

Missional Social Media: Content and Strategies for Missions Organizations

Kathryn Larson

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2021

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

Dr. Clark Greer, Ph.D.
Thesis Chair

Dr. Carmen Navarro, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Christopher Nelson, M.F.A.
Associate Honors Director

Date

Abstract

Technology can be used in amazing and creative ways to spread the gospel and create community across borders. The Apostle Paul used the communication tool of his time, letters, to communicate with churches from a distance. Today's tools include social media which, when used properly and with intent, can positively influence an organization in the name of the gospel. Missions organizations have an incredible opportunity to use strategies and content to create a viable social media ministry. Theories such as the Community Development Theory and various reception theories contribute to an understanding of two-way communication and engagement between organization and audience. An evaluation of audience, platforms, and content go into creating a social media strategy that can be measured and reevaluated to continuously improve and meet organizational goals.

Keywords: Christian missions, social media, communication, ministry

Missional Social Media: Content and Strategies for Missions Organizations

In 2020, about three quarters of Americans used social media for entertainment, connection, or engagement in their virtual community (Pew Research Center, 2020a). Businesses, organizations, nonprofits, and various other companies have adapted to the digital shift and have used it to their advantage to better market a product, create a community, and connect with their audiences like never before. Appel et al. (2019) recognize the cultural significance of social media being a primary way by which individuals connect with others, share content and obtain information about the world. Businesses have used digital marketing and monetization of users through social media as a dominant model to consumers (Appel et al., 2019). Nonprofits have created social media communities to share their impact and inspire action among their publics (Sehl, 2020). The social aspect of social media makes creating online communities possible and beneficial. This is evident through word-of-mouth marketing where customers recommend a product, service, or business to someone in their community (Mahoney & Tang, 2018). Social media is a tool to be used not only for businesses and nonprofits, but also for any organization seeking to create community, connect with their audiences, and be digital ambassadors for Christ.

Churches have recognized this digital shift and have begun to create online faith communities through social media. Christians of today's world have the task of being Christ's digital ambassadors to a world saturated with all kinds of media. This even spills over into the realm of missions organizations and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ across the platforms and media that are prevalent in today's global technological culture. The opportunity to connect with people from all over the world is more prominent than ever before. How will Christ's digital ambassadors respond to His Great Commission to share the gospel with every tribe,

tongue and nation? Missions organizations are a perfect place to start. What types of content and strategies need to be created to enhance missions organization's social media?

There is a gap in formal literature on how missions organizations can best use social media and digital content to accomplish the Great Commission. A discussion of communication theories across history aids in understanding how communication and technology have evolved to where they are today. An evaluation of the biblical foundation of testimony and hope for the nations sets the basis for how missions organizations should view social media ministry. This in-depth look at social media platforms and content works to create a best practices guide for missions organizations to utilize. This guide will equip organizations with the practical knowledge on how to optimize social media ministry for their particular audience and mission.

Historical Technology

Throughout history, Christians have used modern communication tools and technology to spread the saving message of Jesus Christ. Two instances of this are through the New Testament letters and the printing press. Wise (2014) described Paul's use of technology through his letters in the New Testament. "We must remember the early church was built on the back of technology: St. Paul's letters...Technology provided a presence for Paul and extended his reach when he could not be there physically" (Wise, 2014, p. 111). The modern technology and communication tool of the New Testament were letters. These letters were a way that individuals and groups hundreds of miles away could communicate with each other. They contained truths from the Holy Spirit communicated through Paul about Jesus, Christianity, and how people can come to know their Savior. Paul took advantage of this tool and used it for the purpose of encouraging and instructing his churches. Humans long for connection and communication. This embodies the true intent behind the development of new technologies. It is wired in human DNA

to share and relate to one another. Technology develops towards more and more connection and breaking the barriers of distance and time.

Hundreds of years later, this technology advanced to the printing press, which allowed texts like the Bible to be mass produced. The Bible was no longer confined to the pulpit of the church and the hands of the priests. Anyone from church members to unbelievers could own and read the Bible on their own. This advancement was pioneered by German monk Martin Luther in 1521. Luther, seeing the sinfulness of the control that the Roman Catholic Church had over its members through the imposition of indulgences, began to translate the Bible into German (Wise, 2014). He was able to mass produce the Luther Bible through the use of the new printing press, allowing common people to read the Bible and experience God for themselves (Wise, 2014). Paul, through his letters, and Luther, with his use of the printing press, both saw the value in technology and how it could aid in the spreading of the Gospel.

Modern Day Communication Technology

Today's modern day communication technology presents itself in the form of social media and the web. Gould (2013) defined social media as "web-based tools for interaction that, in addition to conversation, allow users to share content such as photos, videos and links to resources" (p. 3). Gould (2013) focused on the participatory nature of this new media and how heavily it relies on interaction. Social media is not a strategy in itself, but rather a tool to be used purposefully. Perhaps the most influential outcome of using social media as a tool is the creation of online community. This community refers to a sense of fellowship with others resulting from shared values, attitudes, and interests (Gould, 2013). God is a relational and interactive God who sent His Son into the world to connect and reconcile humankind to Himself. Jesus created a faith community and encouraged them to love another and value others above themselves. Hedt

(2013) described his concept of missional spirituality in a digital world indicating that social media helps “feed the God-given desire for community and interconnectedness” (p. 188). Social media can be used as tools for discipleship and mission through online communities. These online communities provide a home for encouragement, teaching, and positive peer reinforcement (Hedt, 2013). Social media can be a place not only where the Gospel can be preached, but where disciples can be cultivated and communities can be developed.

American churches adapted to the global pandemic of COVID-19 in the year 2020. Some churches closed their doors, cancelling in-person services earlier in the year. Pew Research (2020b) conducted a study of 10,211 U.S. adults in July 2020 in order to survey the impact of COVID-19 on church attendance and online streaming. Pew found that among regular worshippers, three-quarters of them had watched virtually in the past month. American churches leveraged difficult circumstances to create virtual meetings and faith communities through the utilization of livestreaming. Many churches like Brenthaven Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Brentwood, Tennessee, began broadcasting its services on Facebook live (Amy et al., 2020). Waymaker Church in Forest, Virginia, established its online viewing platform years ago and recently made steps to further online community. In the beginning of 2021, Waymaker launched its online community groups to cater to the families in Forest and beyond who are unable to meet physically (Waymaker Church, 2021). These churches have been able to adapt to the current status of culture and allow believers a place to come together online. Pew Research (2020b) even found that half of the respondents who had watched services recently had not done so before the outbreak of COVID-19. Churches were able to share the love of Christ through the circumstances of the pandemic by adjusting their meetings and creating virtual experiences. This

is an example of how the Christian community can use digital technologies to connect with people who otherwise may not be reached.

In a time in history when people are increasingly engaging in virtual faith communities, it is imperative that the Christian church around the world continue to hone its digital strategies. According to Bendor-Samuel (2020), “The spirit works in mysterious ways. We know from theoretical works that while crises like COVID-19 lead to much suffering, they can also lead to religious change and transformation” (p. 255). Bendor-Samuel (2020) describes missions as a responsibility of the church and the main goal of missions as the establishment of the church. The end-all of missions’ efforts is identified as a local thriving body of growing disciples of Jesus Christ. How can missions organizations cultivate these communities? The communication strategies that were employed in the time of COVID-19 can be learned from as new communication vehicles emerge and can be used to create community in the future.

Classical Medium Theory

In 1996, Bill Gates wrote, “content is king” (p. 1). While the importance of the content being shared is obvious, is the way it is being shared just as important? In 1964, McLuhan posited his classical medium theory. He was the first to propose that the media affects the message being transmitted, affirming “the medium is the message” (Edwards et al., 2017, p. 244). He saw media as the “symbolic environment of any communicative act” and recognized its ability to impact society (Edwards et al., 2017, p. 244). A symbolic environment links action and symbols in the human mind. Symbols work through the concept of association, which aids in creating meaning. For example, a symbol such as the stop sign is associated with the action of stopping a car. McLuhan argued that the medium through which one communicates a message changes its meaning. Humans interpret different media in unique ways. Wise (2014) uses the

example of reading a book and following one idea through hundreds of pages with supporting information. This would contrast reading a tweet of 140 characters, which allows the reader to create context and understanding that the tweet in and of itself would not contain (Wise, 2014). In the 1960s, McLuhan created this theory to explain the reception of media of his day, mainly TV and print. The type of medium takes on its own importance as more and more have emerged through digital communication technologies like social media and the internet. McLuhan argued that the way a message is communicated is just as important as the message itself. This is why it is so vital to evaluate how organizations communicate through social media, which platforms they are using, and their effectiveness.

Communication Theories

Another aspect of social media communication is relationship and community building. Communication is being used in unprecedented ways to connect people from around the world. Social media create opportunities to share messages and create community. Gould (2013) described some ways social media can help the church. Social media can be used to build Christian community beyond the walls of the church, inform newcomers about the church, obtain feedback from members, share the gospel, and show stories and testimonies (Gould, 2013). These social media capabilities surrounding community do not apply only to churches, but also global missions organizations. In 1995, Joseph Walther developed Social Information Processing Theory that explains how computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication are both successful in building relationships (Edwards et al, 2017). Becoming friends on social media can create community between two people that can flourish even if they are never able to meet in person.

Edwards et al. (2017) posited that new media can establish virtual communities. There are organizations that now rely on social media and the internet to communicate and relate to their customers and stakeholders. People can develop a sense of belonging within a group, creating a deeper trust between individuals within the group and the organization as a whole. One study surveyed the benefits of using social media for non-profits and volunteer efforts (Raja-Yusof et al., 2016). The authors concluded, “social media allow users to create and participate in virtual communities where they provide functions of sharing, communication, publishing, managing, collaborating, and interacting with a click of a button among NGO members or the general public” (p. 7). Digital communities are useful for connecting the organization to the general public, creating connections, and sharing information.

Community Development Theory

Community Development Theory contains four dimensions of community: membership, shared emotional connection, membership influence, and needs fulfillment (Mahoney & Tang, 2017). Mahoney and Tang (2017) identified these dimensions as necessary for creating a community in which individuals take part in an identity and allow for participation with each other. Participation and interaction are vital in a social media strategy. Those characteristics are what turn a social media platform or page into a living and breathing community. The first dimension of community is membership. This involves the idea that an individual has done something to become a part of the community. The second dimension is shared emotional connection. For mission organizations, this could be shared purpose or mission. This shared purpose would be the creation of Christ-centered community and evangelism. Membership influence is the third dimension which can be accomplished through members contribution and participation. This would involve seeking their opinion and input and sharing their stories. The

final dimension of community is needs fulfillment. Members should feel as if the social media of the organization is fulfilling a need of theirs; this could include spiritual and relational needs (Mahoney & Tang, 2017). Community Development Theory, founded on these dimensions, explains the intricacies of social media communities and provides an understanding of the foundation of community.

Reception Theories

In addition to community building, social media can also fulfill the purpose of sending messages to a target public. An understanding of how audiences receive messages is essential to knowing which messages to tell and how to tell them. Van Ruler (2018) explained the foundation of communication theory, including the many models throughout the years. Van Ruler (2018) proposed there are three main categories of communication theory: one-way, two-way, and an omnidirectional diachronic process, which refers to a continuous development of meaning.

One-way Communication: Mathematical Communication Theory

In early communication theory, the one-way process from sender to receiver was utilized in mass communication. Shannon's 1949 mathematical communication theory saw the information as objective, focusing on the flow of information, and putting the responsibility of perception on the receiver. As long as the communication is received, it is considered successful (Van Ruler, 2018). Van Ruler identified this one-way model as sufficient for sharing information and persuasive communication.

Two-way Communication: Berlo's Model

Two-way models of communication were proposed, as interaction within communication became prominent. Intrapersonal communication theories drove this era of communication as Van Ruler (2018) described, "In these models, interaction is focused on how people engage in

conversations with each other and literally converge in creating meaning” (p. 9). Meanings are continuously being created when communication is going two-ways, as the participants serve the role of actors in the communication process. This plays into the idea of communication being a diachronic process of meaning development, as Van Ruler suggested. This is based in Berlo’s 1960 communication model that explains, “communication process is not a sequence of events, one following the other, but a continuous and simultaneous interaction of a large number of variables that are moving, changing, and affecting each other” (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 15). The diachronic aspect of this model involves the ongoing process of meaning-creation between actors communicating.

Social Media Relation

When evaluating communication theories in relation to social media ministry and outreach, it is essential to notice the process of active participants as opposed to neutral or passive agents (Van Ruler, 2018). These active participants are continually interacting through shared media and creating meaning based on context and content. The method through which communication takes place changes the way an audience creates and shares meaning. For example, text and visuals, like image and video, are perceived differently. Hoppe (2018) said visuals hold internal storytelling power that can go past language and trigger emotional responses. Images have the power to change attitudes and create memories. Hoppe (2018) also noted that, according to research studies, social media posts, including images, receive 180-percent more engagement. In addition to that, memory recall for posts that combine text and visuals is 63-percent in contrast to 10-percent for text-only posts (Hoppe, 2018). All of these statistics show that visual communication using images is effective across media platforms.

Social Media Strategy

Social media posts can vary from one organization to another based on the needs of an organization and the desired platform. Strategy should be present in social media endeavors. Wise (2014) noted churches should optimize social media, focusing on the importance of a big idea. This big idea should be something the church or missions organization lives, breathes and fully embodies as a community (Wise, 2014). The big idea should be specific to the community as well as the culture. It should communicate in a short manner how to become involved and the benefits of participation in the community. The big idea has implications for those inside the organization and those external to the organization. This big idea could be a mission or vision statement for a church or a missions organization. Wise (2014) noted that only after a big idea is created can a content strategy be built on top of it. A content strategy should then become even more specific to focus on a major community-focused event or campaign. Each content strategy should include a platform, target audience, estimated cost, and information to know (Wise, 2014). Wise (2014) laid out a straight line from big idea to content strategy, allowing for customization and personalization depending on the organization's and community's needs.

A specific element that can permeate social media strategy is storytelling. Storytelling is one of the primary forms of communication across generations. It can be one of the most powerful ways to reach people and bridge cultural gaps. It can also be one of the primary ways to connect people across oceans. Telling the real-life stories from the field can inspire donors and members of the organization to increase their prayer and giving. It can also be a way to further cultivate community among members, letting them know the reality of the mission of the organization. Mahoney and Tang (2017) noted that storytelling is one of the most powerful and persuasive forms of communication. "Individuals have always told narratives based on the

culture of folklore passed from generation to generation. Stories are a reflection of the values and ideologies within society, and therefore become incredibly valuable to how we make everyday life decisions” (Mahoney & Tang, 2017, p. 54). Media have now become an avenue for the telling of stories and the use of storytelling as means of connection and participation.

Biblical Integration and Storytelling

The Bible tells stories of hope and the restoration of creation. Lazarus (2020) explained the way that social media can be used to share these life-giving stories. Testimonies can give people hope and inspiration, making them important to the social audiences. Lazarus (2020) identified the Bible verse, Revelation 12:1, which states that the blood of the lamb and the word of Christian testimony overcomes the evil one (*Holy Bible*, New International Version, 1978/2011). Social media is a place where people are looking for answers and stories to encourage them in this dark world. The church and missions organizations tasked with spreading the gospel and creating community can do so through the avenue of storytelling with written text, pictures, videos, and compelling content.

The Great Commission provides a structural framework for social media strategy. Lazarus (2020) journeyed through each section of this scripture and applied it to the types of content that should be present in a gospel-centered social media strategy. Matthew 28:18b-20 states,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

(*Holy Bible*, New International Version, 1978/2011)

Jesus' proclamation begins with the spiritual authority that He holds over all heaven and earth. Believers in Christ have been given this authority to go out into all the earth and spread the good news of Jesus. This authority is vital to an understanding that the Christian should not fear the advancement of modern technology, but rather embrace learning it for the Lord's purposes. Jesus follows up this statement with a command to go to the nations. In New Testament times, disciples could only reach certain geographies, due to travel time, but now with social media, people all around the world can be reached within a second. Jesus' command to go can be accomplished through the use of modern technologies (Lazarus, 2020).

Discipleship is one of the most important aspects of this commission. Christians are called to share the gospel and provide resources for new believers to experience God in a continuous way. This requires ongoing effort on the part of the organization or ministry to empower and equip new disciples. Social media allows for posts and resources to be shared to encourage believers and give them profitable content at any time. Teaching is the other element that Christ instructs. Lazarus (2020) stated, "Sometimes we fail to consider teaching as the primary element of modern Christian ministry. We can focus too much on the activities, community and socializing parts of ministry that teaching starts to take a backseat" (p. 71). Without teaching, individuals do not fully understand the primary principles of God. Finally, Jesus declares, "I am with you always," promising His presence and Holy Spirit to His followers. Christ-followers can trust that He will empower them to use social media in ministry with His Spirit as a guide. The Spirit provides discernment and wisdom to those who seek it, even in technology. The Great Commission can serve as a framework as methodologies and strategies are considered for social media ministry.

Audience Analysis

Audience analysis is one of the most important aspects of any social media strategy. A specific message will not impact every person. It must be specifically aimed at a group of people with certain things in common. This means a target audience must be identified in order to achieve maximum impact. Hoppe (2018) identified this as the who of a ministry. The more this audience can be narrowed down, the more the message and content can speak to them. Other factors to consider in this process are their current religious practice, spiritual openness, and emotional response to Christianity (Hoppe, 2018). These considerations are more abstract and less concrete. More concrete considerations would be the study of geographics, demographics, psychographics and behavioral patterns. All of these factors should work together to create a community profile. Geographics includes where individuals are physically located: country, city, culture. Demographics includes the major who of individuals: age, gender, occupation, education. Psychographics includes the inside of a person: attitudes, faiths, beliefs. Finally, behaviors include how individuals consume content, spend time and their preferences (Hoppe, 2018). All of these considerations make up a target audience, which must be constantly evaluated and updated according to the message.

Global missions organizations have the goal of cultivating local communities of believers or building upon existing communities. The International Missions Board identifies a pattern in Scripture of the gospel being preached, disciples being made, and churches being formed from those believers (McKinley, 2017). McKinley (2017) declared that the end goal of Christian mission is the institution of the church. This truth drives missions and can be used to identify and narrow down the target audiences of missions organizations. Therefore, the broad target audience of a missions organization would be the target of the local church in a given area. The target

audience can be narrowed down from there to include specific audiences for certain ministries or outreaches. Social media can be used to connect individuals in a community by making them aware of events and ministries sponsored by the local church or missions organization. Social media channels can also be places where storytelling can thrive and successes from the field can be shared among the community and to those supporting the organization.

Platforms

The idea of “the medium is the message” applies when considering the marriage of content and social media platforms. Each channel has positives and drawbacks and can reach people differently. The first consideration when choosing a channel is determining which platform is most heavily used by the target audience. Hoppe (2018) suggested that the types of interactions that organizations want to have with their public must be considered. Each platform can function to serve a different purpose for an organization. The second consideration is based on the characteristics of each platform. For example, generally, YouTube is best for video, Twitter is best for short information, and Instagram is best for images.

Facebook

Based on a study conducted in January of 2020 by the organizations We Are Social and Hootsuite, Facebook is the most-used social platform across the world with 2.4 billion monthly active users (Kemp, 2020). Facebook is able to reach a large audience around the world, being the most popular platform. The first use for Facebook is pages that can be used by public figures, organizations and businesses to establish a presence. Photos, videos and text can be posted on pages. Pages can also be an avenue for reposting articles from other content creators or organizations that could benefit the audience. Another valuable feature of Facebook is the live streaming capability. On Facebook Live, organizations can stream events like speaking

engagements and gatherings. Facebook also has a private group feature which can be utilized by smaller groups who have more in common. Hoppe (2018) described groups as “an excellent way to bring together groups of people with shared interests and promote community...an easy way to share news, prayer requests...[and] for discipleship, even in countries where censorship is high” (p. 39). Facebook can be a place for missions organizations to prosper and can act as a home base for information while also being able to go deeper with Facebook groups based on location and culture.

YouTube

YouTube is second for the most used social platform in the world with 2 billion monthly active users (Kemp, 2020). YouTube is the home for sharing video content to inform and entertain. Gould (2013) identified two positives of YouTube ministry: it can reach audio-visual learners and can be shared and understood across generations. YouTube videos provide a place where content can be shared with ease and stories can be told. A Dutch study done by Voorveld, et al. (2018) on social media engagement by platform type examined the top eight most popular social media platforms. One thousand, nine-hundred nineteen respondents were surveyed on their use of these platforms and their attitudes and behaviors surrounding each platform. They discovered that YouTube was highest ranked on the entertainment dimension (Voorveld et al., 2018). YouTube, however, scored low on the social interaction dimension, beat out by Facebook. This study showed that YouTube is mainly a platform of entertainment and one-way communication (Voorveld et al., 2018). Videos are uploaded and can inform the audiences through a visual means. In the realm of social media ministry, videos are an impactful way to share stories, worship gatherings, and informative ministry updates.

Instagram

Instagram is next with 1 billion active monthly users (Kemp, 2020). While Instagram is a primarily visual platform, there are many opportunities for interaction and engagement through comments, direct messages, and content sharing. Hoppe (2018) identifies Instagram as a social tool that prompts readers to share their life through the platform. Instagram also has multiple video capabilities such as stories and reels. Pew Research indicates that six in ten adults who use Instagram use it daily (Auxier, 2020). The platform is very popular among young people. A guide by the college student ministry organization, Cru, noted “Currently, 90 percent of the 150 million people on Instagram are under 35 years old...That means if we want to reach the next generation, we need go no further than their phone to plug events, share stories and promote ministries through the photo sharing application” (Allred et al., n.d., p. 13). Instagram makes it easy for interaction between organization and audience through responding to comments and using the direct messaging tool within the app. It also allows for calls to action like polls and question and answer stickers. Instagram differs from other platforms, like Facebook, which can utilize text, and YouTube, which capitalizes on video content. Instagram is an effective platform for sharing various types of content and interaction between users.

Twitter

On the lower end of active users is Twitter, with only 340,000 monthly active users in 2020 (Kemp, 2020). Twitter is status-updating platform that allows for real-time sharing and interaction. Tweets are characterized as fast and short blurbs, maxed at 280 characters, that inform and spark conversation. Some practical uses of Twitter for missions organizations can include encouraging believers by sharing short prayers or motivational quotes, promoting ministry events, and posting links to web-based content to aid spiritual formation (Gould, 2013).

The functions and content across platforms vary and must be carefully evaluated in order to maximize social media ministry efforts.

Creative Portion

Why Social Media Ministry? Let's Talk Big Idea

Before the creation of any social media account, you must know the WHY behind your social media ministry. Wise (2014) described this big idea as something you and your organization “live and breathe and embody as a community” (p. 123). Your big idea should be simple and specific to your community. It should motivate and clearly communicate the benefits of participation in your mission (Wise, 2014). Lazarus (2020) noted that a big idea is the core of your social media ministry. This core should consist of purpose statements that flow from the big idea and inform the ministry.

A set of questions should be asked to determine both the big idea and the purpose statements to follow:

1. What are we passionate about as a ministry? What is the mission or vision statement of your organization as a whole? How can the use of social media contribute to furthering this overall mission?
2. How can the use of social media positively impact the community we are serving?
3. How can social media ministry contribute to the Great Commission, bringing more people to Christ and to community in the local church?
4. What do we want to happen as a result of implementing social media into the ministry?

The answers to these questions should help to inform a big idea and a set of purpose statements. Hoppe (2018) described social media ministry in this way: “If God has called you to

preach, love your neighbor, serve the poor, and share the gospel with unreached peoples, that ministry can, to some extent, be mediated through and enabled by social media” (p. 6). As Christians, the overarching big idea is to spread the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, to a broken world. Some examples of big ideas for missions organizations could be:

1. Minister to the unreached peoples of _____ through connecting them in virtual communities.
2. Spread the gospel to the people of _____ through sharing of stories of faith and transformation.
3. Increase awareness of community events in _____ through digital promotion.
4. Increase engagement and interaction between Christians in _____ through the use of social platforms.

The target audiences are specific to each organization and mission. Once a big idea has been created, and backed up with more specific purpose statements, it can be applied to a target audience.

Who are you talking to? Let’s Talk Audience

In order for the message to have maximum impact, it must fall upon the right ears and be seen by the right eyes. A missions organization has the potential and responsibility to reach multiple audiences. Some of these could include unreached people, donors, volunteers, local churches, the global church, and even more. Lazarus (2020) suggested organizations “create a list of people, groups, organizations, and the entities who will benefit from what you are going to do on social media” (p. 89). Each content strategy and campaign should have a target audience. For example, if your organization was promoting an afterschool Bible study for students in your

city overseas, your target audience would be the parents of kids in the local schools. If the campaign was sharing stories of testimony and faith from the field, then your target audience would be church members connected to your sending churches back in the US. There are certain considerations that go into narrowing down a target audience. All of these must be researched and understood in order for the message to reach the right ears. Some of these considerations and distinctions that Lazarus (2020) made are:

Geographics

Where are they? Geographics are going to be the most important aspect of audience for your missions organization. A geographic profile encompasses the location at its most basic level and travels even further to the specific cultural climate. Is your target audience for a campaign in the sending country or in the target country? Is the culture primarily a certain religion, a certain political climate? Think about who needs to hear the message and that should translate to the geographics of your target audience.

Demographics

What are they all about? Demographics have to do with external and physical factors of an individual. For example, these include age, gender, and occupation. This can go even deeper to marital status and family.

Psychographics

Who are they really? Psychographics encompass the deeper attitudes and motivations in an individual. This also describes their faith and beliefs. Understanding the belief systems of your target audiences is vital to knowing how to communicate with them. For example, you would communicate differently with someone of the Muslim faith than someone of the Christian

faith. You would not use complicated Christian jargon, but rather contextualize your message for them to be able to understand and apply it.

Behavioral Patterns

What are they doing? A behavioral analysis has to do with how the audience spends their time. This would include hobbies, activities, and, most importantly, media preferences. This would also encompass what social media platforms the audiences are using the most.

These dimensions of audience can be used as a template for social media campaigns. All of these must be considered for the target audience to be nailed down successfully. Once you have chosen a target audience for a campaign and evaluated which platforms they are most likely to use, you can choose the appropriate platform and begin to plan content.

Where are we going? Choosing Platforms

Social media platforms have grown and evolved significantly over the past 20 years. The word platform here refers to digital spaces where media are distributed and interaction between users takes place. Some platforms have come and gone; others have adapted to survive. Different platforms are used for different purposes to reach different audiences. Each platform is uniquely equipped to accomplish its purpose in this digital world. It is important for your mission organization to know and utilize these platforms with purpose and intentionality. Some things to consider with each platform are main audience, primary media, and potential opportunities.

1. Facebook: Facebook is the most widely used social media platform in the world. The Digital 2020 reports, published by We Are Social and Hootsuite, place Facebook in this role with 2.5 billion monthly active users (Kemp, 2020).
 - a. Main audience: According to the Digital 2020 report, the largest percentage of Facebook audience is individuals aged 25-34. The largest percentage of users

which is males between 25-34 at 19%, followed by males 18-24 years old (Kemp, 2020). Pew Research (2019) notes similar percentages for Facebook usage with 79% of US adults aged 18-29 and 30-49 use Facebook. Pew Research (2019) also found a difference of 73% of Americans in Urban environments use Facebook vs 69% suburban and 66% rural (Pew Research Center, 2019).

- b. Primary media: Statista published a study in January 2020 about the most popular Facebook activities of users in the US. In the top spot, 51% of respondents sent a message on Facebook messenger (Tankovska, 2021). Forty-five percent browse their feed to see posts from friends or pages they follow. Thirty-seven percent posted a photo, written status, or video to their feed (Tankovska, 2021). Facebook can be considered the jack of all trades when it comes to media. Written content can be shared via a status update. Photos can be shared individually or in photo albums. Videos can be shared or linked. As versatile as Facebook is, the possibilities are endless.
- c. Potential opportunities: Written posts like status updates or even short blogs can be successfully used to provide audiences with updates on the organization. Photos of events or missionaries can be shared to give the audience an insight into the mission. This can provide a face for the organization. Testimony videos can be shared to show the impact of the ministry. Facebook Live can be used to live-stream events. Private Facebook groups also provide an outlet for community to occur. These can be specific to churches or ministries within the church to serve as a home base of that specific ministry. For example, the women's Bible study in

a local church can have its own private Facebook page to share prayer requests or what they are learning in their study.

2. Instagram: Instagram is primarily a photo-sharing application that has been on the rise in the recent years, passing the one billion monthly active user mark in 2018 (Tankovska, 2021).
 - a. Main audience: The average age of Instagram users is 25-34 years (Tankovska, 2021). Pew Research (2020) notes a higher shift as 67% of US adults aged 18-29 use Instagram versus a mere 47% for people aged 30-49. Similar to Facebook, it is also more used by urban residents at 46% compared to suburban at 35% (Pew Research, 2020).
 - b. Primary media: Instagram is known for its photo-sharing nature. Users can share images accompanied by a short caption explaining the photo. In recent years, Instagram has ventured into the realm of video content, as well. The Instagram Story feature allows a user to post a photo or short video that lasts on their story for 24 hours. A positive of Instagram is the opportunity to connect globally and interact with others. On stories, users have the ability to direct message in response. They can also post polls and questions through Instagram Stories for follower response. Lastly, through Instagram Reels users can post longer videos.
 - c. Potential opportunities: Instagram can act as a canvas for your organization. Post photos of missionaries, their ministries, their churches, photos of people they are ministering to, events you've been able to sponsor, and even more. Remember, a picture says a thousand words. Images have the ability to deeply impact a person. Provide context for each photo by crafting short but meaningful captions. Explore

graphic design by creating illustrated texts using inspirational quotes, Scripture verses, or your mission/vision statements. Use stories to give real-time updates on the latest news about your organization. Make sure to interact and engage with all of your followers through liking, commenting, and replying to messages. Use the reels function to share short videos and clips of ministries.

3. YouTube: The Digital 2020 report identifies YouTube as the second ranked most used platform in the world with 2 billion monthly active users (Kemp, 2020). Pew Research (2020) noted that in the US, YouTube even surpasses Facebook as most used with 73% of US adults using it.
 - a. Main audience: The great thing about YouTube is that it can appeal to audiences young and old. It is user-friendly and an easy way to share a wide variety of videos. Younger audiences will dominate this platform, but by a small margin. Pew Research notes that 91% of 18-29-year-old individuals use YouTube followed by 87% for ages 30-49 (Pew Research, 2020). There is also a smaller margin between urban and suburban users, at only a 3% difference (Pew Research Center, 2020).
 - b. Primary media: YouTube is known as a video sharing application. It has not varied from this norm in all of its years. There are many different genres of videos that are commonly shared including gaming, fashion, lifestyle, vlog, entertainment, music videos, and more.
 - c. Potential opportunities: YouTube can be your organization's home for all video content. A great idea would be to create a promotional video for your organization, letting viewers know who you are, what you do, and your mission.

From there, testimonial videos of faith change and ministry updates from the field could be created.

All three of these social media platforms can be used strategically to communicate a specific message to a specific target audience.

Where to start? Social Media Creation

You might be thinking: “This all sounds great, but where do I start?” You might not have the slightest idea of how to create or begin to manage your social media accounts as an organization. Do not fear. You do not need a social media expert to begin your social media ministry. Now that you understand the primary media and potential opportunities of each platform, you can create these platforms and begin to create and curate content for your audiences.

Creating a Facebook Page

Facebook Social Impact gives a step-by-step guide on how to create an organization Facebook page:

<https://socialimpact.facebook.com/learning-support/getting-started/create-a-page-for-your-nonprofit/>

1. Go to facebook.com/pages/create
2. Insert the name of your organization as the title
3. Make your page type ‘Company & Organizations’
4. Select the specific page subcategory (‘Religious Organization,’ ‘Nonprofit Organization’)
5. Add a profile picture (your logo!)
6. Add a cover photo (820 pixels wide by 312 pixels tall)

7. Insert your 'About' information (Inform the public about your mission and programs)

Creating an Instagram Profile

Instagram profiles will function the same as a personal profile.

1. Go to Instagram.com and click "sign up"
 - a. If you already created your Facebook page, you could also select 'log in with Facebook' to link your social media accounts
2. Sign up as a business profile
3. Create an Instagram handle that is clear and concise. It should easily identify your organization and be easy to find.
4. Insert your profile name (your organization's name)
5. Add a profile picture (your logo)
6. Insert your 'Bio' information (Inform the public about your mission and programs)
7. Link your website at the bottom of the bio section

Creating a YouTube Channel

Creating a YouTube account will be similar to the Facebook account. A new feature of YouTube is the YouTube Nonprofit Program.

1. Create your YouTube channel through your organization's Gmail account
2. Add your organization's name
3. Add a profile picture (your logo!)
4. Add a YouTube banner (2560 x 1440 pixels)
5. Request a Google for Nonprofits account
6. Look up "YouTube Nonprofit Program," and click 'Get Started'
7. Follow the steps indicated and wait for your request to be processed

8. Find more information about Google for Nonprofits at

<https://www.google.com/nonprofits/resources/how-to-guide/get-your-nonprofit-on-youtube/>

What are you saying? Content Creation and Curation

Now that you have established your target audience and platforms, you can begin the journey of creating and curating content for your social media accounts. Luttrell and Capizzo (2019) noted, “Companies use content to earn trust, gain attention, increase engagement, and garner a variety of actions from users around the world” (p. 94). They added that the primary goal for this content should be to develop a strong relationship between brand and audience (Luttrell & Capizzo, 2019). Content creation encompasses content that is produced by your audience that provides value to the audience in a certain way. Content curation is content that is shared from other organizations to enrich the audience experience and create connections to other like-minded organizations (Luttrell & Capizzo, 2019). Gould (2014) described what the end goal of content should be saying, “We need to create and curate content in the joyful hope of sharing the Gospel, ministering to others, and developing community” (2014, p. 43). Content can be divided into three main categories: spoken content, written content, and graphic visual content (Lazarus, 2020). Each category of content contains preferred platforms and potential messages and opportunities.

1. Spoken content: This could include church services, special speaking engagements, conferences and podcasts. It can come in the form of video content, live video streaming, or podcast material.
 - a. Preferred platforms: YouTube, Spotify Podcasts, Apple Podcasts

- b. Potential messages and opportunities: Ligonier Ministries utilized spoken content through posting a video of John Piper speaking on evangelism and missions (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdqz2DCkisQ>). They posted this message on YouTube for their audience to watch, listen and learn from. This is an amazing way to use the platform to post informative and inspiring content to move your audience.
2. Written content: This could include things like blog posts and articles. Written content will also accompany every visual content piece in the form of captions.
 - a. Preferred platforms: Facebook, Instagram
 - b. Potential messages and opportunities: Greater Europe Mission uses written content in the form of missionary blog posts (<https://www.facebook.com/GEMission>). They share these links on Facebook accompanied by a short caption to catch attention and direct the audience to reading the whole article.
3. Graphic visual content: This could include images, graphic designs, visual text posts, and videos. Remember the impact of visual content on viewers (social media posts including images receive 180 percent more engagement (Hoppe, 2018)).
 - a. Preferred platforms: Instagram, YouTube, Facebook
 - b. Potential messages and opportunities: Samaritan's Purses' Instagram is a great representation of how to use graphic visual content (<https://www.instagram.com/sampurseuk/?hl=en>). They use a mixture of high quality pictures and text to create informative and moving graphics. The text on the graphics includes details of a certain event, a Bible verse or a quote.

When to speak? Content Calendar

After evaluating audience, platforms, and content, you are almost ready to go. Experiment and try different forms of content across platforms. This is the only way to discover what truly speaks to your target audience and how they best consume media. The process of building your social media presence is one of trial and error but can eventually lead to greater understanding and successful ministry. Content calendars are a tool you can use to plan out your social media ministry. There should be a variety in your content type and platform choice.

A well-known principle in marketing is referred to as the 80/20 rule or the Pareto Principle (Hoppe, 2019). Originally, the Pareto Principle referred to the fact that 80% of the wealth of Italy was owned by only 20% of their population (Erridge, 2006). This was an observed law of nature that can be applied to communication studies. Hoppe (2019) applied this through suggesting that 80% of what you post should inform, entertain or educate your audience. The other 20% can contain an “ask” or a promotion of your business/organization (Hoppe, 2019). In the context of missions organizations, 80% should be content regarding your missionaries, what is going on in the organization, uplifting stories, etc. and 20% should be the ask for volunteering, donating etc. Once you figure out the form of the content that resonates with your audience the most and evaluate which platform it would perform best on, you must actually post it. The day of the week and time of day are important so that the post can receive the most traffic possible.

According to Elizabeth Arens (2020) and a study done by Sprout Marketing, the best time for nonprofits to post on Facebook is Wednesdays and Fridays from 8-9am. Instagram is Tuesday and Wednesday from 1-3pm. According to Nicole Ferreira (2021) and a study by Oberlo, YouTube’s primary posting time is Thursday’s and Fridays from 2-4pm. As most videos

are watched in the evening of those days, the video can be indexed and circulating the platform by then. Even though these are the times when the most interaction is happening on a platform, do not feel limited to stick to these specific dates and times. When something needs to be communicated, it needs to be communicated, regardless of day of the week or time of day. A ministry's social media must stay focused on being consistent and being interactive. Social media algorithms organize data and prioritize it on an individual's feed based on what they interact with frequently. Algorithms can start to promote your content, as they realize you are a consistent creator that interacts with their audiences.

Based on these statistics, this social media calendar can act as an example and a template for what, where and when to post. Figure 1.0 provides suggestions for posting days of the week and types of content.

Figure 1.0.

Sample Content Calendar

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Facebook	Plan content for the next week	Ask followers to volunteer or give to the organization	Interact with followers, respond to comments or messages	Post link to missionary blog	Interact with followers, respond to comments or messages	Post an organization update or an update on a missions location	Go live on Facebook Or Ask your followers an engaging question
Instagram	Plan content for the next week	Interact with followers, respond to comments or messages Post Instagram story picture or video	Post image of ministry and include prayer request in caption	Post graphic with Bible verse or quote from organization	Interact with followers, respond to comments or messages Post Instagram story picture or video	Ask followers to volunteer or give to the organization	Go live on Instagram Or Ask your followers an engaging question
YouTube	Plan content for the next week		Interact with followers, respond to comments or messages		Post (bi-weekly) update video of ministry location	Post (bi-weekly) encouraging testimony or story	Go live on YouTube for an event (not every week, on occasion)

Is this working? Analytics and Metrics

The success of your organization’s social media ministry should be constantly evaluated and adjusted accordingly. There are many tools to utilize to measure analytics and metrics. This encompasses page views, interactions, followers, page traffic, etc. Many of the social media platforms provide basic analytics within their program. Some built-in programs are Facebook analytics, Instagram insights and YouTube studio analytics. There are also other full-service analytics programs that can track the success of your social media ministry across all of your

channels. Brent Barnhard (2020) with the analytics company Sprout Social noted some of the best analytics tools, Sprout being among them. Sprout has a unique listening tool for audience analysis and a variety of reporting options and presentations to display the results of cross-channel analytics (Barnhard, 2020). The second and third place options on the list were HubSpot and TapInfluence, which are also notable options. However your organization chooses to track your progress, strategy must be constantly reevaluated and readjusted depending on successes and downfalls found through analytics.

Social media ministry is possible and can be profitable for missions organizations today. Just like Paul in the New Testament who used the technology of his day to spread the gospel and create community, Christians of today can use social media for kingdom purposes. There is potential now more than ever to create virtual community across cultural and geographic boundaries. Missions organizations can latch onto these techniques and content strategies to fulfill specific goals and contribute to their overall mission. Christians are called to be digital ambassadors for the cause of Christ; social media ministry is a worthwhile extension to that ambition.

References

- Allred, M., McCurdy, A., & Kustas, D. (n.d.). *Social media is weird*. Cru.
<https://www.cru.org/us/en/communities/campus/campus-social-media.html>
- Amy, J., Schor, E., & LaVoie, D. (2020, March 16). How houses of worship are adjusting to coronavirus concerns. *The Christian Science Monitor*.
<https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2020/0315/How-houses-of-worship-are-adjusting-to-coronavirus-concerns>
- Appel, G., Grewal, L., Hadi, R., & Stephen, A. T. (2019). The future of social media in marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 48, 79–95.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-019-00695-1>
- Arens, E. (2020, December 17). *The best times to post on social media in 2020*. Sprout Social.
<https://sproutsocial.com/insights/best-times-to-post-on-social-media/>
- Auxier, B. (2020, October 21). *8 facts about Americans and Instagram*. Pew Research Center.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/21/8-facts-about-americans-and-instagram/>
- Barnhard, B. (2020, December 02). *10 of the best social media analytics tools for marketers*. Sprout Social. <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-media-analytics-tools/>
- Bendor-Samuel, P. (2020). COVID-19, Trends in global mission, and participation in faithful witness. *Transformation*, 37(4), 255–265. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378820970225>
- Edwards, A., Edwards, C., Wahl, S., & Myers, S. (2017). *The communication age: Connecting and engaging*. SAGE Publications.
- Erridge, P. (2006). The Pareto principle. *British Dental Journal* 201, 419.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.bdj.4814131>

Ferreira, N. M. (2021, January 28). *Best time to post on social media in 2021*. Oberlo.

<https://www.oberlo.com/blog/best-time-post-social-media>

Gates, B. (2017, October 28). "Content is king" - essay by Bill Gates 1996.

<https://medium.com/@HeathEvans/content-is-king-essay-by-bill-gates-1996-df74552f80d9>

Gould, M. (2013). *The social media gospel: Sharing the good news in new ways*. Liturgical Press.

Hedt, N. (2013). Missional spirituality among digital natives: Technology, spirituality and mission in an age of social media. *Lutheran Theological Journal*, 43(3), 187-202.

New International Version Bible. (2011). Zondervan. (Original work published 1978)

Hoppe, C. (2019, February 07). *Social media for missions: An introductory guide*. Mobile Ministry Forum. <https://mobileministryforum.org/social-media-for-missions-an-introductory-guide/>

Kemp, S. (2020, February 04). *Digital 2020: 3.8 billion people use social media*. We Are Social. <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2020/01/digital-2020-3-8-billion-people-use-social-media>

Lazarus, N. (2017). *The connected church: A social media communication strategy guide for churches, nonprofits and individuals in ministry*. Natchi Muthu Lazarus.

Luttrell, R., & Capizzo, L. W. (2019). *The PR agency handbook*. SAGE.

Mahoney, L. & Tang, T. (2017). *Strategic social media: From marketing to social change*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.

McKinley, M. (2017, October 26). *Missions is church planting or it's not really Christian missions*. International Mission Board. <https://www.imb.org/2017/10/26/mission-church-planting/>

Pew Research Center. (2020a, June 05). *Demographics of social media users and adoption in the*

United States. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>

Pew Research Center. (2020b, August 10). *Attending and watching religious services in the age*

of the coronavirus. <https://www.pewforum.org/2020/08/07/attending-and-watching-religious-services-in-the-age-of-the-coronavirus/>

Raja-Yusof, R., Norman, A., Abdul-Rahman, S., Nazri, N., & Mohd-Yusoff, Z. (2016). Cyber-

volunteering: Social media affordances in fulfilling NGO social missions. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 57, 388-397. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.12.029>

Sehl, K. (2020, September 21). *Social media for nonprofits: 11 essential tips for success*.

Hootsuite. <https://blog.hootsuite.com/social-media-for-nonprofits/>

Tankovska, H. (2021a, January 27). *U.S. Facebook user activities 2020*. Statista.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/275788/share-of-facebook-user-activities/>

Tankovska, H. (2021b, January 27). *Instagram monthly active users*. Statista.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/#:~:text=In%20June%202018%2C%20Instagram%20had,user%20properties%20owned%20by%20Facebook>

Van Ruler, B. (2018). Communication theory: An underrated pillar on which strategic communication rests. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*. 12(4), 267-381.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1452240>

Voorveld, A.M.H., Van Noort, G., Muntinga, D., & Bronner, F. (2018). Engagement with social media and social media advertising: The differentiating role of platform type. *Journal of Advertising*. 47(1), 38-54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2017.1405754>

Waymaker Church. (2021, March 16). *Online community groups*. Waymaker Church.

<https://www.facebook.com/waymaker.church1>

Wise, J. (2014). *The social church a theology of digital communication*. Moody.