

Reshaping Offline Community in the Image of Online Experience:
The Impact of Digital Media on Church Conflict in the Episcopal Diocese of
Pittsburgh

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Relationships within the offline church have, in recent years become increasingly intertwined with online relationships; the church has often seemed unprepared for the influence of this parallel world, and has often seemed slow to meet the challenges it poses. When Chris recently took his fifteen-year-old goddaughter to church, she immediately pulled out her cell phone, opened Snapchat, and pointed her device at the sanctuary. An advertisement for the sushi restaurant next door drifted across the screen, as she scanned for signals within range. After asking whether we could have sushi for lunch, she asked: “Why doesn’t the church have any messages for my phone?”

This vignette illustrates two issues that emerged during our ethnographic research on contemporary conflict in the Anglican Communion. First, the online dimension of the tensions came as a surprise; we had not anticipated the extent to which our informants would emphasise digital media as a factor contributing to church conflict. Just as Chris was unaccustomed to the ways in which a fifteen-year-old interacts with a church environment, neither of us expected that those we interviewed would regularly raise issues relating to social media and blogging. Second, we observed that church congregations and their leadership are largely behind the curve when it comes to digital media. Christian churches struggle to discern how best to adapt to this technological and cultural context, employing the new media it in ways that are consistent with their beliefs, values, and practices. As church leaders begin to recognise this challenge, and conclude that they have been too slow to respond to the digital age, many now actively promote the potential of social media to engage with current and attract new members and encourage the exploration of online forms of worship and spiritual practices.

In the context of this new enthusiasm, this essay identifies ways in which digital media can exacerbate conflict in the church. We focus on a divisive conflict in the Episcopal

Diocese of Pittsburgh. When we asked our informants to explain the schism that occurred in their diocese into 2008, what we unexpectedly heard was that social media and blogging played key roles. The essay demonstrates that such media reshaped both individual and communal identity among local Episcopalians. We observed this dynamic in a number of distinct developments. First, the internet mediated links between local church members and like-minded Anglicans in distant regions of the globe. Second, the filter through which digital media impacts on Christian identity is far from neutral but is influenced by demographic usage and access to the technology. Third, we observed ways in which digital media impacted intimately on individual identity, as many reframed their expectations of their offline local congregation in relation to their online experiences.

From this perspective, the essay subsequently engages with celebrations of the potential of digital media to ‘bring the world closer together’ as more and more people join social media networks¹. We suggest that, as Christians explore the potential of digital media, they should not neglect to also reflect deeply on the negative aspects of the medium, which are increasingly coming under scrutiny among social scientists and media analysts. Our chief finding is that, as digital media facilitated relationships between Christians across vast distances and across cultures, many individuals in Pittsburgh began to try to reshape their local offline congregations into the image of their online virtual community. As the Internet helped fuel the ensuing tensions, it is not difficult to understand how the result was a significant schism.

1. Digital Media and Church Conflict: The Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh

¹ Mark Zuckerberg, ‘Bringing the World Closer Together’, *Facebook.com* 22 June 2017. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/bringing-the-world-closer-together/10154944663901634/> [Accessed 16 February 2019].

In 2008, the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh suffered a formal schism when the Bishop and over sixty percent of the congregations declared that they were withdrawing from the structures of the national Episcopal Church (TEC), while a significant minority decided to remain in the national church. Those that left rebranded themselves ‘The *Anglican* Diocese of Pittsburgh’ to distinguish themselves from the ‘continuing’ *Episcopal* Diocese of Pittsburgh. Considerable pain and resentment built up on both sides, and a number of congregations were left internally divided.

When we asked Rev. Andrea, a priest in the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, why her diocese had experienced a significant split, she replied,

I think of it ... as the fallout of our new technology. Because, I think the whole way communications happens now - in an instant and in a global way - it's easy - but not connected to human beings. So you can say on your blog whatever you darn well please, and nobody knows what you look like, or they know what you look like but they certainly don't know where you live.... You're not in conversation with the real persons, so it's really easy to go extreme and ... blow things up, and be more antagonistic, and stuff like that.... You've got ... everybody getting their backs up over here and digging their heels in and getting impatient. So I think ... part of it is a function of our communication technology. It plays into sound bites and lack of manners; things like that.

For Rev. Andrea, digital media had contributed to the tensions in her diocese by accelerating the exchange of heated rhetoric and accusations. Moreover, it enabled those caught up in disagreements to carry on a polemical battle without meeting in person. In the past, church conflict had largely been limited to diocesan synods or clergy conferences, where at least one had the opportunity to respond directly to one's opponents, and to observe visually how they were reacting to what one said.

We had arranged to meet with Rev. Andrea as part of our project in Pittsburgh. The city of Pittsburgh sits in the southwest corner of Pennsylvania. It experienced the immediate postwar years as a period of rapid growth, during which waves of immigration brought societal change to the region, and contributed to weakening the predominance of the Presbyterian Church. In the 1950s, the Episcopal bishop Austin Pardue encouraged initiatives that responded to these social changes, particularly through evangelistic missions in the many mill towns of the region. In 2008, the city had a population of just over 313,000, with 2.3 million living in the greater Pittsburgh region. The white population comprised 66%, with an African-American demographic of 25%.

Tensions between the Diocese of Pittsburgh and the national Episcopal Church (TEC) had been building up over various matters since the 1970s but intensified in the late 1990s after Pittsburgh's bishop, Robert Duncan (elected in 1996) became one of the leading conservative critics of the national church.² Following the consecration of a partnered gay man as bishop of New Hampshire in 2003, the situation became heated. In 2007, the Diocesan Council in Pittsburgh voted to change its constitution so that it was no longer bound by the canons of TEC. As a result, on 18 September 2008, TEC's House of Bishops voted to depose Duncan of his position on the grounds that he had effectively abandoned communion with the Episcopal Church. On 4 October, the Diocese of Pittsburgh declared that it was withdrawing from TEC to realign itself with other dissenting Episcopal churches, and temporarily put itself under the authority of the Church of the Southern Cone (southern South America). Bishop Duncan instructed every member of the clergy and the vestry (the governing leadership committee) of every congregation to declare whether they were

² For a history of the Diocese of Pittsburgh up to the schism, see: Jeremy Bonner, *Called out of Darkness into Marvellous Light: A History of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, 1750-2006* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

realigning and joining him, or whether they would remain associated with TEC. Much to his surprise, one third of the parishes decided to remain within TEC.

We conducted ethnographic research among Anglican and Episcopal clergy and lay members in the region between 2008 and 2013 to inquire about the cause of the split that tore apart their diocese. Media coverage of the schism had generally explained the dispute as a feud over the acceptance of homosexual partnerships in the church, or by reducing it to a ‘Culture War’ between Liberals and Conservatives. To explore the reasons for the conflict more deeply, we undertook participant observation at church meetings and conducted semi-structured interviews with 53 individuals, of whom 53% were members of the realigned Anglican Diocese of Pittsburgh, and 47% were members of churches that remained within the ‘continuing’ Episcopal diocese of Pittsburgh. Of those we interviewed, 40% were women and 60% were men; 45% were clergy and 55% were lay people. Eleven of these individuals were interviewed on more than one occasion for updates and clarifications. The names of individuals and congregations have been changed to maintain confidentiality.³

Our scripted interview questions did not ask about digital media, but instead made open-ended inquiries into the issues and factors that had led to the tensions and conflict in the diocese. As such, we had not anticipated the frequency with which social media and the internet were identified as significant factors in the schism in Pittsburgh. Yet a number of our informants told us that digital media had been a powerful contributor to local polarization.

Over the course of our research, we encountered laments like that offered by Rev. Andrea over ways in which the internet was re-shaping Anglican-Episcopal identity and

³ For a fuller analysis of the split in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, see: C.C. Brittain, *A Plague on Both Their Houses Liberal vs. Conservative Christians and the Divorce of the Episcopal Church USA* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015). For an account by a local church leader, see: H.T. Lewis, *The Recent Unpleasantness: Calvary Church’s Role in the Preservation of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Pittsburgh* (Eugen, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

relationships in the South-West corner of Pennsylvania. Rev. Adams put the issue to us as follows,

Today, if you have a thought, you instantly put it on the internet and everybody across the world knows it. And so, I think, the tensions that have always been there now are exacerbated by the fact that anybody and everybody can put in their two cents and then once they do that they've become committed to that point of view and it's very difficult to back off. I think that's fuelling the fire.

How social media 'fuels the fire' of tensions and disagreements in the churches can be elaborated upon in various ways. Gagnous & Wagner offer one such explanation when they observe the extent to which social media encourages like-minded people to reinforce each other's presuppositions, 'people often avoid objectivity if the path to reassuring information, which is consistent with their presuppositions, is readily available.'⁴ In similar fashion, in the wake of conflicts in the Anglican Communion, Bruce Kaye observes, 'If we want to have any confidence in understanding the faith of our fellow Anglicans on contentious and important personal questions then we will need to have a very high order of understanding and sympathy. Emails and websites do not particularly facilitate that.'⁵ The compression of time and space that the internet enables has changed both the speed and scope of church conflict, often resulting in an intense polemical atmosphere.

In this fashion, we became accustomed during our conversations in Pittsburgh to listening to people share their frustrations over being 'misrepresented' or 'attacked' in the blogosphere. Rev Gino, for example, recalled how he read some articles online in which critics accused him of being a closet Roman Catholic and not a true Evangelical. Even a number of years after the fact, the bitterness and hurt in his voice remained palpable.

⁴ J. Gagnous & K.M. Wagner, *Tweeting to Power: The Social Media Revolution in American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 10.

⁵ B. Kaye, 'High Speed Conflict and Anglican Identity', *Journal of Anglican Studies* 5 (2007), pp. 135-143, at p.138. DOI: 10.1177/1740355307083641

1.1 Mediating the Local and the Global.

As we encountered concerns among Pittsburgh Anglicans/Episcopalians that digital media was exacerbating tensions between local church members, we also observed regular discussion of ways in which the internet was facilitating the emergence of new networks between like-minded church members across vast distances. This served to foster, in the words of Roland Robertson, an ‘intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole’.⁶ Digital media enabled parishioners to identify with a global virtual community at some distance to their own locality. Such enhanced access to alternative beliefs and practices from those of one’s local congregation, and the facilitation of networks between like-minded people across vast distances, represent a significant challenge to established church structures and procedures. Digital media offers discontented local church members relatively easy access to supportive resources in other regions, while also expanding the distribution of dissenting views within the local church.

Rev. Daniel of St. Bylsma’s emphasised the importance of these links to one side of the local dispute: ‘the conservative block, whatever you want to call it ... found themselves in a decided minority in The Episcopal Church, a voice crying in the wilderness.... It was [only] then that they discovered the Anglican community.’ Rev. Brooks at St. Orpik’s emphasised the way this changed the sense of connection that many had to the local national church, ‘People felt much closer to the church of Uganda than they did to the Episcopal Church in its national expression.’

That this development was not limited to clergy and elite leaders in the region was evident five minutes into a visit with Norm, a parishioner of St. Bylsma’s, at his home in Pittsburgh. He thrust a pile of printouts of blog postings in Chris’ hands and proclaimed,

⁶ R. Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. (London: SAGE, 1992), p. 8.

‘You have to keep yourself informed! Have you read these ones yet?’ This senior citizen was by no means an early-adopter of the latest technology. But one of his friends regularly printed out material for him from online blogs that discussed contemporary issues in The Episcopal Church – often written by authors in distant Australia, England, or Africa. The scope of his sense of Christian community had expanded exponentially through digital media, while his sense of alienation from his local congregation grew.

1.2. Challenges to Anglican Identity

This phenomenon is particularly striking for the way in which it impacts on the self-understanding of Anglicans and Episcopalians and their sense of identity. In Pittsburgh we observed ways in which digital media impacted intimately on both congregational and individual self-understanding. Recall how Rev. Adams suggested to us that expressing oneself via digital media can make someone inclined to maintain consistency with previously publicly expressed views. It becomes difficult to adapt or compromise when engaging with others after having published a strong position in a public forum like a blog or on social media.

Others we spoke with vented frustration over ways in which the Internet had become an instrument to demonize others. Rev. Jon, for example, lamented the experience of feeling ‘smeared at every chance they got.’ Some, like Martha, expressed dismay over the amount of time her priest spent online engaging in ecclesial polemics. She observed, ‘It used to be in my church that God was the ultimate.... I’m not sure that we are there at this point.’

Such a concern about the personal impact of digital media is discussed by Alex Lambert, who observes, ‘Facebook offers the opportunity for ... a different kind of intimacy. Yet this spatiality is precarious. It can sometimes be inverted so that participants see others

and themselves as objects rather than subjects. Interpersonal intimacy is deferred.⁷ This resonates with the caution Rowan Williams has raised about the fact that, ‘to be a conscious subject involves thinking through what it is to experience check or limit.’⁸ If he is correct, the pace and fluidity of online religion has a significant potential to minimize the checks and limits experienced by Christians in their processes of communal and individual identity formation.

This issue is intensified by some significant structural and demographic factors. In addition to the challenges articulated by our informants in Pittsburgh, it is noteworthy that the parameters through which digital media filters information between Christians is far from neutral. Not all Christians possess an equal capacity to generate online content. As Heidi Campbell has shown, in 2010 most Christian bloggers were male (>80%), held a position of authority in an offline religious organization (62%), and were American (69%).⁹

In Pittsburgh, women like Debbie experienced the criticism she encountered online as gendered. She shared with us how one of her friends, a female priest, was harshly criticized online. Her friend had preached a sermon in which she expressed concern over the fact that women could not be ordained to the episcopate in the new realigned Anglican diocese of Pittsburgh. With rage in her voice, Debbie told us, ‘the blogs were just vicious.’

The way that people like Debbie and Rev. Jon identify digital media as supporting polemic and polarization in the church resonates with some emerging research on the impact of the Internet on human behaviour. In a study of social media use among clergy in the Church of England, Lee Longden concludes that the online identity many adopt can result in ‘toxic online disinhibition’.¹⁰ This emerges when individuals hit the ‘send’ button after

⁷ A. Lambert, *Intimacy and Friendship on Facebook*. (London: Palgrave, 2013), p. 3.

⁸ R. Williams, *Lost Icons* (New York: Morehouse, 2000), p. 146.

⁹ H.A. Campbell, ‘Religious Authority and the Blogosphere’, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 15.2 (2010), pp. 251-276, at p. 256. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2010.01519.x

¹⁰ L. Longden, ‘Online Disinhibition: heightened potential for professional conduct issues among clergy in the Church of England?’, *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 35.1 (2014), pp. 1-9.

composing an email or post with ill-considered words or images, offer remarks they think will be viewed only by a limited intended audience, or write critical blogs written in a tone and manner that they would seldom adopt in face-to-face encounters. Longden notes that many clergy using digital media struggle to maintain professional conduct standards in their online identity, unless they invest considerable care and conscious effort to the ways in which they use this communication technology.

While digital media can foster a divergence between one's offline professional identity and one's online identity, there is a corresponding potential impact on how one conceives of God and spirituality. In a study of the use of the Internet by two Korean mega churches, Kirsteen Kim observes how, among the membership of these two communities, 'the Internet not only displays different spiritualities, it also contributes to the creation of spiritual identities – and to a new form of Christian expression', which she calls 'ethereal Christianity'.¹¹ Kim notes that, for over a decade, South Korea has been the most Internet-connected country in the world and has faster average broadband speed than anywhere else. In such a context, she suggests that 'Pentecostal-charismatic spirituality' – such as is prevalent in South Korea – is more immediately suited than other types to the interactive medium of the Internet. This is due to the way in which it encourages a distinct approach from that of traditional church worship, where the text is treated as an 'embodied icon'.¹² Kim writes that, for charismatics, 'their theology of empowerment means that they do not distinguish between the text and their interpretation of it, but understand it as it speaks to them.' As such, charismatics do not focus on following the text, but rather on responding it; they are thus 'more likely to be comfortable playing with a text'. This facilitates, Kim concludes, a convergence between spirituality and digital technology, which is gradually

¹¹ K. Kim, 'Ethereal Christianity: Reading Korean Mega-Church Websites', *Studies in World Christianity* 13.3 (2007), pp. 208-224, at p. 209.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 221.

reframing Christian beliefs in a new form of ‘cyber-theology’. Examples Kim offers include comparing prayer to being ‘online to God’, or engaging in cyberspace to ‘living in the spirit’.

Kim’s observations about how the Internet mediates the spirituality of the members of these two mega-churches highlight the impact of digital media on the formation of Christian identity and interpretation of the meaning of their faith tradition. While the ‘ethereal’ nature of this expression of Christianity might engage a younger generation deeply engaged with digital media, Kim also notes that it impacts of the kind of authority that a church institution and leader can exercise in forming a Christian identity. She notes that the medium of the Internet, ‘implicitly relativises authority by its eclectic mix of fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, virtue and vice, good and bad, public persona and private peccadillo’.¹³ This concern for the impact of digital media on traditional forms of church authority is also an issue that emerged during our fieldwork in Pittsburgh.

1.3 A challenge to traditional authority & redefining the local through a global lens

It was when we spoke to Frank, a member of St. Gonchar’s Church, that we began to not only to grasp the extent to which the local church was becoming globalised and religious identity was shifting both combined to support changing attitudes towards the local denominational institution and its established clerical authorities; we also began to observe a development not generally described in scholarly literature on online religion.

Notably, Frank seemed almost proud about how much time he spent online reading blogs relating to The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion,

the more information and facts you have, the better informed you can be. I mean, that’s why we get comfortable in our pews – because nobody talks to us. There are things going on, and I don’t even know about it... There are lots of things that

¹³ Ibid., p. 221.

can happen to you when you are uninformed. So, this being the case, I've read the literature, avidly.... It challenges me. It challenges the system, which has become very comfortable.

Frank expressed the desire for access to information about his church, which had previously eluded him – ‘nobody talks to us’. By ‘us’ he was undoubtedly referring to laypeople who share his viewpoint, and in this regard, Frank’s comments resonate with the ways in which some studies argue that the blogosphere is changing the nature of religious authority.¹⁴ As Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner put it, as the Internet facilitates enhanced individualism and less embedded group members, the result is a “flattening of traditional hierarchies.”¹⁵ Such scholars are unable to conclusively predict what will be the outcome of these changes; however, what they think is clear is that all of this enhanced contact and communication will not generate greater religious uniformity; rather, most think these developments will result in greater diversity emerging among and between religious organizations.¹⁶

Bryan Turner argues that while digital media might enhance access to information, it also has ‘the unintended effect of corroding traditional forms of authority that are either based on oral transmission and memory, or on printed forms of textual learning’.¹⁷ This is due to the way in which information is now detached from the authority figure that passes on the information orally, or from the specific texts that the information is drawn from. It also

¹⁴ Kerstin Raddle-Antweiler and Hannah Grünenthal have suggested that debates over the impact of digital media on religious authority are often confused by the deployment of differing definitions of the term ‘authority’. The understanding being employed in this essay is the Weberian notion of authority as referring to power structures, so that a challenge to traditional authority involves a changed relationship to established hierarchies and legitimation procedures. See: K. Raddle-Antweiler & H. Grünenthal, ‘Religious Authority: Ascribing Meaning to a Theoretical Term’, *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 7 (2018), pp. 368-380. DOI: 10.1163/21659214-00703009

¹⁵ H. Campbell & S. Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Waco: Baker Academic, 2016), p. 64.

¹⁶ S. H. Rudolph, ‘Transnational Religion’, *Religion in Global Civil Society*, ed. M. Juergensmeyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 189-199. See also: P. Beyer (ed.), *Religions in Global Society* (London: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁷ B.S. Turner, ‘Religious Authority and the New Media’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 24 (2007), pp. 117-134, at p. 118. DOI: 10.1177/0263276407075001

diminishes the need to study these texts under the direction of an institutional authority. This is another way of describing how digital media enables the emergence of what Kim calls ‘ethereal Christianity’.

Our ethnographic data offers additional evidence to support claims that digital media is impacting on the everyday life of Christians and their churches. Yet one aspect of our research contrasts with emphases in existing academic literature, and nuances more theoretical discussions of the impact of the Internet on the church. For example, in *Networked Theology*, Campbell and Garner emphasise the point that online engagement by Christians does not replace their involvement in a local congregational community. They argue, ‘online communities generally serve as a supplement, not substitute, for offline church involvement.’¹⁸ While it is undoubtedly true that online participation supplements, rather than replaces, offline engagement, online interaction also has the potential to reshape face-to-face involvement; how it does so has thus far been less well understood. In Pittsburgh, many Episcopalians who engaged with like-minded people online returned to their offline churches with an expectation that gradually became a demand that their local church conform more seamlessly with the values and agendas they had encountered online. In other words, as their online community shifted their sense of Anglican identity and encouraged a flattening of their understanding of religious authority, many mobilised to try to reshape their offline community into the image of their online experiences.¹⁹ This contributed to a deep rift and eventually a schism in the diocese. This desire to reframe local church experience according to online encounters and interactions is a significant development illuminated by our study of the conflict in Pittsburgh.

¹⁸ Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, p. 66.

¹⁹ Tero Karppi emphasises that the new forms of connection facilitated by digital media requires new forms of disconnection. See: T. Karppi, *Disconnect: Facebook’s Affective Bonds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

Observing such a development in our fieldwork supports our conclusion that social media and blogging played a significant role in the schism that occurred in the Episcopal diocese in that region. We have observed a similar potential for digital media to exacerbate church conflict in our research on tensions in the global Anglican Communion.²⁰

As scholars of contemporary religion, we both engaged in this research in Pittsburgh and in others regions of the Anglican Communion because we were interested in the trans-national dimensions of the conflict. That digital media plays a significance role in these dynamics seems obvious in hindsight, yet we had not anticipated at the outset of our works the central role it plays in facilitating the entwinement of the global in the local.

For one of us, however, there was a personal motivation for the research. Chris is an ordained Anglican priest, and thus has a stake in the unity and integrity of the Christian tradition to which he belongs. It was with such a concern that, after observing the ways in which digital media fuelled tensions in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, he sought to engage – *online* – with some of these dynamics in American Episcopalianism. In the next section, we discuss this because the result of this interaction further illustrates the complex ways in which digital media shapes religious conflict.

2. The challenge of interrupting these patterns

In 2015, Chris published a blog that analysed online commentary on events in the Anglican Communion that he had encountered over the course of our ethnographic research in Pittsburgh. He focused on two video-bloggers in particular – Kevin Kallsen and George Conger - who host the weekly site *Anglican Unscripted*. He discovered the existence of this site through our informants. In his blog, Chris identified two particular instances of Kallsen’s

²⁰ For a discussion of the impact of digital media on the contemporary Anglican Communion, see: C.C. Brittain and A. McKinnon, *The Anglican Communion at a Crossroads: The Crises of a Global Church* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), pp. 46-65.

and Conger's coverage of events, which he described as examples of 'truthiness'.²¹

'Truthiness' is a concept coined by Stephen Colbert, who defines it as follows, 'The quality of stating concepts or facts one wishes or believes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true.'²² The intention of Chris' blog was to encourage a conversation about the way in which current tensions in the Communion were being over-simplified through the medium of the internet. Our observations in our Pittsburgh fieldwork had led us to conclude that ways in which issues and tensions are symbolically framed and described influence the nature of a church conflict.²³ In Chris' view, the style of these particular episodes of *Anglican Unscripted* resembled the polemical tone of material that our informants had raised concerns about. Details were omitted to support a specific interpretation of a given situation.

It would be difficult to describe this attempted intervention as successful, but as a quasi-experiment, it has proven illuminating. The experience has encouraged us to reflect further on the complex challenge of seeking to interrupt or counter the dynamics we describe in this essay. For, in a subsequent episode of *Anglicans Unscripted*, the two hosts referred to Chris' blog.²⁴ They summarised how their critic [i.e. Chris], 'Found inaccuracies he thought were in that article.' They continued by adding, 'We are not above reproach. We desire to be truthful. When we are wrong, we desire to correct it. This is the difference between commentary and news.' Kallsen and Conger then suggested, 'We laid out the facts in our inimical way', and proceeded to mock the tone of Chris' article: 'To pretend that you are doing dispassionate professional analysis, when you're really doing partisan hackery, and calling it high-mindedness – you know, try again.'

²¹ C. Brittain, 'The Truth of the Gospel, the Gospel of "Truthiness," and the Future of the Anglican Communion', *ABC Religion & Ethics* (29 May 2015). Available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-truth-of-the-gospel-the-gospel-of-truthiness-and-the-future-/10098244> [accessed 16 February 2019].

²² M.C. Munger, 'Blogging and Political Information: Truth or Truthiness', *Public Choice* 134 (2007), pp.125-138, at p. 125. DOI 10.1007/s11127-007-9205-6

²³ C.C. Brittain & A. McKinnon, 'Homosexuality and the Construction of "Anglican Orthodoxy": The Symbolic Politics of the Anglican Communion', *Sociology of Religion* 72.3 (2011), pp. 351-373.

²⁴ *Anglican Unscripted* episode 184 (beginning at 13:10). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0AbBKACJhX0> [accessed 16 February 2019].

From our perspective, the initial attitude of this response essentially suggests that it is naïve as to ask for dispassionate analysis. It is curious that the two video bloggers do not speak to any of the particular details and facts that Chris suggests they had misrepresented. Instead, because critical questions were asked about their reporting, they accused their critic of ‘partisan hackery’ and disingenuous ‘high-mindedness’.

Also notable is the way Chris was accused in the comments sections of the *Anglican Unscripted* blog of being un-Christian for his failure to approach the two video-bloggers directly before criticising them in print. Leaving aside the fact that they do not offer a such a courtesy to the people they criticise on a weekly basis, such remarks highlight the ways in which the impersonal medium of online commentary leaves open a very large gap in direct communication, which people are free to fill in with a wide range of assumptions and reactions.

This failed attempt at intervention has thus deepened our interest in the impact of digital media on Christian churches. The reaction to Chris’ blog suggests that an attempt to offer a dispassionate or neutral description of these phenomena is unlikely to be taken as objective, nor to be welcomed by those predisposed to another view. Subsequent developments in the dynamics of ‘Fake News’ reinforce the reality that identifying false or exaggerated claims by offering corrective information does little to change the minds of those who are sympathetic to the message delivered in the blogosphere.

Does this suggest that trying to bridge divides and establish dialogue across differing worldviews cannot be accomplished online? In this regard, we note that we have experienced more success reaching across sharp divides over theology and ethical positions when speaking face-to-face with informants in Pittsburgh. Nuance and hesitation were possible or at least basic civility and respect, if not agreement.

3. Implications: The Church and the Negative Impact of Digital Media

How is engaged communication across the ‘filter bubble’ within which we are confined by digital media companies possible? This is a question with which we continue to wrestle. For the church cannot simply ignore social media and its impact; yet the challenge is daunting. According to the Pew Research Centre, only 20% of adults in the USA read a newspaper.²⁵ Another Pew study from 2013 determined that 25% of Americans watch Fox News for their sole access to current events.²⁶ The documentary *Digital Disconnect* reports that half of American adults use Facebook as their primary source of news.²⁷ Moreover, it is clear that only a minority of Millennials and even members of Generation X regularly seek out news. More typically, they only encounter information on current events accidentally on social media. Trends like these lead Youchai Benkler, Robert Faris and Hal Roberts to conclude that “somewhere between 25 and 30 percent of Americans willingly and intentionally pay attention to media outlets that consistently tell that audience what it wants to hear.”²⁸ If this is true of access to news, there is a likely corollary in terms of access to information about Christianity and the churches.

In response to such trends, scholars like Paula Poindexter suggest that the appropriate corrective has largely to do with education. Social institutions need to teach people what news is and why it is significant for their lives, while at the same time discussing with them what sort of news they would benefit from. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts similarly emphasise a pressing need to promote greater ‘media literacy’ in order to address the negative aspects of digital media, although they also call for government regulation of media platforms.²⁹ This

²⁵ P. M. Poindexter, *Millennials, News, and Social Media: Is News Engagement a Thing of the Past?* 2nd edition (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), p. 7.

²⁶ A. Mitchell et. al., ‘The Modern news Consumer’, *Pew Research Center*, updated February 27 2017. Available at: <http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/the-modern-news-consumer/> [accessed 16 February 2019].

²⁷ J. Earp (dir.), *Digital Disconnect* (Media Education Foundation, 2018).

²⁸ Benkler, Faris & Roberts, *Network Propaganda*, p. 367.

²⁹ Benkler, Faris & Roberts, *Network Propaganda*, pp.355-365. A recent UK Parliament report suggests that calls for regulation of ‘Fake News’ may be gaining traction amongst legislators, who expressed concern about the ‘digital gangsters’ that facilitate its spread. See: D. Pegg, ‘Facebook labelled “digital gangsters” by report on

suggests the similar importance of educating members of the church on the nature of digital media and online information and of helping them to acquire skills in discernment. As one Anglican bishop recently said to Chris while discussing the contemporary priorities for theological education: ‘Please teach them how to use social media appropriately!’

As for intervening in polemical debate directly by identifying misinformation: it would seem that alternative strategies need to be imagined and explored. Here emerging analyses of the distinct nature of ‘online sociality’ will likely be significant.³⁰ Digital media often changes what we pay attention to, and even more significantly, *how* we pay attention, even as it encourages a certain degree of reciprocity of interaction. Moreover, how one presents oneself through digital media needs to be carefully considered with regard to the likely ways in which one’s audience may receive an address. This was a consideration that Chris did not adequately reflect upon as he sought to engage with Kallsen and Conger.

While our fieldwork and the example of Chris’ failed intervention do not provide us with sufficient data and insight to propose a clear strategy for countering the negative capacity of digital media to enhance polemic and polarization in the church, what we have learned resonates with the emphasis that some theorists place on the significance of affect in digital media. Paaronen suggest that intensive mechanisms of digital media, which modulate and produce the demands and desires of users, ‘give shape to online connections and disconnections’.³¹ As informants like Rev. Andrea, Rev. Jon, Debbie, and Rev. Gino made very clear to us, digital media powerfully impacted on the emotional lives of Anglicans and Episcopalians in Pittsburgh, and their perception of the words and actions of their opponents were influenced by this affective dimension. If digital media is to assist the church confront

fake news’, *The Guardian* 18 February 2019. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/feb/18/facebook-fake-news-investigation-report-regulation-privacy-law-dcms> [Accessed 18 February 2019].

³⁰ R. Schroeder, *Social Theory after the Internet: media, technology, and globalization* (London: UCL Press, 2018), pp. 90-95.

³¹ H. Hills, S. Paasonen & M. Petit, *Networked Affect* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), p. 88.

conflict and polarization, its users will have to find ways to employ this affective power of the Internet in positive ways.³² This will only be possible if church leaders and theologians do not allow their enthusiasm for the positive potential of digital media to restrict careful analysis of the negative dimensions of this powerful, and increasingly hegemonic, cultural technology.

The last decade, however, has witnessed widespread enthusiasm among Christians for social media and online outreach activity,³³ as well as for non-institutional forms of online-Christian networks.³⁴ Church organizations and Christian leaders have promoted the use of social media and the Internet as a missional tool,³⁵ as a device for pastoral support,³⁶ and as an enhancement of liturgical worship.³⁷ Although such developments have sometimes been met with hesitation and concern over a potential loss of the primacy of the physical local gathering of the offline ecclesial community, the majority of church leaders and theologians have gradually decided that it would be foolish to adopt the stance of a Luddite towards what has become a dominant form of cultural interaction. As the moral theologian Nancy Duff concludes, for the church to ignore ‘online communication today would be like ignoring the telephone when it became a common means of connecting us to one another.’³⁸

³² For a discussion of the potential of early Christian letter-writing as a model for Christian online practice, see: Elizabeth Anderson, ‘I saw Your Soul in Your Letter’, *Open Body: Essays in Anglican Ecclesiology*, ed. Z. Guiliano (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 213-228.

³³ T. Hutchings, ‘The Internet and the Church: An Introduction’, *The Expository Times* 122.1 (2010), pp. 11-19. DOI: 10.1177/0014524610377955

³⁴ C. Helland distinguishes between institutionally-supported ‘Religion-Online’ and independent grassroots ‘Online-Religion’. See: Helland, ‘Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communities’, *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, (eds.) J.K. Hadden and D.E. Cowan (London: JAI Press, 2000), pp. 205-224.

³⁵ M. Carr, ‘The Use of Online Information Sources as a Tool for Mission by Parish Churches’, *Journal of Religious and Theological Information* 6.2 (2004), pp. 51-85; B. Vogt, *The Church and New Media: Blogging Converts, Online Activists, and Bishops Who Tweet* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 2011).

³⁶ J. G. Anderson et. al., ‘The Church of Online Support: Examining the Use of Blogs Among Family Caregivers of Persons with Dementia’, *Journal of Family Nursing* 23.1 (2017), pp. 34-54. DOI:10.1177/1074840716681289

³⁷ T. Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

³⁸ N. Duff, ‘Praising God Online’, *Theology Today* 70.1 (2013), pp.22-29, at 22. DOI:10.1177/0040573612472898

This gradual adoption of digital media culture by church leaders has been encouraged by an emerging scholarly literature that challenges the worry that online religion will undermine traditional offline Christian communities, practices, and intuitional authorities. Teresa Berger, for example, highlights the extent to which Christians have integrated internet accessing devices into daily life, including in their practices of prayer. Rather than assume that this is a threat to the sacramental life of the church, she argues, church leaders should instead understand this development as a migration of spiritual practices into new digital spaces of worship.³⁹ According to Berger, digitally-based worship practices are no less appropriate or authentic connections to the divine than those performed in local communal gatherings because all liturgical acts are mediated in some manner.

What is striking about this emerging enthusiasm in theological and ecclesial literature for the potential of digital media to support ministry is the way in which this embrace seldom attends to the corresponding limitations and challenges of this technology, which our research in Pittsburgh has illustrated. For while church leaders and theologians are increasingly advocating for the adoption of digital social media, the wider society is showing greater suspicion about this technology, and more voices are urging caution over its use. As many churches scramble to set up social media interfaces, a social movement is emerging to encourage people to unsubscribe from Facebook. Robert McNamee suggests that Facebook has encouraged ‘growth hacking’ to increase user count and time spent on the site, which facilitated the rise of ‘Fake-News’ and been deployed to influence democratic elections. He laments, ‘Facebook has managed to connect 2.2 billion people and drive them apart at the same time.’⁴⁰ Our research demonstrates that these dynamics reach deeply into church communities as well. Even as some feel more deeply connected to like minded Christians in

³⁹ Berger, *@Worship*, 33-51.

⁴⁰ R. McNamee, *Zucked: Waking Up to the Facebook Catastrophe* (New York: Penguin, 2019), p. 155.

other regions of the globe, such online relationships sometimes encourages them to become less tolerant of their neighbour sitting in the next pew.

While significant focus of the critical scholarly literature analysing the impact of digital media on society is particularly concerned with the emergence of ‘Fake News’ and ‘filter bubbles’,⁴¹ a developing body of research focuses on the impact of digital media on human relationships and identity.⁴² Moreover, discussions over the negative influences of the internet and social media are by no means limited to scholarly forums. Newspapers regularly refer to surveys that report the majority of users regret posting something online,⁴³ raise concerns over changes to attention span and memory,⁴⁴ and how digital media can foster impatience and a desire for instant gratification.⁴⁵

That such issues have been identified as potentially negative effects of the use of digital media does not, of course, imply that all citizens should log off and avoid utilizing the Internet. The same is true of the adoption of new communications technology by churches. Recalling Duff’s perspective on the invention of the telephone, one cannot realistically pretend that the Internet does not exist. Yet is incumbent upon those who advocate for enhanced usage of digital media to not only attend to the advantages of such adoption, but

⁴¹ S. Fuller, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (London: Anthem Press, 2018); L. McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018); M. Fuller, ‘Big Data and the Facebook scandal: issues and responses’, *Theology* 122.1 (2019), pp. 14-21. DOI: 10.1177/0040571X18805908

⁴² T. Karppi, *Disconnect: Facebook’s Affective Bonds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); A. Lambert, *Intimacy and Friendship on Facebook* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); K. Weller et. al. (eds), *Twitter and Society* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014).

⁴³ A. Hall, ‘Six in ten Britons post things online that they later regret’, *The Independent* 29 April 2018. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/social-media-post-regret-data-gdpr-a8327906.html> [accessed 16 February 2019].

⁴⁴ N. Carr, ‘Is Google Making us Stupid?’ *The Atlantic* July/August 2008. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/> [accessed 16 February 2019].

⁴⁵ C. Muther, ‘Instant Gratification is Making us Perpetually Impatient’, *The Boston Globe* 2 Feb 2013. Available at: https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/style/2013/02/01/the-growing-culture-impatience-where-instant-gratification-makes-crave-more-instant-gratification/q8tWDNGeJB2mm45fQxtTQP/story.html?s_campaign=8315 [accessed 16 February 2019].

also to its inherent challenges and potential negative effects. This is often neglected among advocates, as they seek to encourage the church to ‘catch up’ to the digital age.⁴⁶

4. Conclusion

During our last research trip to Pittsburgh in 2013, although pain over the split in 2008 was still very much in evidence, we observed signs that tensions in digital media had begun to diminish. Rev. Matt told us that members of his church were spending less time on the blogosphere; ‘I don’t think they follow the blogs or really know a whole lot about what the [Episcopal] diocese is doing anymore.’ Rev. Jon shared that he now tries to avoid the polemical side of the internet, ‘this blog that is notorious.... Thankfully, I haven’t checked in a while’. Such accounts suggest that individuals and communities are capable of adapting to the impact of digital media and modifying their use of it and its influence upon them. Of course, they offered these moderated perspectives to us after a schism had already occurred in their local diocese. Time will tell whether other church communities, when experiencing serious conflict and tension, will be able to similarly moderate the role of digital media, prior to it serving as a principle device for fuelling division.

⁴⁶ This is not, of course, to suggest that all church leaders embrace digital media uncritically. In this regard, one might point to statements like the following statement by the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Social Communications, ‘Ethics in Internet’ 22 February 2002. Available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_en.html [Accessed 16 February 2019].