statistics – Households and individuals, 2020). Considering these facts, it makes sense to understand the rapidly growing occurrence of online ministries in the context of the Christian church's ongoing effort to make its message available and applicable to new audiences. An active presence in social media may today be an essential part of such a ministry.

The Norwegian interdenominational center for faith and media (Tro & Medier) encourages churches to think of their social media presence along three lines: information, inspiration, and invitation. Information is about letting followers know what is going on in the church; inspiration is about sharing inspiring texts, stories, or testimonies; and invitation is about inviting people to the church and to a Christian life (Søvik, 2018). All these approaches can be identified as purposeful communication which fits well with the term "strategic communications" used in a business context (Zerfass et al., 2018).

Observing almost any random Facebook page run by a Norwegian church reveals that many posts show up that can be categorized as informational or invitational, given that they promote activities, events, or worship services. There are also examples of churches that use their social media channels for cross promoting other media platforms, like their

podcast or YouTube videos, and thus invite the users to spend time on other of the church's media products. However, there are also several examples of other types of posts, like tributes to volunteering or pictures with verses from the Scriptures incorporated. These kinds of posts can be viewed as inspiring or encouraging ways to build a community.

A not so typical, but still pleasant, example of the community-building aspect of a church's Facebook page is from a rural part of Norway where the local church posted that it was to be visited by a piano tuner, and if anyone else in the area needed one, they could just call to make an appointment.

Literature Review

The subject for this study is positioned in the intersection of media and communication studies, media and religion studies, and studies of strategic communication. Therefore, a short introduction to existing, relevant research within these areas is needed.

Media and Communication Studies

Roger Silverstone argues that, while the twentieth-century media culture was based on one-way broadcasting, the twenty-first century might involve a return of two-way communication (Silverstone, 2005, p. 201). This argument may be understood in light of James Carey's distinction between the two aspects of communication: transition of information versus communication as a ritual activity (Carey, 1989). Communication as a one-way process from sender to receiver may work well for broadcasting information but will not be a proper means for developing a relationship between the two parties. For that, a broader approach is needed, which Carey labels the cultural approach. With today's social media platforms, opportunities for transferring information as well as for building relationships with the audiences have arrived, Silverstone states.

Mediation and Mediatization

Back in 1992, Jonathan Steuer used the term "telepresence" to describe the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium. Contrary to the unmediated experience where presence is taken for granted, telepresence refers to a perception of being present when an individual is de facto within a mediated environment (Steuer, 1992, p. 76).

In more recent years Stig Hjarvard, an acknowledged scholar within the field of mediation and mediatization, refers to Erving Goffman's thoughts about man's abilities for impression management (Goffman, 2007). He writes that mediated communication makes it possible to control the self-presentation delivered in a better way than face-to-face communication (Hjarvard, 2008a, p. 44). This raises the question of what mediation actually is, and how we can understand what the process of mediated communication alters when it comes to the relationships that participants have with the subjects in question as well as with each other (Silverstone, 2005, p. 189).

Hjarvard also builds upon Joshua Meyrowitz's three metaphors of media as conduits, languages, and environments (Meyrowitz, 1993) when developing his theoretical framework of mediation and mediatization. Media as conduits focuses on the fact that media transport symbols and messages from senders to receivers, which, in our context, means that media are distributors of religious representations among many types of messages. Media as languages draws attention to the various ways in which the media frame the relationship between sender, content, and receiver. Media as environments focuses on the ways in which media systems and institutions facilitate and structure human interaction and communication (Hjarvard, 2008b, p. 4). Hjarvard distinguishes between the terms *mediation* and *mediatization*, where the first describes how the message and the relationship between sender and receiver may be influenced by the media through which the communication takes place. Mediatization, on the other hand, is used for long-term and profound changes in the form and function of the social practices and institutions that are objects of mediation. When it comes to religion, Hjarvard argues that mediatization changes religion itself, and Knut Lundy follows this line of argumentation by writing that the fact that the communication takes place through technical media affects the message and the communication practice (Lundby, 2011, p. 15).

It can be argued that Hjarvard primarily discusses media as institutions in society, and therefore his reflections are not readily applicable to a situation where organizations themselves are producers of the content, and where they to some extent control the distribution as well. However, though the institutional approach and communication through traditional media differ somewhat from organization-based internet communication, there is still something to learn from mediatization theory because new players such as Google and Facebook constrain the ways in which we should communicate if we want to be heard (Fischer-Nielsen, 2012, p. 50).

Social Media

Social media is a broad term and comprises a range of platforms. Previous studies have discussed the differences between platforms when it comes to the users' preferences in light of uses and gratification theories. A precise understanding of what motivates the user to invest time and effort on specific content on a particular platform would obviously help professional communicators greatly when it comes to using the platforms for effective strategic communication. Salem Alhabash and Mengyan Ma conducted a study among college students, and focused on their use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. Based on their findings, they concluded that the strong emphasis on entertainment by their informants should lead communicators to design campaigns that adhere to and gratify these motivations for engagement and continuity purposes (Alhabash & Ma, 2017, p. 10). Besides the motivation for entertainment and convenience, which was important for all platforms, they found that Facebook use was driven by a desire for self-documentation and self-expression, Instagram was mostly for self-documentation and passing time, and Snapchat was for self-expression. A relevant finding for my current study is that information sharing was rated as the sixth highest motivation for using Facebook and Twitter, compared to being rated lowest of all for Snapchat and Instagram. However, the participants spent the greatest amount of time on Instagram and Snapchat, and the least on Twitter.

Statistics show that marketers consider visual images the single most important form of content in social media (Stelzner, 2018, p. 38), with images more than doubling the

engagement on a Facebook post (Pinantoan, 2015). However, images do not always communicate well on their own. Often a better option may be to combine the image with supplementary text, as this combination creates a multimodal message. In Roland Barthes' pioneering essay about rhetoric of images (Barthes, 2003), he introduces the terms *anchorage* and *relay* as a theory of how text and image work together. While the image adds recognition and esthetics to the message, it is often important that the accompanying text anchors the image, i.e., gives signals about how the image should be interpreted. At the same time, image and text will most often complement each other, in that they both add information that is not available in the other modality.

A key driver for the development of social media is what Henry Jenkins et al. label a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009, p. 6). This is recognized as a culture with at least five characteristics:

(1) There are relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement.
(2) Strong support is shown for creating and sharing creations with others.
(3) Some type of informal mentorship exists whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.
(4) Members of the culture believe that their contributions matter.
(5) Members feel some sort of social connection with one another (at least they care what other people think about what they have created).

There is no requirement that every member must contribute to the community, but it should be clear to everyone that the opportunity is there, and that a contribution will be appreciated. Jenkins et al. claim that "participatory culture is reworking the rules by which school, cultural expression, civic life, and work operate" (Jenkins, 2009, p. 10).

Several studies point out how organizational Facebook pages can be used to expand, improve, and keep relationships with individuals by taking advantage of the relational aspect offered by the platform (Haigh et al., 2013; Sias & Duncan, 2020; Waters et al., 2009). The aspect of participation and engagement is also important according to the study by Algharabat et al on Facebook pages belonging to nonprofit organizations in Jordan. The study concludes by advising these organizations to design their Facebook pages such that sensory information is reflected, as well as to keep posting pictures, videos, and success stories to increase the followers' engagement (Algharabat et al., 2018).

This cultural shift ought to affect the church domain as well, and Eileen D. Crowley argues that churches could, for example, post assignments on their social media profiles in the same way as news organizations and corporations motivate their audiences to share their creativity. Just like ordinary people willingly give away their images of flooded neighborhoods, beautiful sunrises, and local beauty to corporate businesses' social media channels, parishioners could, according to Crowley, be motivated to post images based on questions like "where do you see grace in your neighborhood?" or "how do you think God sees the world?" (Crowley, 2015).

Media and Religion Studies

The study of online religion has developed in parallel to internet studies in general. Heidi Campbell has given an overview of how the discipline has evolved from when the phenomenon was first recognized in Usenet groups back in the 1980s. She points out three waves of

focus among researchers in the field (Campbell, 2011). In the 1990s, she says, the focus was on describing what was actually happening, but around the millennium shift, the researchers started to explore trends, and compare different forms of online religion culture, based on a growing understanding that it was not simply the technology, but rather the people who were generating these new forms of religious expression online. Campbell especially points to Christopher Helland's distinction between religion-online (importing traditional forms of religion and religious practice online) and online-religion (adapting religion to create new and interactive forms of networked spirituality) as an important contribution to the development of the discipline of religion and media (Campbell, 2011, p. 234). What Campbell calls the third wave of research is a more theoretical, interpretive, and integrative trajectory which seeks to open up the investigation "from just mapping life online to considering how online-offline interaction and integration point toward findings about life in an information-dominated culture" (Campbell, 2011, pp. 240–241). In commenting on her historic presentation of how the discipline has evolved, Campbell suggests several areas for future research, and among these she points out that, as new forms of religious use of the internet emerge, more studies will be needed to address the impact of these technologies on religious culture and belief. This study is such a contribution when it comes to Norwegian churches' use of social media.

Audrey Lim has investigated how twenty-one churches within the Australian Christian Churches movement use their Facebook pages. She found that 35% of all gathered posts were classified as persuading people to attend events. However, these posts had an engagement rate of only 2%, which was far below the average of 5%. The posts which gained the most engagement were those classified as "encouraging people," with an engagement rate of 9%, but those posts comprised only 3% of all posts on the churches' public Facebook pages. Lim thus argues that, although the churches acknowledge that a presence on Facebook is important to the church, the majority of the churches investigated have yet to utilize the potential of social media (Lim, 2017). These findings are in line with a study from Lifeway Research carried out among American Protestant churches indicating that 84% of the churches have a Facebook page, and 97% of those that do, say they use it to inform people about upcoming events (Smietana, 2018). However, in contrast to the churches Lim observed in Australia, only a small portion of the American Protestant churches use either Instagram (13%) or Twitter (16%) in addition to Facebook.

From a perspective of religious organizations, Heidi Campbell has identified a fear that the online religious communities have a potential power to lead people out of the pew and away from face-to-face community interaction. However, research shows the opposite.

> Members joined and stayed involved in online community to meet specific relational needs. Yet this participation could not fully meet religious members' desire for face-to-face interaction and an embodied worship experience. Therefore, online religious activities represent only one part of an individual's overall religious involvement. (Campbell, 2004, p. 90)

When it comes to the religious experience itself, Andrew Zirschky agrees that, while technology can carry the content of a religious service, it lacks the fullness of the experience.

> What happens in a religious service is more than the actions of the people or the rituals itself — it's the relational aspects that bind people together and allow them to see themselves as one body and to care for one another in those ways. (Yellin, 2017)

What people are really searching for in today's "faceless society" are in-depth, face-to-face interactions, Zirschky points out. Audrey Lim also discusses this issue when she writes about the limitations of Facebook and points out two areas of concern in particular. The first is the inability to convey nonverbal cues, and the second is the limited ability to convey social presence (Lim, 2017, p. 37).

These reflections point to a discussion on human-computer interaction and what the limits are for the relational aspect of computer-mediated communication. Herring and Androutsopoulos touch upon this when they write that the question is not "does the technology shape the nature of [computer-mediated] discourse?" but rather "what aspects of discourse does it shape, how strongly, in what ways, and under what circumstances?" (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015).

Statistics show that on average church attendance is declining both in Norway (https://www.ssb.no/en/kultur-og-fritid/statistikker/kirke_kostra) and in the US (Pew Research Center, 2018). However, some churches are growing and a report published by Hartford Institute for Religion Research states that growing congregations engage young adults better, have more innovative worship services, engage in greater use of electronic technology and the internet, among other characteristics (Lizardy-Hajbi, 2016, p. 6).

It is probably an exaggeration to consider the use of technology and online communication a cause for church growth, but it seems, to some extent, to be a characteristic, and for that reason worth exploring further. Also, when it comes to the physical design of church venues, which in many cases are supposed to host a variety of events, there is a trend toward more technology in all forms, including video walls, LED walls, LED lighting, Wi-Fi, and more. Multi-functional spaces have created the need for churches to operate seven days a week, with social media as an important part of the mix (Cottrill, 2018). This is very much in line with Lars Dahle's point of view when he claims that effective use of every kind of media technology, format, and genre is important for worldwide evangelism, for discipleship, and for faith education (Dahle, 2014, p. 116).

Studies of Strategic Communication

Communication on behalf of organizations, i.e., marketing, advertising, management, and public relations, etc., is decisive activity aimed to fulfill the organization's mission.

Kirk Hallahan et. al. define strategic communication this way in their landmark article from 2007:

> Strategic communication focuses of how the organization itself presents and promotes itself through the intentional activities of its leaders, employees, and communication practitioners. Of course, this does not exclude their use of relationship building or networks in the strategic process. (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 7)

Vital to an understanding of the term strategic communication is the idea of influence, and the belief that it is, in fact, possible to alter the behavior or attitude of others. The purposeful nature of communication is the essence of the term (Thorson, 2013).

However, not all purposeful communication can be considered strategic. When Ansgar Zerfass et al. discuss the term, they mention the example of flight announcements at an airport, which are clearly purposeful when it comes to fulfilling the airline's mission, but

because of their routineness they do not fit into a meaningful definition of strategic communication.

Zerfass et al.'s definition of the term is therefore:

> Strategic communication encompasses all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals. (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493)

This definition, Zerfass et al. say, has some important implications. First, not all purposeful communication is strategic, although it can make important contributions to goal achievement. Second, conversations of strategic significance to an organization's goals, may take place in a variety of arenas. Third, communication includes both messaging and listening.

A well-established model within the field of marketing goes under the acronym AIDA and describes the process of influence, persuasion, and decision making. The letters come from the words Attention – Interest – Desire – Action, and the model dates back to 1898 when E. St. Elmo Lewis first proposed this theory based on studies of the life insurance industry, where he described the four cognitive phases from the point that a product is first presented to a potential buyer, to the moment a sales contract is closed. The idea is that it is only by moving a customer through the first three stages that a purchase actually takes place (Michaelson & Stacks, 2011, p. 5). Over the years, this model has been applied in a wide range of marketing-related situations including social media marketing and nonprofit marketing (Buis et al., 2015; Gupta et al., 2017; Hassan et al., 2015; Miles, 2019). In such contexts, the model describes stages in a process of purposeful communication.

A study conducted by Jim Macnamara and Ansgar Zerfass shows that organizational social media communication has to balance the dual purposes of communication: participation and effectiveness (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 304). Participation requires openness, community, and democratization, which is very much in line with the open philosophy of Web 2.0, while effectiveness is about achieving the organizational objectives. One of the key features of online communication is that dialogue is an option, and though it may lead to some critical postings from the outside world when you invite comments, the organization's reputation may still benefit because the increased openness is valued in itself (Bonvik & Brønn, 2010, p. 274). As Joep Cornelissen writes, strong reputations give organizations "first-choice" status with stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2017, p. 84). This two-way perspective also makes it easier than before for the organization to keep track of what the outside world is thinking about its products, services, behavior, and values (Linaa Jensen & Tække, 2018, p. 136).

The aspect of building the organization's reputation, sometimes labeled branding, is an important part of strategic communication. However, branding is not only about outside stakeholders and their views. The organization's own workforce is relevant as well, since corporate organizations also find worker pride to be a competitive advantage for the business (Butler et al., 2016). A parallel is found within the church context. Riza Casidy has conducted a survey among regular church-goers and non-church-goers where he found in both groups that respondents who perceive the church as highly brand-oriented are more likely to perceive church participation as delivering positive spiritual, social, and purpose-in -life benefits through its activities (Casidy, 2013, p. 237).

On the other hand, Keith Anderson and Elizabeth Drescher argue that a focus on branding may turn churches into products to be consumed rather than real people and communities with whom to be in relationship (Anderson & Drescher, 2018, p. 42). Another concern may be the negotiation between control of the message, the ideals of a participatory culture, and the opportunities for dialogue that the technologies provide (Campbell & Lövheim, 2011, p. 1090).

Research Questions

The literature review has shown how theory and research from the fields of communication studies, media and religion studies, and strategic communication may all contribute to a better understanding of how church practices can help the organization reach its potential in terms of social media use. The aim of this article is to complement the existing research with distinct information about how Norwegian Christian churches adapt to the new media situation.

Particularly, three research questions are important for this study. The first one is this: How frequently do churches post on which social media platforms, and which audiences are targeted? This question is important because, when it comes to church websites, a study of the websites of Southern Baptist churches in the US (Sturgill, 2004), and a study of the websites of Lutheran churches in Norway (Hodøl, 2018), both conclude that the websites observed mainly show content that promotes church activities and events, and to a lesser extent, content covering the missiological aspect targeted at people outside the church community. The answer to this first research question will disclose whether the same is currently the case for Norwegian churches' social media engagement.

The second question is how churches communicate in social media, and to what extent they engage in relational and dialogical activities on platforms like Facebook. This is an area where social media platforms diverge from traditional media by focusing on openness, two-way communication, and participation from both the organization and its stakeholders or clients. Therefore, it contradicts the traditional view of media as a means for bringing a single message to a large and diverse audience which has limited options for responding to the sender. The engagement facilitated by social media supports relationship-building activities, and social relationships are as well a key concept for Christian churches (Modéus, 2019; Ratzinger, 1996).

The third question to be addressed is what the church leaders themselves consider the primary purpose for their social media activity. This question represents a development from the two previous ones, and the answers to this question will primarily be discussed based on theory of strategic communication and existing research within the field of media and religion.

Based on findings and discussions related to these three research questions, the article will reveal a potential for development that churches can assess for their future activities in social media.

Methodology

The approach for addressing the research questions make use of a survey in form of a questionnaire sent to church offices with a suggestion that it be answered by a priest,

a pastor, or another person in a leading position in the church. A quantitative approach is used in this context as an instrument for mapping what churches actually do and, to some extent, the strategic reasoning that lies behind the practice. Therefore, the answers provide a framework for the following discussions.

The questionnaire mainly consisted of questions for which the respondents were to choose among predefined response categories, but also contained questions to which the respondents could express answers in their own words. Therefore, although the study is predominantly a quantitative study, it has elements of a qualitative approach as well.

The Survey and Its Response Rate

There is no comprehensive register of all the Christian congregations in Norway, so e-mail addresses were collected from the national headquarters of the denominations, from the churches' own websites, and from the Norwegian governmental agency where churches can apply for financial support.

According to DAWN Norge there were more than 2.600 local churches or churchlike congregations within the country in 2009 (DAWN, 2010, p. 9), with the number increasing (*SENDT Norge rapport (p. 20), 2016*, p. 5). Approximately 1.280 of them belong to the Church of Norway, which is currently organized as a denomination but was a Lutheran state church until 2012. However, many of the congregations are either very small, or they share office resources as well as clergy, so the number of possible entities to get in touch with is substantially lower. Altogether, a list of 2.068 local congregations in Norway was composed for this study and 1.818 e-mail addresses were identified from this list. Among these addresses, there were 62 duplicates. Out of 1.756 unique e-mail addresses, a non-valid response was received from 44. From the 1.712 remaining addresses (to which the questionnaire was sent), 95 replies were received indicating a desire not to participate in the study, and 725 positive responses were recieved, which means that 42% of those who received the survey filled it out partially or entirely. This response rate was higher than expected, and clearly above 35.7%, which was the mean for response rates for studies conducted on an organizational level in Baruch and Holtom's examination of 490 different studies published in 17 refereed academic journals (Baruch & Holtom, 2008).

379 of the respondents (52%) represent churches within the largest denomination in the country, the Church of Norway, which correlates well with the denomination's percentage of the total number of entities. The respondents were not required to answer every question and, based on the answers given by the respondents to some questions, the web-based questionnaire would present relevant follow-up questions.

Limitations

Although a higher percentage of respondents would have given more precise numbers, a response rate above forty percent is above projected and, for the purpose of this study, considered good enough to reliably represent the practices and reasoning that exist among Norwegian church leaders when it comes to social media.

The strength of the chosen methodology is that it makes it possible to gain knowledge of what church leaders think of their own practices. However, their views do not necessarily reflect what actually takes place, and a content analysis of what is posted would have shed

additional light on the topic. Some of the answers given by the respondents to the open-ended questions were brief, and follow-up questions could have helped to obtain a better understanding of the views and reflections of the respondents.

The questionnaire, as well as the methodology, were reported to and approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD), a national center supporting researchers and research institutions.

Results

The findings from the survey are presented in connection with each of the three research questions.

RQ 1: How Frequently Do Churches Post on Which Social Media Platforms, and What Audiences are Targeted?

The questionnaire contained a question about how often content was published on various social media platforms, and 560 respondents answered this question (Table 1).

Almost nine out of ten churches report that they post content on Facebook at least monthly, and 71% as often as weekly. Also, Instagram is used by some churches, although in much lower numbers. Close to one out of five churches post something on Instagram every month, which is still a considerable number.

When it comes to other platforms, a substantial number of churches publish video content regularly (Table 2).

If we add up the numbers for the different platforms and look at what kind of churches publish video content at least twice every six months regardless of platform, which can be considered somewhat regularly, we find that congregations in urban areas, as well as congregations not belonging to the former state church, the Church of Norway, publish video content more often than others. 11% of congregations within the Church of Norway

Table 1. How often does the church publish content on the following social media channels?

	Facebook	Instagram	Snapchat	Twitter	Other
Daily	3.0%	0.5%			1.6%
Several times per week	33.3%	4.2%	0.5%	0.2%	6.4%
Weekly	35.5%	6.3%	1.9%	0.9%	16.7%
Twice or thrice per month	12.2%	5.7%	1.9%	0.5%	7.0%
Monthly	3.1%	2.1%	1.9%	0.2%	3.3%
At least twice per six months	3.0%	1.2%	1.6%	1.6%	3.5%
More rarely or never	9.9%	80.0%	92.2%	96.7%	61.5%
Total (N = 574)	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.1%**	**100.0%**

Table 2. How often does the church publish content on the following platforms?

	YouTube	Vimeo	Other video	Blog
Several times per week	0.4%		0.2%	
Weekly	0.9%	0.5%	1.8%	1.2%
Twice or thrice per month	2.3%	0.4%	1.2%	1.2%
Monthly	2.7%	1.1%	1.1%	1.2%
At least twice per six months	6.9%	2.1%	3.0%	2.0%
More rarely or never	86.9%	95.9%	92.7%	94.3%
Total (N = 566)	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

post video online at least twice every half year, while 21% of other churches report the same habit, and we get almost the same figures if we group churches according to location. Among churches located in a town or city with at least twenty thousand inhabitants, 22% of the churches post videos online somewhat regularly, while only 12% of churches in more rural areas do the same.

The respondents were asked to rank the target groups, and the answers clearly indicate that the primary target audience for the churches' social media activity are the members of the church.

62% of the churches say that the members of the church are the primary target for the church's social media content. This number is almost identical whether we look at churches within or outside the Church of Norway. Even if we sort the feedback by denomination, the same tendency is shown. However, despite low numbers of respondents within some denominations, the answers may indicate that Catholic and Orthodox churches tend to rate the members of the church as the most important target compared to outsiders.

The respondents were presented with a number of statements to which they were asked to respond on behalf of their church. When the statement was "Social media makes it easier for the church to come into contact with new people," 48% agreed completely and 42% agreed partially, which adds up to a total of 90% of the respondents. When the statement was: 'Social media makes it possible to build a stronger community among church members,' the tendency was the same; however, more respondents tended to be in partial agreement in this regard, and 23% – close to 1 out of 4 – disagreed partially or completely.

Based on the survey, there are no significant differences observed in how church leaders respond to these questions when congregations are broken into criteria like within or outside the Church of Norway, or rural versus urban areas.

All the answers indicate that many churches do emphasize their social media presence, but mostly for informational and branding purposes. The fact that the main target audience is comprised of people who are already members, combined with the mind-set that social media makes it possible to strengthen the fellowship among members, is consistent with Butler et al. and their thinking of building the organization's brand within the organization itself.

RQ 2: How Is the Relational Aspect of Social Media Taken Care Of?

Only one third (32%) of the respondents agreed completely or partially to the statement that social media makes it possible for the church to have open discussions on key topics, and one church respondent stated clearly that the national headquarter of the denomination does not allow local congregations to use Facebook as a forum to discuss various theological or practical issues. There were no significant differences between answers from congregations within or outside the Church of Norway when it came to their position on this statement.

As mentioned earlier, organizational social media must balance different purposes, and the relational aspect is one of these. Several respondents pointed to this relational aspect by writing about lowering the threshold to the church, creating a sense of belonging to the church, and showing the local community that the church is part of the vibrant life. However, when asked about public discussions, some churches were more reluctant. Given the research presented earlier in this article indicating that dialogue and discussion are key strengths of social media, the answers from the church leaders show that churches have potential for development in this respect. Campbell and Lövheim may be right about

the organizations' concern regarding losing control of the message as an explanation for this state of affairs.

The respondents were asked whether or not the church has a defined strategy for its social media publishing, and less than four out of ten churches (39%) answered in the affirmative. However, those who do have such a defined strategy reported it to consist of guidelines for what kinds of content should be promoted, as well as rules about privacy and copyright issues. Several respondents pointed out openness and transparency as key values, though one respondent honestly stated that they do not succeed as much as they wish.

According to the descriptions by Hallahan et al. and Zerfass et al., strategic communication is about information, persuasion, and relations when used in the context of achieving of an organization's mission. The churches examined in this survey seem to focus primarily on the first of these aspects.

RQ 3: What Do the Churches Consider the Purpose of Their Social Media Activity to Be?

The respondents were encouraged to describe, in their own words, why their church is active on social media, and a vast majority used words like "information," "advertising," and "promotion" when asked to pin down the most important reasons for the church's presence in social media. However, quite a few churches also mentioned missiological purposes as well as reputation building and branding, and some pointed out that the church has to be where the people of today are. One source specified this by expressing that, of the seventy-two church members, there were only two they could not reach via Facebook. Another source mentioned that there is no longer a local newspaper in the village and therefore local message boards on Facebook had become important.

One source wrote that it is important for the church to show itself, and in this way, lower the threshold for people to come to a worship service. Another pointed to the importance of a church being transparent, and that social media is a suitable conduit for this.

When the respondents were presented with the statement "Social media is something we do because we think we have to do it," 38% agreed partially or completely. At first glance, this figure can be perceived as a fear of being left behind if modern communication is not embraced. However, this can also be thought of as a sign of willingness to try out new options and to broaden the toolbox for reaching both current and new audiences.

When it comes to social media's contribution to building the brand of the church, the respondents were predominantly positive (Table 3).

Table 3. To what extent do you agree to this statement: "Social media is important for building the church's brand or reputation in the community".

	Congregations outside the Church of Norway	Congregations within the Church of Norway	Total
Completely agree	32.4%	43.9%	38. 0%
Partially agree	44.5%	38.7%	41.7%
Partially disagree	9.6%	8.1%	8.9%
Completely disagree	5.0%	1.1%	3.1%
Do not know/not relevant	8.5%	8.1%	8.3%
Total (N = 552)	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

80% agreed – partially or completely – with this statement, and when asked to elaborate, one source mentioned the aspect of creating interest and pride in the church as a reason for their church's use of social media.

Interestingly, there is a tendency that churches within the former state church have stronger faith in the reputation-building effect of social media than other churches.

Discussion

Strategic communication refers to purposeful communication on behalf of an organization. This study is conducted among a broad range of Christian churches in Norway and, therefore, the churches will state their overall purpose in somewhat different ways based on the diversity of denominations and traditions. However, about half of the entities belong to the former state-run Lutheran Church of Norway. To provide an example, they present their vision by stating the phrase "More Heaven on Earth" and by pointing out the ways in which the church witnesses in words and deeds, by being confessing, open, ministering and missional (Church of Norway, 2015). The missional aspect as described in the beginning of the article, may thus be relevant for most respondents, if not all.

Posts and Audience

Previously in this article, findings related to the churches' posts and the prospective audience have been revealed, with the predominant discovery being that most of the churches' published social media content is targeted at current parishioners. Posts are, to a large extent, seen as a substitute for advertising in newspapers, and for this reason churches follow a traditional media strategy of broadcasting a non-personal message to a nonspecific audience. However, as communication scholars like Carey emphasize, communication is more than information spreading. If an organization neglects the ritual view of communication where sharing, participation, and fellowship are in focus, it does not take advantage of the dialogical and interactive potential of the new media platforms. The majority of churches in this survey have not yet taken part in this transition that Silverstone anticipates.

If we apply Meyrowitz' and Hjarvard's theory of media as conduits, languages, and environments in this context of churches promoting events, we need to look at how Facebook as a conduit affects the message, for example, when it comes to the algorithms that determine what posts are given the most prominent position in a user's newsfeed. Facebook as a language points to the rules and conventions – or grammar – for how users expect posts to be. Since churches, like any publisher, want to reach as large an audience as possible, it is reasonable to assume that they will try to comply with the media logic and the practice that seems to work the best. When it comes to Facebook as an environment, the platform presents all information in a linear way, with the content typically being consumed on a mobile screen when the user is on the move. All these arguments highlight a situation which apparently is very different than local newspaper advertisements that show up in the same spot under the same heading week after week. Therefore, the choice of media platform does influence the message conveyed, and the churches ought to reflect on which media conduits they should use for accomplishing their communication goals.

It is also relevant to discuss how a marketing-oriented theory like the AIDA-model can be applicable in a situation of church communication. The first phase of the model is about attracting the target audience and getting their attention. An example is a community church that posted a cross-word game at new-year, asking their Facebook audience to look for words that may describe their new year. The post, which did not convey any kind of information about the church or its values or beliefs, got a high number of likes, comments, and shares, and thus worked as an attention getter.

The next phase in the model is about generating interest among the audience. An example[1] is a church's Facebook post consisting of an image of a child sitting on the floor close to a wall, with the hands covering its face. On the wall was the word "beloved" in graffiti-like text. The Facebook image was accompanied by a sentence describing God's love for people. The image itself depicted a heartbreaking situation, but the word on the wall contrasted the mood of the child's situation, and the text that went along with the image on Facebook – which was anchored in the image – turned the overall impression from painful to positive. The combination of text and image in this example goes well with Roland Barthes' terms *anchorage* and *relay* when it comes to how the elements work together. In this example, we find that the word "beloved" is used both in the image and in the accompanying text and thus is an example of anchorage. However, the text went further explaining that it is God who loves and cares for his creatures. This is an example of something that is not possible to read directly from the image itself, and thus it is what Barthes called "relay." The image and the text combined conveyed the message from the church and were supposed to build interest among followers to be a stronger part of the church community.

The "D" in the AIDA model stands for "desire" and refers to putting out information that intensifies the target audience's desire from a general interest to a more distinct intent. In a church context, this can be to provide specific information about something the audience should not miss. An urban church promoted an upcoming service on Facebook using an image of a guest speaker with his name superimposed, and with text that informed the reader that this well-known speaker would come and present the following day in addition to a full worship band on a brand-new stage design and, moreover, that there would be a separate, parallel program for the kids. This is an example of specific promotion for something extraordinary, and it is easy to assume that followers of this church will experience an intensified anticipation for the event that can be considered desire.

The fourth and last phase in the model is about a call to action. In a church context, this may be inviting people to spend time in church or getting involved in a ministry. It can also be about sharing church experiences and, in this way, bolstering the relationship within the church community. An example of the latter is from a Facebook post done by the Church of Norway denomination. They posted a close-up image of a communion cup, with this question superimposed on it: "Did you go to church today?" The text that went along with the image on Facebook clarified the question slightly by asking what the best aspect of the service was and which local church the reader attended. The text also invited the reader to share his or her experience by commenting right below the image. The post got approximately two hundred comments and an even higher number of likes, which is an exceptionally high number of responses.

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[1]This example is not from at Norwegian church which was part of the survey.

Social Media and a Participatory Culture

The second focus point of this study concerns the formal characteristics of the communication that is taking place, and especially whether the churches take part in the participatory culture and take advantage of the options for two-way communication and interactivity. The examples presented show that sometimes churches invite their Facebook audience into conversations. However, the overall impression based on the survey is that churches do not do this very often, and it seems reasonable to look at this as an unexploited potential when it comes to building relationships with the audience. Churches frequently use words like "fellowship," "connection," and "community" among other similar terms when they present themselves and their values. And yet, it seems like this relational aspect is – for most churches – allocated to offline arenas and only to a limited extent do churches provide online alternatives to those who for some reason would prefer to be part of the community via online tools.

On the other hand, although this is not a trend study, the answers indicate that a growing number of churches are in the process of developing their online ministry. 16,4% of churches in this study reported that the church either already offers a church app, or they are considering launching one. Some churches have started using Facebook groups as a means for communicating with individuals that do not appear in the church physically. These groups can be open to all or limited to parishioners, and they can be places for questions, prayer requests and thoughts, as well as for sharing personal stories.

Based on Zirschky's argument that the relational aspect is vital to a church community, which is also perfectly in line with the recognized strengths of social media, it would be worthwhile to carry out further research on how online groups may contribute to accomplishing the churches' goals.

Strategy

The last research question is about the purposes or strategies behind the churches' social media presences. The findings in this study indicate that churches have different approaches to what Macnamara and Zerfass label the dual purpose of communication – participation and effectiveness. When it comes to participation, dialogue, and discussion, the churches' strategies range from no discussions at all, via a praxis with a leadership that moderates the input received, to a few churches that openly state a transparent approach where questions and opinions are appreciated. The answers bolster Campbell and Lövheim's argument that there is a need to balance the participatory culture with a need for control. However, this way of thinking contrasts with Bonvik & Brønn, who argue that transparency is valued enough among users to compensate for the negative comments that may appear as a result of the openness. This study does not provide information about what experiences churches have with an open approach to participation and dialogue. How branding theory applies to a church context is thus also an area for future research.

Conclusion

The overall objective of this study was to describe and discuss what practices and purposes Norwegian churches have when it comes to social media, and what potential there is for

development. It is clear from all the answers received from the leaders of more than seven hundred Norwegian congregations, that social media is extensively used for strategic purposes. However, whether they attain their goals must be studied by methods other than asking the church leaders themselves.

The key finding of the study is that churches predominantly use social media platforms for informational purposes, which can be considered a continuation of the practice of promoting events by advertisements in local newspapers. This finding is consistent with findings from other empirical studies, but as we have seen, it is not in line with social media theory which builds on theory of a participating culture. Although churches report that their online ministries are emerging, it seems like social media is still primarily considered a tool for bringing people physically to the church, and not in itself an arena for serving the public. An urgent question following this finding is whether it is time to revise this goal because of changes in needs and expectations from the target audience. In the Pew Research study about why Americans do or do not go to church, many respondents attributed their decision to stay home to practical or personal factors rather than a lack of faith, and 37% of non-churchgoers reported practicing their faith in other ways as a reason for not attending church (Pew Research Center, 2018, p. 9). The study did not look into what kind of practices these are, but it is likely that the online ministries many churches provide in terms of an active presence in social media and livestreaming of video, among other internet-based activities, can be one way to fulfil these people's spiritual desires. For churches, this may lead to a discussion of what their mission truly is, and how success is to be considered in the future. It is not obvious that a large number of people within the church building at a particular time on Sunday morning will continue to be a good instrument for measuring the church's impact on its potential audience.

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