Salvation May Just Be a Click Away: A Case Study in the Impact of New Media

Communications in the Evangelical Church in the Bible Belt

by

Robert Peerson

Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

PhD in Communication

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Abstract

This was an exploratory qualitative case study into the usage of new media in the evangelical church within the context of the Bible Belt region of the United States. The problem with the current status of new media communications within the evangelical church is that some churches seem to struggle with using these mediums successfully. The purpose of this study was to gather information on how churches are using new media communications in their environment and equip churches with greater knowledge and tools on how to leverage new media communications to grow the Kingdom. This study features three main research questions that focus on the application of new media to church environments. The research team identified churches throughout the Bible Belt that would be considered successful and influential, and through a series of interviews with representatives of these organizations, examined and analyzed their new media communication efforts. The findings of this study point to new media being something very useful to churches as they attempt to grow and remain relevant in today's society as well as identifying five key norms that churches use in their new media communications.

Keywords: communication, church, new media theory, normative media theory

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Carol Hepburn for her guidance, wisdom, patience, and encouragement throughout the dissertation process. Special thanks also to Dr. Christopher Beck, Dr. Erin Black, and Dr. Robert Mott for their participation, evaluation, challenging thoughts, and kind words in this process.

Thank you to Emily Floyd and Kevin Marks for assisting me in the process of proofreading and perfecting my manuscript. These individuals have been so generous to take time and review this document and speak to this process and I am extremely grateful.

A special thanks to all the participants of this study. For ethical reasons, these names will remain confidential but I am incredibly thankful for to each of them for their willingness to extend their ministry into academia. I hope that churches around the world can glean knowledge from this study and its future iterations and use it to grow the Kingdom of Heaven.

I would like to thank Valor Coffee and the incredible Valor Pit Crew for a safe space to come to study and write through the entirety of this process. I am not sure if this would have been possible without the help of all the iced lavender vanilla lattes and chocolate croissants .

I would like to thank my family. My mom, Joy Peerson, my dad, Rob Peerson, my grandmother, Sue Peerson, and my grandfather, Bob Peerson, each gave so much for me to come this far. Their sacrifice is unmeasurable. I will never be able to repay them. I love each of them deeply and am eternally grateful God allowed me to be their son and grandson.

I would like to thank the Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit. My steps have been ordained to reach this day. The strength, wisdom, guidance, and perseverance to complete this could have only come from Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Thank you God for helping me achieve this great accomplishment and I hope it further equips me to reach people for the Kingdom.

Dedication

To those that have chosen to stand in the gap between life and death, carry the Cross of Christ, fight the good fight, run the good race, and work endlessly to fulfill the Great Commission, may you never lose the wonder and the fire for reaching people for Jesus.

"The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; The Lord lift up His countenance upon you And give you peace" (The New King James Version, 1982, Numbers 6:24-26).

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Our modern world seems to revolve around technology. It is present in every field from

medicine, to business, to education, to religion. One of primary facet of this technological

envelopment of the today's society, is the development of new media communications. Every

piece of communication we engage with at some point has been processed through new media.

New media can be defined as any media, from newspaper articles and blogs to music and

podcasts, that are delivered digitally (Cote, 2022). The development of the smartphone changed

the world in such a way that made it impossible to not to communicate through new media. It

could be argued that Apple alone has made face-to-face communication irrelevant. With this

reality, how have organizations pivoted to stay alive, competitive, and current with the

technological advancements that the world continues to embrace? Especially in recent years as

the world has fought to survive the COVID-19 pandemic, new media has become even more

important as individuals and communities have continued to abstain from face-to-face

communication and interaction. In today's current market, it is nearly impossible to find an

organization of any size that did not have some form of new media presence. Even the most

basic website is considered a new media container for communication purposes. This study is an

effort to learn more about how religious organizations across America are using new media

technologies in their communication practices, evaluate how new media has changed

communication for these organizations, as well as develop an understanding for how new media

communications are being received by the target audiences of these organizations.

Many types of organizations in Modern America use new media in their everyday

pursuits. Each one has a unique approach and perspective on new media that should be used as it

pertains to the level of effectiveness it has in their environment. That means that no two uses of new media theory are alike. For this study, the organizations in question will be Christian churches and their congregations in America. While each may function slightly differently, the overarching goal of a church's use of new media is the same – to bring people into the kingdom of God and get them engaged with the church body. Churches have often been regarded as traditional organizations and slow adopters of technology, but in today's landscape, that mentality is no longer an option. To survive and be relevant in any community in America, a church needs to have at least some form of new media accessibility. Many churches do an excellent job at this while others do not. The goal of this study is to provide insight into how churches across America are currently using new media, showcase and champion how it can be helpful to a church community to have a new media presence, and provide practical techniques on how churches that are currently not using new media can equip themselves with these powerful tools.

The long-term ambition of this study and further research would be to use the findings to develop a resource for churches that currently do not have a strong new media presence or are just starting and equip themselves with to become stronger and engage more people in both their physical and digital community. Scripture says, "to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (New International Version, 1978/2011, Ephesians 4:12). In this modern day, new media could quite possibly be the greatest tool that the church and Christians can equip themselves with to build the body of Christ.

Background

The topic of this study is the use of new media usage in the modern American Christian church. For centuries, churches across America have been considered one of the cornerstones of

society. It is nearly impossible to go anywhere in the United States without finding at least one church. Even in the furthest recesses of Alaska, there are churches. Churches represent a place of community, growth, and peace. Even those who have renounced Christianity often have a level of respect for the church and its place in American history.

As the world and culture have changed and evolved, churches across America have been forced to change with it. Many churches can be considered exclusively contemporary with upbeat music, lights, camera, and sound, and even the ones that may not have practiced that worship style historically, have begun to have this as an option for their congregations. To appeal to the youth of America, many pastors and members of church leadership have moved away from exclusively wearing suits and robes and wear hoodies, jeans, and sometimes even hats in the pulpit. It seems that church is more likely to take place in an intricately design space, arena, or coffee shop now than it is in a building with a steeple and pews. This phenomenon, known as "Cool Christianity," is something that has been stirring since the 1960s (Rocha, 2021). What scholars have found is that churches are trying to connect with those that would not set foot into a traditional church by means of bringing Christianity into things that are historically considered a part of the secular world (Rocha, 2021). The phrase "Fashion-Celebrity-Megachurch industrial complex" has been coined to help describe some of the choices that churches that fall into this "Cool Christianity" category (Rocha, 2021).

Though not all churches would consider themselves a part of the "Cool Christianity" movement, many churches are turning to modern avenues to reach people. Churches across America spend thousands of dollars a year in marketing now to invite as many people to church as possible. Pastors across the United States have social media accounts where they post clips of their sermons, devotions, or personal invitations to church, hoping that someone will hear it, feel

a connection, and find their way to church. Many churches now release music on different streaming platforms with the same goal. Contemporary church websites look more like designer fashion catalogs than informational platforms. Some churches even have full-blown movie and television studios on their campuses now, creating unique cinematic and broadcast-level content in hopes that it will reach someone that may not come to church. There are many ways new media can be used to grow the Kingdom. And to remain relevant, it is important for the church to take advantage of them.

Introduction to the Problem

In 2019, nearly 5,000 protestant churches closed in America, with only 3,000 openings (Gabbatt, 2023). This is the first time in history that the number of reported church closures is higher than those of openings (Gabbatt, 2023). In 2017, researchers found that 7 in 10 people between the ages of 18 and 22 that had been raised in the church, stopped attending because they felt as if the church was too old-fashioned and that there was not a place for them and their modern beliefs (Gabbatt, 2023). In 2020, the percentage of Americans that identified as Christians was less than 65% (Gabbatt, 2023). This is in contrast to in, 92% of Americans stated they regularly attended church and identified as Christians (Gabbatt, 2023). The Pew Research Center estimates that the number will be less than 50% by 2072 (Gabbatt, 2023). While the mass exodus away from Christianity seems to have begun prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, churches across America report that they are still only at 85% of the attendance level they were at before the pandemic (Gabbatt, 2023). People are leaving churches at an alarming rate and the rate at which people are coming to church is decreasing. While the reason for this varies from situation to situation, the church must find ways to combat this, and one way is through adopting new media.

In 2021, Lifeway Research conducted a survey of 1,000 pastors in the United States on their views of technology and how the church is using it. Of the pastors surveyed, 84% stated their church had a website that was regularly updated and was active on social media (Smietana, 2021). This is up 14% from 2010 (Smietana, 2021). Of this number, 97% said they use these new media avenues to share about services and events (Smietana, 2021). What is interesting about this survey is that over 60% of the pastors interviewed stated they were not actually that interested in the benefits technology could offer their church and were only using it at a minimum level because they felt like they had to or because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Smietana, 2021). Less than 25% of the pastors surveyed said they were comfortable with introducing technology into their church practices (Smietana, 2021). While this is relatively small number in the context of all the churches in the United States, these findings are quite concerning. This hesitation and fear of introducing new media to the church is the problem and why research into how churches can use new media effectively to grow the kingdom is so important.

Problem Statement

While the concept of new media is something that did not come into existence until the late 20th century, communication, and the importance of how the gospel is communicated is something that dates to the early days of mankind. Scripture says, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (New International Version, 1978/2011, Isaiah 52:7). This is the foundational principle of all church communication efforts. These efforts and their effectiveness are determined by their place in the field of the tension between biblical truths and values and the situational context the receivers find

themselves (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). While the messaging typically remains the same, the interpretation and knowing the situational context of the recipients are key to successful church communication (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics theory helps determine this (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021).

This theory was developed through critical engagement with Gadamer's theory of the fusion of horizons with inter-human dialogue as a model (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). The two theories became deviated due to Ricoeur's issues with Gadamer's approach, specifically with the use of two separate concepts - 'truth' and 'method' - which led to an inherent contradiction between epistemology and methodology (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Ricoeur stated that this approach was invalid because choosing a methodological position could result in the loss of ontological closeness while opting for a truth position would compromise objectivity (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). This approach resulted in struggles distinguishing between good and bad interpretations (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Ricoeur's developed his theory to overcome this tension between objectivity and the contemporary human experience (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Ricoeur states that the central issue of hermeneutics is "the status of interpretation versus explanation" (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). This challenge arises in all forms of communication (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021).

Ricoeur explored the impacts of shifts in communication mediums, noting that certain forms make more sense about the actual event that is happening and carry a claim to truth in its view of that reality in which the communicators narrative takes place (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). In addition to this, Ricoeur states that in some forms, the intention of the communicator is changed by the medium in which is chosen to carry the communication (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Language rendered in different mediums separates itself from the original intention of the

speaker (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). This causes a divorce of the speech act from the context, leaving only the content (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021).

Church Communication

All communication features some form of narrative. Narrative originates from a world of action in the past and returns to the contemporary world of the consumer (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). A consumer interprets the communication by applying it to their situation, followed by appropriation to discover its meaning (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). The application phase happens when the consumer enters the world created by communication (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). At this point, the two realities confront each other - the world of the communication and the world of the consumer (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Communications can have multiple applications and the consumer may experience many different narratives (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). This can result in the consumer being intrigued by it, renewed by it, inspired to act, and even provoked to create a new narrative from the original communication (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021).

Ricoeur states there are three pieces to the hermeneutical process (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). The first is pre-figuration (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Pre-figuration is when the communicator, which can be an organization or an individual, chooses a topic for their communication (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). The second piece of the process is configuration (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Configuration happens when the communicator takes the topic and constructs their communication in a unique style and structure (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Finally, re-figuration takes place when the consumer receives the communication and interprets it for their current reality (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021).

Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics can also be applied to the interpretation of the Bible in modern communications (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Scriptures are the experiences of biblical people in their encounters with God that were presented in communication media and conveyed the sense and message of the speakers in the Old and New Testaments to the modern world (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Additionally, the biblical authors presented their messages in written form as a "work", each featuring a unique structure and style (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Therefore, those interpreting these communications must be familiar with the different contexts to fully comprehend them (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). By engaging with the written language of the Bible, readers can understand the Bible as a revelation of God (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021).

Church communication founded in the Bible can bring about a new existence and a new life for the recipients of their communication (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). The books of the Bible are narrative containers for God's revelation through His actions and words in the history of Israel and Jesus Christ, who brought God's love, mercy, and grace to humanity (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). The Bible is the written record of people's experiences with God's words and saving deeds (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). The Bible reflects faith experiences that people have had over almost 1200 years and its content has been tested over centuries, and it serves as a source for faith pronouncements (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). As the Bible is to function as the foundation and primary source of church communication, it falls upon the creator of the communication to interpret scripture for their audience (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). This allows for topical and relevant communication (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Church communication cannot rely solely on an individual's thoughts or perspectives (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Churches must intentionally listen to the congregation, engage with the communities they are

reaching, and be aware of current events and culture (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Churches should use the context of their audience as a guide of how they choose to communicate (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). By keeping the congregation's context in mind, churches can then build communication with a biblical foundation that will engage their audiences at the highest levels (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Ricoeur states that this approach will open up avenues for people to apply Biblical principles and examples to their own life (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021).

As a church crafts its communication efforts, some key processes need to take place to yield the greatest achievements (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). The first process is one of finding individualistic values in Scripture (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Inserting "self" into the narrative and seeing how these principles can be applied on a personal level will open new possibilities for consumer interpretation, potentially yielding great results (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). The next important factor when building church communications is to intentionally seek out silenced perspectives (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Churches are the cornerstone of many communities, and thus they must recognize their position of power and privilege within society and actively challenge dominant discourse by absorbing diverse perspectives (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Additionally, the church should aim to challenge oppressive political and economic discourses while urging the congregation to engage in mission work worldwide, as per Jesus' directive in Matthew 28:19-20 (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Finally, all communication should be prayed over and reflected upon (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021). Asking questions such as "What do we hope to achieve with this communication?" or "Who do we hope to help with this?" should be considered (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021).

The Importance of Media in Church Communication

Throughout history, humans have communicated using all forms of media, ranging from rock carvings and paintings to written text on clay, parchment, and paper, and from printed material to sound and visual broadcasting through the airwaves (Gelfgren, 2014). Similarly, religion has been transmitted through different means, such as sculptures, icons, incense, printed text, and radio and television programs (Gelfgren, 2014). Media and religion are distinct entities, and there are many theories that focus on mediation and mediatization to examine how media influence religious messages (Gelfgren, 2014). For example, Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message" reflects this perspective on a broad level (Gelfgren, 2014). Other scholars such as Stolow argue that separating religion from media is impossible, and humans cannot comprehend religion without media (Gelfgren, 2014). This challenges the idea that modern communication technology is directly linked to secularization, as it assumes that the expansion of these technologies will lead to a crumbling of religious authority and identity markers; however, many scholars now believe that church growth has no predetermined direction and changes as society changes (Gelfgren, 2014). David Morgan states that there is nothing unique regarding mediatization and its relation to religious transformation and there is no link to modern media or the internet (Gelfgren, 2014). Nonetheless, there is a connection between media and religious change (Gelfgren, 2014). One example of this is the Lutheran Reformation (Gelfgren, 2014). Eisenstein believed the Reformation was reliant on and benefited from the printing technique (Gelfgren, 2014). Protestantism, which emerged from the Reformation, finds its foundation in the written word to reach new people to a greater extent than the Roman Catholic or Orthodox traditions (Gelfgren, 2014). This is one of the main differences between Catholic or Orthodox practices and Protestantism (Gelfgren, 2014). Protestantism finds

any means of communication acceptable to reach the unreached, while the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, focus on the traditions and experiences of the physical Church and its sacraments (Gelfgren, 2014). David Morgan said, "Print media were to play a key role in realizing this Evangelical Christendom because print – not sacrament or liturgy, or traditional institutions – was the chief manifestation of the body of Christ, the emerging visibility of the church as a global reality" (Gelfgren, 2014). As Christianity has declined in recent years, churches are utilizing the internet as a means of rejuvenating communication with people (Gelfgren, 2014). There are striking similarities between what America is currently experiencing and moments in history (Gelfgren, 2014).

In the 19th century, particularly during the Pietistic and Methodist origin that was sometimes referred to as Evangelical, modern communication tools included colporteurs, who were itinerant book distributors, and tracts (Gelfgren, 2014). These became popular due to the steam press and cheaper paper (Gelfgren, 2014). Popular belief at the time was that the word of God, spoken or written, could convert people to Christianity (Gelfgren, 2014). Tracts became popular as they were cheap to oral preaching and were found to be quite successful (Gelfgren, 2014). Churches and pastors of the time would say "the tracts should rain over the country giving spiritual life to people" or "The tracts were the seed to give growth to the kingdom of God" (Gelfgren, 2014). To contrast this, Contemporary churches and communication through tracts or the internet is similar in form (Gelfgren, 2014). Tracts were often created to mimic secular materials (Gelfgren, 2014). The idea was that people could be interested in the story and, at the same time, be implicitly exposed to the word of God (Gelfgren, 2014).

Today, churches use social media such as Facebook, blogs, and Twitter to do the same thing (Gelfgren, 2012). Both tracts and social media aim to speak to people in a personal voice,

dissolving traditional hierarchies, stereotypes, and presumptions, that may exist between society and the church (Gelfgren, 2014).

Churches most often refer to their usage of modern media as a way to build relationships with people outside the walls of their church (Gelfgren, 2014). This participatory culture of the internet serves as a role model for some churches; however, historians have found that this is not a motive that is exclusively related to the usage of new media (Gelfgren, 2014). Before churches had access to new media, handing out tracts was seen to open up the conversation and bridge the gap between the Church and those it wished to reach (Gelfgren, 2014). The same applies to digital communication today, especially with social media (Gelfgren, 2014). Baily and Storch describe this desire to reach people as a "new passion for authentic communication" (Gelfgren, 2014). People want to be part of an open and honest conversation, and one-sided communication is no longer sufficient (Gelfgren, 2014). Using new media allows churches to create this dialogue and meet people where they are (Gelfgren, 2014). Again, to contrast this, in 19th century, colporteurs, tracts, sharing testimonies, prayer meetings, and the community among believers were all parts of the participatory culture of the Evangelical revivalist movement (Gelfgren, 2014).

We first see new media begin to find its way into church communications in the second half of the 20th century (Zsupan-Jerome, 2014). In November 1962, the Second Vatican Council dedicated a relatively brief two-and-a-half-day session to the topic of new media communication and how it was affecting Christian society (Zsupan-Jerome, 2014). What came out of this session became known as the Inter Mirifica (Zsupan-Jerome, 2014). This document urged parishioners around the world to take heed and notice of new media communication outlets, and with wisdom evaluate how they could be used to lead people to salvation as society progressed (Zsupan-

Jerome, 2014). This publication went out to the world and reached more than just those who

practice Catholicism (Zsupan-Jerome, 2014). Now, we see churches and other Christian

organizations around the world using film, television, social media, and other outlets to reach

people.

Why is Church Important?

As already mentioned and will be further discussed throughout this study is the scriptural

importance of church attendance We see all throughout scripture promised spiritual benefits of

being a part of a local church, but to someone who may not be a believer or understand those

benefits and promises, why is church so important? A researcher at the University of Cincinnati

compiled a list of benefits an individual or community might receive by engaging in church. The

first being economic benefits (Lewis, 2015). The presence of churches within a community

yields tangible economic advantages for the local area (Lewis, 2015). Church organizations play

a pivotal role in generating employment opportunities for the community, while also fostering

support for various local enterprises (Lewis, 2015). Moreover, churches draw individuals from

neighboring regions to the vicinity where the church is situated (Lewis, 2015). These individuals

subsequently contribute to the economic sustenance of local establishments, thereby augmenting

the overall revenue of the community (Lewis, 2015). In addition to the economic aspect,

churches act as a compelling factor that enhances the appeal of local communities (Lewis, 2015).

Similar to robust educational institutions, many families and individuals factor in the existence of

local religious organizations when making decisions about relocating to a particular community

or investing in property and the presence of churches influences families' decisions to

establish their homes in the local community (Lewis, 2015). Consequently, this choice

contributes to the buoyancy of local businesses and bolsters property tax revenues (Lewis, 2015).

As a result, churches play a direct and vital role in fostering economic prosperity within the community (Lewis, 2015). Their presence stimulates community growth, job opportunities, and ultimately contributes to the overall economic vibrancy of the area (Lewis, 2015).

In addition to direct economic advantages, churches offer social benefits that hold economic significance (Lewis, 2015). Numerous researchers have highlighted the social advantages that churches contribute to communities (Lewis, 2015). These include extending assistance to individuals in need within the community, enhancing marital relationships, reducing violence against women, fostering a sense of moral responsibility within the community, and encouraging charitable donations and volunteerism (Lewis, 2015). From the perspective of social scientists, engaging in moral and volunteer initiatives might appear irrational due to their limited personal benefits (Lewis, 2015). However, being a part of a religious community amplifies one's sense of duty toward serving others within the community, thereby addressing the challenge of "free ridership." By being active members of religious congregations, individuals actively contribute to addressing the needs of the community (Lewis, 2015). This phenomenon helps communities undertake critical social projects that would require government funding if not supported by churches (Lewis, 2015).

An extensive examination of religious congregations in six metropolitan areas discovered that 91% of these congregations engaged in at least one social service (Cnaan et al., 1999). Similarly, in a survey conducted in Philadelphia, 87/% of the congregations were found to offer at least one social service to the community (Boddie et al., 2001). While some contend that these percentages might overstate the involvement of smaller churches, even conservative estimates suggest that larger congregations, representing around 75% of the religious population in the

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United States, contribute to at least one community service (Chaves, 1999). A recent, detailed investigation of Philadelphia churches revealed that their role in community assistance and positive social impact surpasses previous scholarly assumptions (Lewis, 2015). The researchers assert, "If it were not for the remarkable collective effort of approximately 2,120 local religious congregations, life in Philadelphia would have been extremely challenging" (Cnaan et al., 2006, p. 291). Another Philadelphia study found that, on average, congregations were involved in 2.33 distinct social programs (Boddie et al., 2001). Moreover, a typical church supports six community programs annually through financial aid, volunteers, space provision, and in-kind contributions (Ammerman, 2001). Categorized by Ammerman, these programs include two direct service initiatives, two in education, health, or culture, and one in community development or political/social advocacy (A2001). Furthermore, the presence of churches in a community enhances the level of religiosity among locals, leading to positive societal contributions (Lewis, 2015). Religiosity influences individuals' commitment to non-religious moral actions such as, religious individuals demonstrate a higher propensity to participate in community-oriented moral projects, such as blood donation (Ortberg, Goruch, & Kim, 2001).

Additionally, church affiliation and religiosity contribute to increased community and intra-church volunteering (Park & Smith, 2000). In fact, an average church contributes volunteers to three organizations, with some churches providing volunteers for various projects (Ammerman, 2001). A national study from 1990 indicated that church members dedicate 56 million hours annually to external organizations, aiding human services, education, culture, and environmental initiatives (Hodgkinson, 1990). Given the difficulty in quantifying the precise value of volunteering and community-building benefits churches bring to localities, scholars have explored the concept of the "replacement value" (Lewis, 2015). This value incorporates

monetary donations, in-kind support, volunteer hours from both staff and congregants, utilities, and space utilization (Tirrito & Cascio, 2003). Cnaan estimated that churches in larger metropolitan communities provide support equivalent to that of a full-time social service employee (Cnaan, 1999).

In a comprehensive Philadelphia study, community services were valued at $115,009 per congregation and $230,018,400 for all religious congregations in the city (Boddie et al., 2001). While the precision of this figure can be debated, it is evident that churches significantly contribute to both the economic and social well-being of communities by fostering and deploying volunteers, thereby enhancing community development (Lewis, 2015). In addition to their roles in establishing social programs and mobilizing community volunteers, churches also contribute to enhancing educational achievements among students and equipping individuals with training and skills that promote active civic participation (Lewis, 2015). Research has revealed several positive correlations between religious involvement and educational outcomes (Lewis, 2015). For instance, students who are actively engaged in religious activities tend to achieve higher math and reading scores and aspire to greater educational achievements (Regnerus, 2000; Regnerus, 2001). Regular church attendance has been associated with improved time management skills and goal achievement among students (Freeman, 1985). Moreover, students with strong religious ties are significantly less likely to skip school compared to their peers (Sloane and Potvin, 1986). Furthermore, parents' involvement in church activities positively influences their children's educational performance (Lewis, 2015). More religiously engaged parents tend to raise children who consistently complete homework, attend classes, and successfully complete educational programs (Muller and Ellison, 2001).

Churches provide valuable educational, psychological, and moral guidance, resulting in positive educational outcomes for both present and future generations of students (Lewis, 2015). Numerous cross-national and community-based studies have also demonstrated that churches play a pivotal role in imparting civic skills (Lewis, 2015). These skills encompass public speaking, networking, organizing, and active participation in political processes (Schwadel, 2002).

Church environments serve as training grounds for individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, equipping them with the skills necessary for success in various sectors, including industry, business, education, and politics (Lewis, 2015). In summary, the educational and civic engagement training, as well as the motivation, fostered by church institutions, offer substantial social and economic benefits to societies (Lewis, 2015). As educational attainment and civic participation increase, rates of deviance and crime tend to decrease, while economic growth and political stability rise (Lewis, 2015). Consequently, churches stand as vital institutions in the development of the educational, life, and social skills essential for individuals to thrive in society (Lewis, 2015). In addition to their roles in establishing social programs and mobilizing community volunteers, churches play a significant role in reducing crime and deviant behavior within communities, particularly among local youth (Lewis, 2015). This reduction in crime and deviance contributes to safer, more stable, and more productive communities (Lewis, 2015).

Enhanced community safety and stability, in turn, encourage economic growth by fostering business expansion and attracting new residents (Lewis, 2015). Multiple studies have identified the positive impact of churches on reducing crime and deviance, ultimately promoting

these economic benefits associated with safer communities (Lewis, 2015). Active involvement in a church consistently leads to lower levels of deviance and criminal behavior (Lewis, 2015). A national study revealed that religious involvement contributes to a decrease in domestic violence among both men and women (Ellison and Anderson, 2001).

Furthermore, church attendance has been linked to lower rates of crimes such as assault, burglary, and larceny (Bainbridge, 1989), while religiosity has been associated with decreased levels of violent crime, both at the individual and state levels (Hummer et al., 1999; Lester, 1987). Increased levels of religiosity also directly correlate with reduced deviant behavior, including drug use, violence, and delinquency among at-risk youth (Fagan, 2006). This decline in deviance contributes to the maintenance of social order, enhances the likelihood of business expansion in local areas, generates economic opportunities, and reduces government expenditures on programs and institutions dedicated to addressing, penalizing, and compensating for deviant behavior (Lewis, 2015). Churches also contribute to a range of health benefits within the community, enhancing overall community well-being while reducing government healthcare expenditures (Lewis, 2015). Extensive research consistently demonstrates that religiosity is linked to increased longevity (Johnson et al., 2002; Fagan, 2006). On average, religious individuals live seven years longer than their non-religious counterparts, with this gap widening to fourteen years for African American individuals (Hummer et al., 1999; Fagan, 2006). Studies by Johns Hopkins scholars indicate that non-religious individuals face elevated risks of mortality due to conditions such as cirrhosis of the liver, emphysema, arteriosclerosis, cardiovascular diseases, and suicide (Comstock and Patridge, 1972; Fagan, 2006).

Furthermore, religious attendance has been associated with reduced alcohol abuse and drug use (Fagan, 2006; Gartner et al., 1991; Hasin et al., 1985). In San Diego, California, nearly

two-thirds of all churches are engaged in health promotion programs and participate in community health initiatives (Elder et al., 1989). Through their programs and religious practices, churches actively promote physical health, leading to a healthier and more productive community that places less strain on local resources (Lewis, 2015). By contributing to improved physical health, churches offer a substantial benefit to the community (Lewis, 2015). Beyond physical health, church attendance also fosters mental well-being (Lewis, 2015). In a comprehensive survey of mental health studies, 81 percent of 91 studies found a positive association between religion and mental well-being (Johnson et al., 2002; Fagan, 2006). Religious attendance has been shown to reduce stress, boost self-esteem, and instill individuals with hope and a greater sense of life purpose (Fagan, 2006; Johnson et al., 2002). Increased religious practice is also correlated with decreased levels of depression and suicide (Johnson et al., 2002; Ellison, 1995). In summary, church involvement has been demonstrated to enhance mental health, and individuals with strong mental health are more productive and less likely to engage in criminal activities. Churches, therefore, provide mental health benefits to individuals, directly contributing to the well-being of communities (Lewis, 2015).

Christian Worldview

Why is it important to use new media in the modern church? To start, scripture commands to "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 new media is now making that possible for everyone (New International Version, 1978/2011, Matthew 28:19). Whether it is through social media, a different internet format, a video or film, a digitally released song, or even an interaction in the metaverse, nearly everyone in the world has access to a new media format and can use it to share the gospel. The introduction of new media into the traditional institution of

church is a contemporary practice but even the most historic of churches are participating. One of the traditional churches that decided to make a digital footprint for themselves is the world-famous St. Andrew's Church (MacLachlan, 2007). When church leadership was asked why they made this decision the response was "I am sure if Jesus were here today, he would use YouTube as a means of spreading the Good News" (MacLachlan, 2007). Scripture also says, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden." (New International Version, 1978/2011, Matthew 5:14). New media is accessible by all in this modern day and age. To be light and not be hidden, the church must continue to adjust to the ever-changing world, embrace technological advancement, and change with the culture (Soukup & Glader, 2020). Christians are called to embrace the digital world, not simply to avoid being left behind, but rather to offer a witness for authentic, truthful, and hopeful communication as one that leads to forming relationships, edifying communities, and even inviting a sense of communion with one another (Zsupan-Jerome, 2017). Christians around the world are called to be just as proactive in the digital world as they are the physical world, offering truth and hope, and commitment to person, encounter, and possibility when it comes to mediated communication (Zsupan-Jerome, 2017).

What is the Bible Belt?

The label, the Bible Belt, in its modern context, was coined by H. L. Mencken in his writings and reports on the 1920's Scopes Monkey Trial (Brunn et al., 2011). This label refers to the rural south and midwestern parts of the United States, ranging from North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Florida, and South Carolina, all the way to Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and Iowa (Brunn et al., 2011). The term Bible Belt had been previously used in the colonial times to describe New England and the regions occupied by the pilgrims (Wilson, 1995). In this context, this label would not be considered derogatory as Mencken meant it, referring to the states within

his new classification as "the Baptist Back-waters of the south" (Wilson, 1989). Mencken also illuded that other names for this region could be the "lynching belt" or "the hookworm belt" due to the racial tension and tragedies that had taken place in these states and the parasites that are commonly found in dirty, dry, poverty-stricken areas (Tweedie, 1978). More modern labels for it are "beauty pageant belt", the "sun belt", and the "death belt" (Beck, 1984; Rubin, 1977; Green, 2000). All these names for this region of the United States are linked to derogatory viewpoints of the conversative social views of this region held by those in more progressive regions like California, the Pacific Northwest, and New England (Brunn et al., 2011).

Among the other reasons and social contexts that may be correlated to this title, the primary reason this region is labeled as the Bible Belt is the due to the high concentration of conservative protestant fundamentalist Christianity we find in this region (Brunn et al., 2011). In this region, there are the highest numbers of protestant churches, Christian universities, televangelists, church denomination headquarters, religious symbols and signs, Christian owned businesses, and google searches for "church" than anywhere in the nation (Brunn et al., 2011). This phenomenon of religious saturation even can be found in the architecture and the arts in the region (Brunn et al., 2011). Most churches in this area lack the ornate décor, stained glass, and elaborate entrances and sanctuaries that churches in other parts of the United States do (Brunn et al., 2011). Music, film, and television created by artists and organizations in this region has also been found to be more likely to reference themes like God, church, forgiveness, and conservative family values, while omitting themes like same sex attraction and abortion (Brunn et al., 2011).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study is to gather information on the status of the usage of new media in the modern American church. While many churches do this

quite well, others seem to struggle. Why is this? The hope of this study is to offer insight into how churches found success using new media and to equip churches that have not found that level of success or have yet to adopt new media practices with the resources they need to make the most of their usage of new media platforms. As the world continues to evolve and grow, studies become important as they help those who may have concerns or a lack of resources when it comes to adopting further technological advancements.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant to church communication practices as it will provide insight on how to identify a healthy church as well as provide insight into how unhealthy churches can become healthy. Healthy, growing, impactful churches are churches that have excellent communication practices (Snider, 2023). In modern America, it is very easy to tell a healthy church from an unhealthy church, and an unhealthy church cannot survive in the current world we live in. A healthy church is built upon for key principles (Snider, 2023). The first key principle is the quality of the decisions the church makes regarding their communication (Snider, 2023). These decisions are made long before there is something even to communicate (Snider, 2023). These decisions include how communication is going to take place, who is going to communicate, and what information is going to be communicated (Snider, 2023). The second key communication principle to establish a healthy church is only communicating quality messages (Snider, 2023). The world is oversaturated with communicators and information (Snider, 2023). For a church's communication to be effective, the information presented needs to selective, meaningful, and intentional (Snider, 2023). A healthy church must also determine how their congregation receives information and tailor their messaging to their audience (Snider, 2023). The third key principle for healthy church communication is presenting clear and accurate

information (Snider, 2023). Misinformation can create tough situations for churches and their congregation members, capping the potential for participant buy in (Snider, 2023). Lastly, the fourth key communication principle for a healthy church is consistency (Snider, 2023). Lack of consistency can create confusion, disinterest, and untrusting relationships with the intended audience (Snider, 2023).

The significance of this study applied to general communication studies lies in the concept of brand loyalty. A core value of churches across America is developing and strengthening their communities and it is quite evident in a community when a church does this well. The principles that churches are using new media to develop their communities and grow their congregation can be applied to organizations of any kind to develop brand loyalty. Businesses and organizations across America require high levels of engagement, just like churches do. Thousands of churches do this so well and many corporations can learn from this.

Research Questions

This study has three primary research questions. The first is how are evangelical churches in America using new media? The purpose of this question is to gain insight into how evangelical churches across America are using new media and how they are not. This question is important as all churches function differently and find success different ways depending on location, cultural and societal influences, and demographic of the congregation.

The second research question is why some churches seem to experience more success than others when using new media? This research question is designed to help learn more about what variables effect church communication efforts and why. This can be something as simple as branding changes or something as in-depth as studying keywords and using targeted analytics to develop the most effective content.

The third and final research question is in their usage of new media communications is are these churches seeing a difference or an impact in their congregations and communities from their communication efforts?

Definition of Success

The second research question of this study focuses on success. Success is not something that can be truly defined in the contexts of a qualitative study. Everyone's definition is different and is something that is reflected differently in the context of every organization. For this study, the term success is being defined as and refers to quantitative measurements. This can include attendance numbers, financial giving, numbers of salvations and baptisms, and number of locations, outreaches, and events.

Definitions

The following key terms will be used throughout this study to ensure consistency in the way the study is conducted, and the results and discussion occur.

New Media – Any media, from newspaper articles and blogs to music and podcasts, that are delivered digitally (Cote, 2022).

Convergence - The act of converging and especially moving toward union or uniformity (Merriam-Webster's, 2011).

Communication - A process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior (Merriam-Webster's, 2011).

Normative - Of, relating to, or determining norms or standards (Merriam-Webster's, 2011).

Summary

Chapter one presented an introduction to new media in the church environment and the study proposed. First, a Christian worldview was presented, showcasing the significance of the

study from a spiritual and eternal standpoint. Next, a comprehensive overview of the problem at hand, the topic, and the current state of church new media communications was provided to show why this study is significant. Key terms and overarching theoretical and applied assumptions were also presented. Chapter two will focus on preexisting literature on new media and its applications in the church environment.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of the literature review is to present the reader with a review of scholarly literature that not only shows the author's knowledge about the topic, but also provides a background on the topic. This chapter will present a review of literature related to the topic of church communication and a discussion of theory and theoretical principals that will guide the study's research design.

Church Communication

Church communication is conceptually organizational communication. It rests in the desire to share something that engages groups of people with a brand or entity and create change. Crosby defines church communication as "any message that is intentionally (or not) communicated from a church, ministry, staff member or key individual about the church" (2019). How a church chooses to communicate should lie within the answers to four primary questions (Crosby, 2019). The first is, what is the message (Crosby, 2019)? Is the information being presented truly what needs to be communicated (Crosby, 2019)? Churches that desire to communicate effectively should be working in teams to delve into the layers of their communication practices and create new ways to show people the story of Jesus (Crosby, 2019). The next question is, what is the market? Effective church communication must be targeted to a certain audience (Crosby, 2019). This can be done by filtering all communications through the core values of the church (Crosby, 2019). The third question is what media are you going to use? The way to answer this is to find out how the target audience is reaching communication (Crosby, 2019). Every environment is unique (Crosby, 2019). Some churches might respond better to written communication, while others will only engage in TikTok videos (Crosby, 2019).

The last question is, what is the moment you are trying to create (Crosby, 2019)? Make the most of your communication (Crosby, 2019). Use different resources and platforms (Crosby, 2019). Find ways to determine what is memorable and what resonates with the target audience and capitalize upon that (Crosby, 2019).

History of Church Communication

Communication within the church looks nothing like it did when the Apostle Paul and other new disciples of Jesus began to spread the gospel message and build the church over two millennia ago (Schuurman, 2015). It was not until the invention of the printing press in the 15th century that the church communication in any semblance we see today truly became a reality (Schuurman, 2015). This allowed for churches and clergy to not only provide the scriptures on a mass but also distribute supporting manuscripts and other documents (Schuurman, 2015). What scholars consider to be the next milestone in the development of modern church communication is something not related to communications (Schuurman, 2015). This is the invention of the automobile (Schuurman, 2015). This invention grants the individual autonomy to create independence from other people and organizations in their lives, giving them greater access to the communication expressions of their choice (Schuurman, 2015). When people are able to connect with the outlet of their choice, they are more likely to resonate and establish loyalty with that outlet. Fast forward several decades, the next major development in the history of church communication is the invention of the microphone, which was shortly followed by the invention of the projector (Schuurman, 2015). These two developments are now considered cornerstones of the modern church experience. They have changed, evolved, and gotten more complex as the years have gone by but in modern America, it is nearly impossible to find a church that doesn't have some form of microphone or visual display in their environment. As these technologies

have become a part of the church environment, they have created opportunity for other technologies such as cameras and complex video systems to also be incorporated as well. While more and more churches work on bringing more people into their buildings, they also began to experiment with different ways to send their message out. Tracts, flyers, and books have all been present since the early days of the church but following the inventions of the microphone and recording equipment in the mid 20th century, churches began to record sermons and worship and sending it out into the world over radio, cassette tape, television, vinyl records, DVDs, and CDs. This transitions us into the most critical of developments in church communication history: the internet. The internet is the greatest resource and tool the church has ever had access to for communication. Year after year, internet technologies have seemingly unlocked new communication outlets for churches across the world. Theoretically, with internet access, everyone alive today could hear about Jesus.

Over the past two years, the modern church has faced a pivotal choice: either adapt and incorporate media into their environment or face the risk of obsolescence. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered lives and organizations, including churches, which were unable to meet physically. As a result, embracing digital media assets became essential for their survival (Galang & Galang, 2021). Social media emerged as a key platform during the pandemic, demonstrating its potential as a vehicle for sharing Christianity (Galang & Galang, 2021). COVID-19 has reshaped the entire church landscape, with digital media playing a vital role in the new church model moving forward. A significant power shift occurred between face-to-face communication in the church and digital communication strategies. This shift provided dedicated members with opportunities to redefine their theology and reimagine the meaning of presence, absence, and divine interpretation (Mpofu, 2021). The pandemic forced religious communities

worldwide to reevaluate what it truly means to be a part of the church (Mpofu, 2021). To address

the challenges and limitations imposed by COVID-19, the church must embrace the digital realm

and adapt traditional practices (Mpofu, 2021). As the pandemic lingers, the question of whether

the world will return to normalcy looms large. Similarly, churches grapple with the question of

in-person gatherings versus virtual services. COVID-19 has also opened new doors for the

church to share the Gospel on a broader scale and reach the unchurched, people of different

faiths, and those with no faith. By embracing electronic platforms, the church can provide

encouragement and hope amidst the world's current struggles (Pillay, 2020). This integration of

worship and mission emphasizes that the primary purpose of the church is not merely to attract

people but to equip and send God's redeemed people into the world on a mission (Pillay, 2020).

The Status of the Christian Church in Modern America

From 2018 to 2019, a research group from Duke University led a survey of congregations

across America to gather the status of the modern Christian. This study was published in 2021.

This study found that religious diversity in America is on the rise (Chaves et al., 2021). There

are now more synagogues, mosques, and Buddhist or Hindu temples in the U.S. (9% of all

congregations) as there are Catholic parishes (6% of all congregations) (Chaves et al., 2021). Of

the churches surveyed, it was found that there are more small churches than large churches in

America, but more people attended large churches (Chaves et al., 2021). To contrast, people who

consider themselves a part of a small church are more likely to give and serve than people in

larger churches (Chaves et al., 2021). 11% of people who attend church attend a church that

offers worship gatherings at multiple locations at multiple times (Chaves et al., 2021). The

worship style of modern churches is trending to be more expressive, while messages and

sermons have trended to be more informational (Chaves et al., 2021). Many churches now

feature technological elements in their services (Chaves et al., 2021).

Pastoral leadership in America is also trending towards more diversity (Chaves et al., 2021). Over 10% of churches in America are led by women and there has been a significant rise in the number of pastors of color since the 1990s (Chaves et al., 2021). 19% of churches feature a leadership team that is made up exclusively of volunteers or the pastor is the only person technically employed by the organization (Chaves et al., 2021). 41% of individuals that work in ministry are full time while 70% only work for their church part time (Chaves et al., 2021). One in five pastors or ministry leaders serve more than one church on a regular basis, one in three have a one or two other jobs in addition to their duties at the church (Chaves et al., 2021). Outside of pastoral leadership, individuals who work in ministry are more likely to be female, younger, a part of the congregation, and are less likely to have attended seminary (Chaves et al., 2021). Another area of significant growth is the increase of racial and ethnic diversity both in leadership and in the congregations of these churches (Chaves et al., 2021). In addition to this, 89% of churches now have females in positions at the executive and senior levels (Chaves et al., 2021). When it comes to outreach, food assistance is the number one form of outreach churches in America participate in with nearly 50% of churches offering some sort of food assistance program (Chaves et al., 2021). Churches in America are also trending more progressive as 54% of churches now accept people who are openly gay or lesbian in their congregations, with 30% allowing them to serve (Chaves et al., 2021).

New Media in the Modern American Church

The American church has been forced to embrace technology as has developed over the last several decades, just as other major organizations have (Chaves et al., 2021). The number of churches that use technology in worship gatherings is up from 12% in 1998 to 46% in the present

day (Chaves et al., 2021). 68% of evangelical churches use at least some form of visual projection in their services (Chaves et al., 2021). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, over 50% of churches were recording their services and posting them online for people to watch (Chaves et al., 2021). One in five churches live stream and broadcast their gatherings and over 30% of churches post their sermons as individual videos later (Chaves et al., 2021). 33% of churches have moved to offering apps or online platforms that congregation members can use to enhance their worship experience (Chaves et al., 2021). From 1998 to the present day, the number of churches that have a website has risen from 17% to over 75% (Chaves et al., 2021). 73% of churches have an active presence on Facebook and 19% of churches have multiple social media accounts on different platforms (Chaves et al., 2021). 87% of active churchgoers actively engage with their church on at least one form of social media (Chaves et al., 2021). 46% of pastors and church leaders have at least one form of social media (Chaves et al., 2021). 48% of churches have opened an online platform for giving donations as well (Chaves et al., 2021). Over 5% of churches now have a minimum of at least one staff member who's exclusively responsible for the media outputs (Chaves et al., 2021). This number is growing rapidly as technology is becoming a more and more important part of the church environment (Chaves et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of churches that offered an online worship experience grew from 50% to 75% (Chaves et al., 2021). Over 60% of churches that began streaming in 2020 are made up of congregations in which over 40% of the members are over the age of 60 (Chaves et al., 2021). Rural congregations and those in traditional denominations were less like to begin streaming in comparison to evangelical or more progressive churches in larger cities, but this number was found to not be statistically significant (Chaves et al., 2021).

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most interesting things found by church researchers is most churches practicing streaming were Black Protestant churches at 68% of all churches that were actively streaming their services on a weekly basis (Chaves et al., 2021). This was followed by white evangelical churches, with catholic churches having the least number of churches that offered an online worship opportunity (Chaves et al., 2021). The Pew Research Center has also released several studies that provide qualitative data on this subject. In 2014, a survey found that one in five Americans share their religious faith online during a typical week, which is about the same percentage as those who listen to religious talk radio, watch religious TV programs, or listen to Christian rock music (Cooperman et al., 2014). Additionally, close to 50% of American adults that are active online observe at least one individual sharing religious beliefs online each week (Cooperman et al., 2014). A survey involving 3,217 adults from American Trends Panel found that 20% of adults in America shared something associated with their faith online at least once during a seven-day time span (Cooperman et al., 2014). If they are not the ones posting, over 40% of adults see something religious online each week (Cooperman et al., 2014). The interesting part is that only 40% of adults state that they share their faith offline on a regular basis and only 30% of those surveyed say they attend church on a regular basis (Cooperman et al., 2014). These results suggest that a church's online presence does not replace traditional gatherings but simply complements them (Cooperman et al., 2014). This study also found that those who attend church services on a regular basis are more likely to post something faith related on their personal social media than those who do not (Cooperman et al., 2014). White evangelicals and black Protestants are the two primary groups that post about their faith on social media (Cooperman et al., 2014). The Pew Research Center also found that adults between the ages of 18-29 are more likely to post online about their faith and see others' posts

about them than adults of any other age range (Cooperman et al., 2014). To contrast, adults over 30 are the most likely to either watch faith-based television or films and buy faith-based books (Cooperman et al., 2014).

One of the biggest questions posed when it comes to the usage of new media in a church environment is "Does it work? Can people actually be impacted through new media mediums?". During the COVID-19 Pandemic, a team of researchers in Korea decided to conduct a study to answer this question. As people around the world were exiled to their homes, churches and other organizations quickly began to put technology in place to reach people in quarantine. In Korea, 57.5% of churches either were forced to stop worship services entirely or converted to online services only (Cho, 2021). As churches began to do this, researchers began to observe a decay in the community in which these churches found themselves (Cho, 2021). Social distancing seemed to have begun spreading its own pandemic of social isolation, which directly opposes the function of the church (Cho, 2021). As researchers began to observe this, the question was posed when socially distanced, how can one be not socially isolated? (Cho, 2021). To answer this, they began researching how church online could help with this (Cho, 2021). Using speech act theory, or SAT, these researchers began to explore the impacts of the church through new media (Cho, 2021). SAT is a communication theory that focuses on how the use of certain language changes how people act (Cho, 2021). The foundation of this theory can be watered down to the phrase, say something, do something (Cho, 2021). When someone uses language to achieve something, it is called performative language (Cho, 2021). In the context of this study, God's Word, the Bible, or the words of a preacher inspired by the Holy Spirit, has the power of language (Cho, 2021). When we feel God's presence in worship or preaching and we respond, this is performative language (Cho, 2021). With these being stated, the researchers conducting this

study found that the medium in which God's language event was presented, was not exclusive to whether people would choose to respond, therefore fulfilling the statements of speech act theory (Cho, 2021). Just as the intermediary of the language event could be a part of a physical gathering, the internet or some other new media platform can function as an intermediary (Cho, 2021). People have a greater opportunity to respond and participate online than they in do as the margin and capacity of an online experience is larger than one in person (Cho, 2021). This is known as a "double language event" (Cho, 2021). A "double language event" is when a person performs an illocutionary act by means of another person performing a illocutionary act (Cho, 2021). An example of this in this context would be for "person A" to respond by speaking or posting something and then "person B" to repeat A's message to an online community (Cho, 2021). Then B's sharing of A's message is received by "person C" in the community (Cho, 2021). These types of interactions are what eventually lead to connection and community, even in isolation (Cho, 2021). This is one of many studies that point to new media being an effective tool for churches to grow and reach people.

While studies like the one previously mentioned have pointed the modern church to the qualitative benefits of using new media, some still have concerns. One of these is the widespread of false doctrine in the modern media. It is considered one of the greatest dangers of using digital media outlets to share the gospel. With the widespread reach of most digital platforms, using it correctly and verifying the information being shared is so crucial to success. One wrong move and the entire organization can crumble. Therefore, normative media theory is also included in this study and should be taken into consideration in all media creation. The dynamics in which information is communicated and interpreted when presented in media formats can be highly influenced by outside variables so ensuring that only the truth is being communicated is so

important (Schlag, 2019). Another concern is how modern culture perverts the view of the church, especially in most modern media outlets. The church and Christianity are often portrayed as an entity of judgment, rules, and condemnation, and not a place of love, freedom, and joy, which is what it truly is. With each technological advancement, the church and other organizations are forced to combat these factors and others (Soukup & Glader, 2020). Additionally, many relate the implementation of these technologies to the acceptance and even celebration of secularism. As we have all seen, particularly in recent years, some churches and communities have become extremely lax and have begun to blur the lines between what is holy and sacred and what is worldly. Ruth Tsuria, a church scholar with very passionate opinions on this topic released an article in 2021 stating her concerns about new media in religious contexts. She states that the modern world has seemed to have lost its reverence for the church, scripture, and righteousness (Tsuria, 2021). She voices concerns regarding phenomena such as the "Jesus Phone", Kopimism, digital religion, and how some deem the computer a divine being (Tsuria, 2021). She attempts to evaluate both sides and explore some potential uses for new media in the church but eventually concludes that the usage of new media is currently at a point where it is too secularized to have any true value in the church environment (Tsuria, 2021).

In contrast to some of the widespread hesitations about using new media, there are several churches and respected leaders in the church realm that celebrate the use of technology. One of the most well-established and revered churches in the world, St. Andrew's Church, has begun adding new media to its worship experiences (MacLachlan, 2007). When the leaders of this church were questioned on why they felt so strongly about bringing these new technologies into their very traditional environment, the response was "I am sure if Jesus were here today, he would use YouTube as a means of spreading the Good News" (MacLachlan, 2007, para. 6).

Mark Forrester states that "If God used donkeys and dirt to communicate, I'm confident He can use social media" (2017).

Scholar Daniella Zsupan-Jerome published an article pleading with churches and Christians across America to engage in authentic, truthful, and hopeful communication through new media, with the goal of fostering relationships, edifying communities, and even inviting a sense of communion with one another (2017). She also reminds the church that they are called to be proactive when it comes to the digital world and fight against the powers of darkness as it attempts to take over the new media space (Zsupan-Jerome, 2017). To do this, churches must publish content that offers users joy, truth, and hope (Zsupan-Jerome, 20217). Many agree with Zsupan-Jerome's statements and say that new media is something that the church must begin using (Lee, 2017). Researchers have found that churches with an active social media presence experience more growth in membership, resources, influence, community outreach, and engagement, as well as seem to have greater longevity than those that do not use social media (Lee, 2017). This is due to the ease of real-time interactions (Ozuem et al., 2021). This creates a space where people can easily engage and build community with those around them (Ozuem et al., 2021).

Researchers have developed a three-fold standard for new media content creation that has found much success in the church environment (Lim, 2017). The first is to prioritize the gospel. With many new media communications should be designed to build people's faith and encourage them (Lim, 2017). The second fold would be content that focuses on scripture and teaching (Lim, 2017). The goal of this type of content is discipleship (Lim, 2017). Lastly, the final type of content and the least of amount of content that should be published is content that invites people to church or events (Lim, 2017). While this is still important to establish a connection, the first

two folds build relational equity with the consumers, which is what will push them to attend church or actual events (Lim, 2017). This strategy has been found to be extremely successful with young people. According to research, over 70 percent of eighteen to twenty-nine-year-olds cite social media as their primary source of content reception (Forrester, 2017). In 2017, a study in Spain found that young people who had the opportunity to develop a Christian community online showed greater interest in Christianity and those that were Christians showed a higher level of spiritual maturity (Díez et al., 2017). In 2019, an online prayer group of over 500 unique individuals was developed on the popular Chinese social media platform known as WeChat (Vala & Huang, 2019). This became a sanctuary for the underground church and helped Christians stay connected even through the COVID-19 pandemic (Vala & Huang, 2019).

Scripture says, "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011,1 Corinthians 1:10). New media helps foster this. This level of online fellowship can be classified as an online brand community (Ozuem et al., 2021). Online brand communities are large groups of people with shared interests that engage collectively on different online platforms (Ozuem et al., 2021). These groups play a significant role in how organizations develop and maintain customer loyalty (Ozuem et al., 2021). This all links to another call of scripture. Scripture says, "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will

answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Matthew 25:34-40). These online brand communities can create opportunities for the church and for people to help each other. In the Philippines, churches across the country banded together and used social media to determine communities and individuals that needed food, medical care, and other resources during the COVID-19 pandemic (Galang, 2021).

Outreach 100, in association with Lifeway Research, conducts a yearly survey and study into the fastest-growing churches in America (Outreach 100, 2020). A common denominator in all these churches listed as one of the fastest-growing churches in America is that they actively use new media in their environments. There have also been several other studies within recent years that have shown extreme numerical increase upon the integration of new media into a church environment. For example, in 2020, Reachright conducted a study into the effectiveness of church live streams and church online experiences. Life.Church's live stream had over seven million views in one year (Reachright, 2020). In the same study, another church documented a seventy percent increase in giving after only a few months of live streaming (Reachright, 2020). Transformation Church in Tulsa Oklahoma grew their church from roughly 300 people to averaging over 20,000 people a week in a 5-year span and Pastors Michael and Natalie Todd credit social media for their success. (Stanley et al., 2021).

The way these churches grow by using new media is by creating interaction opportunities for their consumers. This is the same strategy used by many businesses. While some might say

that using business techniques in the church environment is not necessary and combats traditional church values, churches that have introduced techniques such as different marketing campaigns into their workflows have experienced much success (Yip & Ainsworth, 2013). Intertwining worship and teaching with branding, aesthetics, products, and services has opened avenues for people who have never been exposed to the gospel to engage with the church (Yip & Ainsworth, 2013). These marketing efforts, combined with intentionality behind the production process, has granted churches the ability to use new media to expand God's kingdom (Yip & Ainsworth, 2013; Benyah, 2018). Churches across the world have begun a practice of changing their worship experience to cater to different demographics (Benyah, 2018). Just like any other field, business, politics, or medicine, the church has had to tackle the challenge of reaching a modern world and evolving as culture has (Soukup & Glader, 2020). Scripture says, "Let this be written for a future generation, that a people not yet created may praise the Lord" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Psalms 102:18). This scripture can be interpreted as a challenge to the modern church to explore new ways through venues such as new media have access to the gospel hearing and knowing the word of God.

What does the future of new media in the church environment look like? What seems to be the next step is the development of virtual reality churches and congregations. The VR Church and Pastor D.J. Soto are considered pioneers in this field by creating virtual environments like "Christmas World" that allow "attendees" to walk through Bethlehem and experience the events documented in the Gospel of Luke (Jun, 2020). More recently, Pastor Craig Groeschel of Life.Church has launched the very first church in the meta-verse (YouVersion, 2022). The first week, the service had 100 attendees with 2 documented first time salvations (YouVersion, 2022). After seeing the success of Life.Church's meta-verse location,

churches across America have begun to follow suit and explore the possibility of launching a location in the meta-verse (YouVersion, 2022). The long-term ramifications of this and what it means for the church as a whole are currently unknown but quite exciting. VR church opens up even more possibilities for people who would not typically set foot inside a church building to hear the gospel (Jun, 2020).

Theory and Theoretical Perspective

The theories this qualitative exploratory case study is built upon are new media theory and normative media theory. New media theory is important to this study as it focuses on the application of new media technology to communication practices as well as how new media changes the interpretation of communications. This is vital to this understanding the findings of this study. The second theory that is important in this study is normative media theory. Normative media theory focuses on what kind of content is being communication and the social responsibilities of the entity communicating. In this discussion, the overlap of these two theories is in if new media communication practices are executing at a level that fulfills the social and even spiritual responsibilities of the church that is attempting to communicate.

Fundamentals of New Media Theory

While new media is something that has existed alongside communication studies itself since the beginning, it wasn't until the 1990s that new media theory became a formal field (Holmes, D., & Holmes, 2009). As digital media evolved from the telecommunications and information technology sectors to the new forms we see today, they demanded exploration (Holmes, D., & Holmes, 2009). Event traditional media was impacted by these changes (Holmes, D., & Holmes, 2009). As these changes happened, scholars began to realize that all communication was being challenged, not just at a medium level, but even down the

foundational ecology (Holmes, D., & Holmes, 2009). Marshall McLuhan is considered the

forefather of media studies (Holmes, D., & Holmes, 2009). In his book, Understanding Media:

The Extensions of Man, McLuhan lays the foundation for what we now call new media theory

(2015). McLuhan says:

> The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless
>
> it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means
>
> that the "content" of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is
>
> speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the
>
> telegraph. If it is asked, "What is the content of speech?" it is necessary to say, "It is an
>
> actual process of thought, which is in itself nonverbal." An abstract painting represents
>
> direct manifestation of creative thought processes as they might appear in computer
>
> designs. What we are considering here, however, are the psychic and social consequences
>
> of the designs or patterns as they amplify or accelerate existing processes. For the
>
> "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it
>
> introduces into human affairs. The railway did not introduce movement or transportation
>
> or wheel or road into human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous
>
> human functions, creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure.
>
> This happened whether the railway functioned in a tropical or a northern environment,
>
> and is quite independent of the freight or content of the railway medium. The airplane, on
>
> the other hand, by accelerating the rate of transportation, tends to dissolve the railway
>
> form of city, politics, and association, quite independently of what the airplane is used
>
> for. Let us return to the electric light. Whether the light is being used for brain surgery or
>
> night baseball is a matter of indifference. It could be argued that these activities are in

some way the "content" of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light. This fact merely underlines the point that "the medium is the message" because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association. Indeed, it is only too typical that the "content" of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium. It is only today that industries have become aware of the various kinds of business in which they are engaged. When IBM discovered that it was not in the business of making office equipment or business machines, but that it was in the business of processing information, then it began to navigate with clear vision. The General Electric Company makes a considerable portion of its profits from electric light bulbs and lighting systems. It has not yet discovered that, quite as much as AT&T, it is in the business of moving information. The electric light escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no "content." And this makes it an invaluable instance of how people fail to study media at all. For it is not till the electric light is used to spell out some brand name that it is noticed as a medium. Then it is not the light but the "content" (or what is really another medium) that is noticed. The message of the electric light is like the message of electric power in industry, totally radical, pervasive, and decentralized. For electric light and power are separate from their uses, yet they eliminate time and space factors in human association exactly as do radio, telegraph, telephone, and TV, creating involvement in depth (p.11-12).

McLuhan's synthesis is what modern new media and digital communication studies is founded upon. His work spanned multiple topics and many scholars furthered their studies based on

McLuhan's statements (Holmes, D., & Holmes, 2009). One of these scholars, Bruce Owens, in his book, *The Internet Challenge to Television*, predicted that through digitalization, all media would eventually live on the internet (2014). This is something we're seeing come true in our lives today. Friedrich Kittler, another researcher influenced by McLuhan, argued that digital media will become so powerful that it would eliminate all other forms of communication (1999). To contrast this, a later scholar, Henry Jenkins stated that due to the media's interactive and participatory nature, all communication mediums and methods were evolving to fit that mold (2006). Brian Winston, another contemporary scholar, took these concepts a step further and began to explore the effects of digitalization and convergence on society and communication. He stated that that digitalization and technological convergence has been taking place for centuries, analyzing each, incremental evolution in society's technological advancement journey (Winston, 1998). This has been used as a rhetorical justification for further deregulation in the media and communications industries, downplaying the effects of capital concentration (Holmes, D., & Holmes, 2009). This perspective not only includes large developments such as the invention of the telegraph but also the smallest changes, such as moving from analog amplitude modulation to analog frequency modulation in radio in the 1960s (Winston, 1998). McLuhan called this "cybernation of instantaneousness," an auditory medium of information from everywhere to everyone (2005). Some believe that the telegraph marked the first step in the separation of communication from face-to-face interaction (Holmes, D., & Holmes, 2009). Some say that the invention of the telegraph could be marked as a "big bang" akin event for cyberspace (Holmes, D., & Holmes, 2009).

The development of Web 2.0 applications, such as blogs, YouTube, Wikipedia, and social networking sites, has created a space for users to create their own content and broadcast

their life experiences (Cormode & Krishnmurthy, 2008). Web 2.0 apart is different from its predecessors as it allows for the creation of media spheres that allow for meaningful interaction and makes global connections tangible (Cormode & Krishnmurthy, 2008). Unlike physical assemblies, these new media channels allow everyone, everywhere to be accessible, which means people can now communicate efficiently regardless of their location (Holmes, D., & Holmes, 2009). Roger Silverstone calls this phenomenon the Mediapolis, which he defines as a platform where multiple strands of communications are circulating and available for anyone to engage with (2007). The theory of Mediapolis is an expansion of traditional new media theory, focusing on how media has actually changed the humanity as a whole, not just communication (Silverstone, 2007). Web 2.0 has created such a plethora of opportunities for media exposure that it has completely oversaturated the communication landscape (Everett, 2003). The click has created a consumer-driven, on-demand media environment that gives the illusion of autonomy to the user (Everett, 2003).

New media theory is part of Craig's cybernetic tradition of communication (1999). These technologies are no longer considered experimental by society, but as cornerstones of progress and therefore must be studied as such (Röhle, 2005). While there are several facets of new media, the interactive element of most formats has positioned researchers to take a reflective pause and reexamine the field of communication theory (Cover, 2004). The new digital landscape has changed the author-creator function, causing conflict in the audience-user or recipient interaction as they attempt to interoperate levels of participation, co-creation, transformation, and distribution (Cover, 2004). New media lives in non-linear space, therefore changing even the most basic principles of communication theories applied to new media contexts as traditional theory presumes that communication takes place in linear space (Cover,

2004). One place that these changes in interpretation as well as reception and meaning-making in the traditional sender–message–receiver communication formats can be seen is in the widespread use of mobile communication on smart devices (Cover, 2004). This hybridizes face-to-face and digital communications (Blank, 2013). Through the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers notated that the advancement of digital communications allowed individuals to recreate and replace verbal and face-to-face communication for a short period of time, yielding the same results as traditional communication would (Blank, 2013).

Media Convergence

As previously stated, one of the key factors of new media studies and one of the most studied elements is media convergence. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (2023) defines convergence as the act of converging and especially moving toward union or uniformity. Media convergence specifically refers to the ability to provide various media channels through a single digital platform (McPhillips & Merlo, 2008). Media convergence is more than technological shifts, as it also deals with industrial, cultural, and social paradigms of different environments (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). Media convergence does many things in the communication landscapes but one of the primary shifts is creates is a change in the ecology of how organizations relate to their communication variables (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). Advancements in technology catalyzes much more than just technological convergence (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). As everything we touch in this modern world has technology attached to it in some form or fashion, media convergence is a part of our everyday lives (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). The focus of media convergence research is the way in which content performs in different media environments (Jenkins, 2006). This provides tangible data for organizations to study and learn how their target audiences are receiving and interpreting their new media communications

(Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). Therefore, when studying media convergence, it needs to be examined in terms of social and technological changes within society (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). The development of new technologies encourages consumers to seek out new information and establish personalized connections among with the subject (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). This results in media companies reevaluating existing assumptions on how the media they are presenting is interpreted by the consumer (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). This affects not only marketing but also production decisions (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). The modern world is filled with new media, especially as technology is becoming increasingly portable and increasingly powerful (Krumsvik, 2013; Urban & Bodoky, 2013). Technology gives consumers the ability to intake, participate with, and contribute to the media they are exposed too (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016).

The saturation of the media landscape has led to a decline in the efficiency of certain models; however, convergence paradigms suggest that new and old media would interact in more complex ways than previously predicted (Wirtz, Schilke, & Ullrich, 2010). Media convergence is not the displacement of traditional media in favor of new media but the interactions between the different platforms (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). Media convergence should be viewed as the cooperation and collaboration between previously unconnected media (Jenkins, 2006). Consumers are always looking for what is most trustworthy (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). As organizations have learned this, they have striven to create brands that people trust (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). For example, when a certain organization produces something successful such as a book, it's not uncommon to see this brand which has now developed trust with consumers to produce movies, video games, or cartoons (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). This expansion leads to convergence (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). As this process takes place, as we move from purely

conceptual pieces to hardware, this may result in technology divergence (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). The hardware in which media is presented must diversify due to meet the requirements of media convergence (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). Organizations with a media presence must not only react and adapt to the convergence trend but keep a pulse on the causes and effects of the media convergence process (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016).

Media convergence is made up of three primary factors: (a) digitalization, (b) deregulation of media and communication markets, and (c) shifts in user preferences (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). Digitalization has established new platforms for creating, presenting, storing, and distributing media products (Rayport & Jaworski, 2001). Deregulation measures introduced since the mid-1990s have created a healthy, competitive space for organizations wanting to share information (Dal Zotto & Dowling, 2003; Dal Zotto & van Kranenburg, 2008). This has forced an increase in the supply of media services and changed the landscape of media distribution (Aitamurto, Sirkkunen, & Lehtonen, 2011; Rayport & Jaworski, 2001). Especially in the last decade, consumers have found themselves using an increasing number of different services to meet their information and entertainment needs, with a clear preference for personal information and communication tools (Wirtz, 2011). Media convergence gives users the ability to create and control their media experience (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016).

The previously mentioned factors have led to various types and evolutionary paths of media convergence (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). The first type of convergence is technological convergence (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). Technological convergence takes place when different technological systems perform similar tasks due to digitalization (Yoffie, 1997). This convergence produces results in two different forms (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). The first is product convergence (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). This is where different functionalities are

combined into a new product (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). The second is market convergence, which is where previously distinct markets merge into one (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). An example of this would be communication service provisions and how the companies that offer this compete in a single market and often integrate the content production into their products to differentiate themselves from competitors (Wirtz, 2011). This can sometimes result in competitive or complementary convergence (Dowling, Lechner, & Thilmann, 1998; Greenstein & Kanna, 1997; Picard, 2000, 2009). This is when the products being offered become substitutes or complements (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). Product-level convergence can result in business-level convergence (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). This is when a company finds it more beneficial to integrate convergent areas of business, either within the company or through outside cooperation (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). When this happens, it can cause innovation and changes in scale in a business (Wirtz, 2011). When convergence occurs across an entire category of business, it can lead to mergers or cooperation between previously separated companies, yielding in strategic or industrial structure convergence (Chan-Olmsted & Kang, 2003; Thilmann & Dowling, 1999; Wirtz, 1999). These forms of convergence transform the media and telecommunication industries from vertical businesses, such as telephone, television, and computers, into horizontal organizations that feature content, packaging, transmission network, manipulation infrastructure, and even terminals (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). Well rooted organization often dominate in their fields, but thanks to technological advancements production costs have decreased, and the internet has opened new opportunities for content distribution on an individual level which allow content producers to bypass mainstream media (McPhillips & Merlo, 2008). In some cases, this strategic convergence may lead to industrial structure divergence (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). Consolidation among certain organizations have created a space where a few major players

dominated the mass market (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). This structural shift has made it challenging for medium-sized operators to compete with larger firms (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). This creates polarization in the industry structure (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). The concentration of media ownership is something that concerns scholars (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). Negative side effects of this could be a reduction in market variety or the marginalization of those without a voice in the economy (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). To contrast, some scholars believe that media monopolies can actually improve the quality and diversity of content, as well as drive technological innovations, challenge the elitism of media professionals, and foster greater public awareness (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016).

Scholars have determined the three primary stages of media evolution (Ströber, 2004). They are invention, innovation, and institutionalization (Ströber, 2004). In media convergence, the invention stage was the shift from analogue to digital (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). The innovation stage was the distribution and consumption of various media types (radio, TV, and internet) through a single platform (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). The global media industry is now moving towards the institutionalization stage of convergence, which involves adapting to the environment to create a new "system entity" (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). This final stage of media evolution typically finds itself masquerading as a revolution in which divergence emerges (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). There are four factors of change that must occur to shape this new system entity (McPhillips & Merlo, 2008). The four factors are technological, cultural, political, and economic (Ströber, 2004). At this junction of history, the first three factors are already in motion, with technological advancements leading to cost reductions and significant increases in functionality (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). We see this in improvements in broadband speed, mobile device quality, and data storage costs (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). The high adoption rate

of these services confirms the value of technological advancements to the public (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). Additionally, media consumption has increased monumentally and seems to continue to do so (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). The current culture patterns point towards a shift away from single-source consumption patterns while moving toward device divergence (McPhillips & Merlo, 2008). Governments have begun to encourage or even enforce digital broadcast adoption to enhance media technology convergence (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). The economy and how it reacts to these changes is another important part of the equation and is still being studied to this day (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). How business models adapt and change as the world and the media field change, will determine the future of the media industry (McPhillips & Merlo, 2008). In its current state, the world is experiencing an oversupply and commoditization of media content, along with the decline of advertising effectiveness and the overexposure of audiences to an infinite number of advertising touchpoints due to media convergence (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). This results in the decline of the current media business model (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). Increasing touchpoints may increase revenues in the short term, but it eventually leads to downward pressure on margins (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). A consumer's attention span and mental capacity are quite limited (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016). Due to this, information media organizations have been forced to take budget cuts, which has resulted in lower-quality content (Lugmayr & Zotto, 2016).

Current State of New Media in Modern America

Due to its level of global usage and consumption, technology has been found to have an extreme impact on human communication practices. The development of the internet and all of its communication avenues has forced scholars to reevaluate all traditional communication practices (Röhle, 2005). We see this in interpersonal communication, business, medicine, and

even politics (Röhle, 2005). New media helps grow customer engagement which yields sales growth, competitive advantage, and profitability in all spaces (Yuan et al., 2017). Companies such as Netflix and Lay's Chips have successfully learned how to leverage new media to enhance customer engagement by creating opportunities for interaction with their customers (Yuan et al., 2017). In politics, new media is being used to help educate people on current issues and campaigns (Yuan et al., 2017). In medicine, nurses and doctors have used new media to develop easily accessible platforms for patients to learn about their health, receive prescriptions and test results, and connect with other patients (Ramos, 2017). New media has truly taken over the modern world.

The prevalence of technology in our daily lives, particularly through social media, virtual reality, texting, email, video calling, video games, and online marketing, has transformed communication on a mass and professional level. Out of these formats, in this current day and age, the most studied communication type is social media. The invention of social media platforms has completely altered communication (Ramos, 2017). Social media can be broadly defined as online communities for people to communicate (Ramos, 2017). In recent years, social media has become unparalleled in connecting people and spreading information in a quick and easy way (Jayashree, 2018). The first instances of what is modern social media were America Online, CompuServe, and Prodigy (Maryville.edu, 2021). These three platforms were developed to create real-time communication with people that were not in the same room (Maryville.edu, 2021). After this, a social networking site called Six Degrees came into existence but did not survive (Maryville.edu, 2021). In 2001, Friendster came on the scene which was a site that allowed people to share their email addresses and make friends (Maryville.edu, 2021). Shortly after the launch of Friendster, blogging became very popular through the platform known as

Livejournal (Maryville.edu, 2021). A more successful site known as Blogger became available shortly after LiveJournal and was later acquired by Google (Maryville.edu, 2021). In 2002 LinkedIn was launched to the public (Maryville.edu, 2021). At the time, LinkedIn was the most advanced social media platform (Maryville.edu, 2021). This allowed professionals from around the globe to connect and communicate with the click of a button (Maryville.edu, 2021). Over the years, LinkedIn has experienced immense success, registering over 675 million active users in 2020 (Maryville.edu, 2021). The next evolution of social media was a platform called MySpace (Maryville.edu, 2021). MySpace went public in 2003 and by 2006, MySpace was the most visited website in the world (Maryville.edu, 2021). Seeing the success of MySpace, a young entrepreneur named Mark Zuckerburg launched a site called Facebook in 2004 (Maryville.edu, 2021). By 2008, Facebook had surpassed all its predecessors and had become the leading social media site (Maryville.edu, 2021). Reddit launched in 2005 and marked the next milestone in the evolution of social media (Maryville.edu, 2021). In 2021, Reddit showcased more than 300 million active users (Maryville.edu, 2021). In 2006, Twitter came into existence and very quickly became the preferred platform of most adults (Maryville.edu, 2021). Still today, over 20% of adults in America are active users of Twitter (since this research, Twitter has been rebranded to X) (Maryville.edu, 2021). In 2010, Instagram and Pinterest both started as ways to share high-quality photos and videos with friends but have since taken their own unique paths (Maryville.edu, 2021). Instagram is currently the leading social media site as it boasts over one billion active users and Pinterest continues to have a healthy presence with over 300 million users (Maryville.edu, 2021). In 2011, Snapchat came on the scene and quickly became a popular platform for instant messaging (Maryville.edu, 2021). This platform was the first to introduce "stories" and "filters," as well as the ability to send high-quality photos and videos directly to

their connections instantly (Maryville.edu, 2021). Over the last decade, other attempts to develop social media platforms have been made but most have not experienced much success. The one that stands out is TikTok. TikTok is a site that allows its users to create short-form videos with music and effects and share them. After merging with Musical.ly in 2018, TikTok took off and now boasts over 800 million active users with increasing popularity (Maryville.edu, 2021).

Of all the countries that have access to social media, The United States boasts the greatest usage rate of any other country in the world (Maryville.edu, 2021). According to a team at the Pew Research Center, as of 2020, almost 75% of American adults are active on social media (Maryville.edu, 2021). 70% of individual social media users say they check or post something multiple times a day (Lee et al., 2020). In 2018, social media generated over 100 billion dollars of revenue (Maryville.edu, 2021). This is a 22% increase from 2017 (Maryville.edu, 2021). Researchers anticipate that the next wave of social media with premium, subscription-based access to exclusive content and curated virtual experiences (Maryville.edu, 2021). Several platforms have already begun experimenting with this and social media experts are expecting more to come of this in the near future (Maryville.edu, 2021).

While social media has proven to be quite effective, it has also been shown to yield negative impacts on the human psyche. With something as powerful as social media, there are bound to be some side effects. Researchers in the field of cognitive sciences and neurology have found that high levels of exposure to social media can change an individual's fundamental communication practices (Fingerhut, 2021). This occurs through enculturation (Fingerhut, 2021). Enculturation is when someone's cognitive practices change after being exposed to other's behaviors in sociocultural niches (Fingerhut, 2021). In the context of new media theory, this means is that an individual's cognitive state can be reshaped by the amount of digital

communication they participate in. This has both positive and negative connotations. Research

has found that in certain situations, pubescent individuals with high levels of exposure to new

media and digital communications experience stunted cognitive abilities, low self-esteem,

depression, and decreased social skills (Dubicka, 2019).

While most contemporary new media research focuses on social media, there are other

venues of new media as well. The primary ones we experience are cinema, television, and

gaming. Examining this exclusively from a hardware standpoint, the television is more closely

related to the computer than to cinema (Murphy, 2011). They often come in similar shapes and

sizes as well as technological features (Murphy, 2011). Often televisions are built with the ability

to connect to computers in mind (Murphy, 2011). To contrast, cinematic media is often projected

and highly singular in consumption while television media is scanned images and meant to be

ingested at the same time as other media (Murphy, 2011). This positioning of the television into

a category akin to the computer changes the cultural significance of television (Murphy, 2011).

This not only changes the value of television but also its functionality within the digital media

landscape (Murphy, 2011). This results in television having much proximity to the film and

gaming industry (Murphy, 2011). While all the ramifications of this proximity of this are still

unknown, researchers have found that there are certain benefits to this (Murphy, 2011). Scholars

in this visual media field have found that elements of each category are crucial to understanding

its counterparts and have used these findings to advocate and open new lanes of research in this

field (Murphy, 2011). While the world is ever-changing and technologically is continuing to

develop and it may seem that we are moving away from certain technologies, the current

discourses on convergence, change, emergence, novelty, and innovation surrounding digital

media technologies should be carefully considered (Murphy, 2011). Television, film, and gaming

are all major players in the current media landscape so understanding how they have connected

and developed each other in the past is incredibly important to contemporary research (Murphy,

2011). As technology moves forward, television will remain an anchor in the new media studies

field as a framework for understanding even the most basic of interactions (Murphy, 2011). Even

in the modern world, TV continues to influence our digital media experiences, as seen in the

recent trend of "smart TVs" and the ability to watch television on mobile devices (Murphy,

2011). People now even watch other people play games on television through streaming services

such as Twitch (Bingham, 2017). In the past, gaming has been stereotyped as a form of

relaxation and leisure, but it is now its own industry and is actively being used as a

communication tool, a revenue generator, and even an educational tool (Bingham, 2017).

Television is connected to everything in new media communications (Murphy, 2011).

 A new reality of communication is one that takes place in a virtual reality headset. While

the realm of virtual and augmented reality is something that is still being researched and

developed, scholars have found a host of benefits through this medium. A study found virtual

reality was very useful in treating individuals with the autism and other cognitive disorders.

Using virtual reality, doctors have been able to help these individuals develop stronger

communication skills and learn how to process information and stimulation in a controlled

environment (Lahiri, 2015). Many scholars believe that VR is the closest thing we currently have

available to face-to-face communication as the COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to separate

and explore digital spaces more diligently (Dzardanova, 2021).

 What VR offers that other new media platform do not is the ability to read non-verbal

cues (Dzardanova, 2021). Non-verbal cues can add several variables to any communication and

completely change meaning and context (Dzardanova, 2021). When using new media platforms

to communicate there are some compromises that are made. Non-verbal communication plays a major part in communication. Non-verbal cues not only supersede, clarify, complement, or enhance the meaning of verbal communication, but also provide indications of social status and types of interpersonal relationship (Dzardanova, 2021). While VR does not quite have the same impact as face-to-face interactions, there is potential to get to this point.

Fundamental Principles of Normative Media Theory

Normative media theory is also a newer communication theory that focuses on how concerned new media is integrated into political spheres and the challenges it presents for ethical communication. It emphasizes the importance of respect, responsibility, and care in all aspects of media use, including speaking, listening, reading, viewing, and producing (Fourie, 2017). The lens in which this theory attaches itself to studies is that of respecting media users and consumers, which creates a more inclusive environment that accommodates the diversity, omnipresence, invasiveness, comprehensiveness, and mediatization processes of the digital media landscape (Fourie, 2017). The framework of normative media theory is the following six questions:

1. What is being communicated and how is being circulated as a matter of public concern?

2. How are different societal perspectives being presented?

3. What is the public interested in and is there a specific reason why?

4. How is this level of interest being measured?

5. What are the social responsibilities of the entity sharing this content?

6. What needs to change for digital media to be recognized as the carrier of public values? (Fourie, 2017).

Normative theories often find themselves linked to studies of that journalism, the press, and other forms of mass communications (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). These theories have deep historical, philosophical, and political roots going back decades, providing deep thinking and example of contemporary media processes and problems for the researchers to contemplate during their study (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). Normative theories are often used to describe how things should be, not necessarily how they currently are (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). Normative theories can also provide insight into how to shape, organize, and manage things such as public interest, societal needs, and corporate systems (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). Most contemporary normative theories are influenced by historical and political contexts, understanding the context that media in any format or era is very important to institutions as it serves as the vessel in which consumers use to develop their opinion and voice it to others (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). These theories also have a clear understanding and respect for organizations (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009).

Contemporary normative theories of the press are heavily influenced by current political and cultural environments (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). In its current state, normative media theory could be considered a byproduct of the philosophy of libertarianism, which emerged as a reaction to the historically dominant practice of authoritarianism (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). In authoritarian regimes, communication is controlled by a governing elite or body of authorities to maintain social order (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). This often involves arbitrary and erratic governmental control policies over media organizations and platforms (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). To contrast, libertarianism is the ideology that information should be free, available, and true to all (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). John Milton's 1644 tract, Areopagitica, is one of the earliest known, published documents arguing for the need and effectiveness of this approach to

communication ((Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). Milton stated that According to the libertarian view, media should be free and independent, without any government filtering (1644). Milton coined the "self-righting principle" stating that truth would always prevail over lies (1644).

We see this concept in a lot of historical documentation, especially in the writings of the founding fathers of the United States (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). Libertarianism is a major influence on the Constitution's First Amendment, which clearly states the freedom of speech and of the press by placing prohibitions on Congress from passing laws that would violate these rights (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). One concept we still see today from the early days of this ideology is the press as the fourth estate (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). The specific nature of the first three estates varies, but the fourth estate, the press, is seen as an influential branch of the government or societal institutions whose role is to serve as a guardian and overseer of democracy, holding those in power accountable and providing citizens with the information they need to participate fully in the democratic process (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). This theory emphasizes the proactive role of the press in shaping democracy and empowering citizens (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). Another libertarianism-based theory that emerged in the early 20th century that is still relevant today is the free marketplace of ideas, which states that ideas and intellectual creativity should compete freely, unregulated by any government authority, with the best ideas rising to the top in a survival of the fittest type of ecosystem (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). While some truly appreciate this theory, others criticize this theory for overemphasizing the role of commercial media companies and ignoring their obligation to advertisers, shareholders, and corporate owners (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). This has led some media corporations to use this concept as an excuse to compete in the business market rather than promoting the dissemination of ideas without restrictions (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009).

In response to society's concerns regarding government regulation, the American Society of Newspaper Editors published The Canons of Journalism in 1923, which represented the first of many efforts by the industry to create a global code of media ethics (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). While most ethical values vary by country, a common thread among most is a commitment to truthfulness, clarity, responsibility in shaping public opinion, ethical newsgathering, and respect for source integrity (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). In the United States, the journalistic codes focus on the importance of objectivity in reporting, developing a clear separation between news and opinion, and a "wall" between editorial and business operations in newspapers (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). While this is wonderful in theory, this has not always been executed in the way one would hope and scholars have had concerns and critiques for many years (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). This highlights some media creators' inability to maintain a fourth-estate role and investigate properly (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). Despite these criticisms, these frameworks are still typically upheld and serve as the industry's own normative theories governing the practices and conduct of the press (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009).

One of the most influential normative theories we have today is the social responsibility theory (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). This theory was developed by the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press, an independent commission formed in 1942 (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). This commission comprised of academic, political, and social group leaders, and media-industry titans, decided to come together to establish a response to the growing belief that the press was incapable of regulating itself (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). In 1947, the commission published "A Free and Responsible Press," a work that introduced a new normative theory that struck a balance between extreme libertarianism and government paternalism by acknowledging press freedom from government control, while simultaneously stating that journalists have obligations

to society, employers, and the market (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). The standards stated are maintaining high professional standards of truth and balance, avoiding the publication of material that could lead to crime, and refraining from causing offense to minority groups (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). In addition to this, the theory suggests that the media should represent the diversity of society and provide access to various points of view (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). Finally, social responsibility theory makes it very clear that individuals and organizations should regulate themselves so that the government does not have to, but should be prepared to if needed (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009).

Communication scholars have since developed a variety of normative theories since the publication of the Hutchins Commission's findings, including identifying different normative models and how they operate in different parts of the world (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). An example of this is the Four Theories of the Press, published in 1956, which identified libertarian, authoritarian, social responsibility, and Soviet Communist models of communication (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, communication theorists have relabeled the Soviet Communist model as a totalitarian model, identifying it with nations like North Korea, Myanmar, and Iraq under Saddam Hussein (Weiss, D., & Weiss, 2009).

In this new media landscape created by digitization, convergence, and user participation, a single normative theory or set of ideas does not build a strong enough ethical foundation for media communication (Fourie, 2017). The key to developing this should be the acknowledgment of diversity and recognition of universal human virtue in mediated communication and media communication (Fourie, 2017). In the past, attempts to create this new theoretical foundation came from a place of postcolonial theory and criticism (Fourie, 2017). The emphasis on de-westernization was developed by comparative normative theories that consciously avoid

ethnocentric bias, focusing on elements that appear to be both universal and immanent in most

societies, considering all relevant human histories, experiences, philosophies, cultural traditions,

and values in theory formulation, acknowledging that paradigms are expressions of social

ideologies and power, and recognizing Eurocentric power and ideology associated with them

(Fourie, 2017).

In recent years, scholars have taken an interest in developing normative theory through

the lens of moral philosophy (Fourie, 2017). One of these approaches is known as *ubuntism*

(Fourie, 2017). Ubuntuism is the moral inclination toward perceiving oneself, others, life, and

the world in a communal manner (Fourie, 2017). While some favor this approach, some scholars

state that instead of turning exclusively to these moral philosophies like ubuntuism, a normative

framework should embrace contemporary values like diversity and difference (Fourie, 2017).

This is the challenge of normative theory: finding a balance between ethical communication and

contemporary values that can be agreed upon (Fourie, 2017).

One critique of traditional normative theory is the lack of acknowledgment of the

pluralization of society and democracy (Fourie, 2017). This is considered one of the foundational

pieces of developing a new normative media theory (Fourie, 2017). Instead, normative theory

should embrace diversity and act as a filter for communication and how it affects the common

good (Fourie, 2017). A new theory would have to develop a way to engage in ethical discourse

through the various media contents in this current digital world, regardless of genre or form

(Fourie, 2017). This mindset is something that all scholars must bring to their research in modern

society (Fourie, 2017). This version of society is so focused on things such as political and

cultural minorities, and minority rights, that it has blurred the lines between public and private

communication as well the level at which communities are acknowledged and how they are,

based on their value set (Fourie, 2017). This creates debates between people and their communities (Fourie, 2017). To help lessen the level of hostility these debates escalate to, the media has responded by creating platforms catered to certain cultures and value sets (Fourie, 2017). This reflects the profound macro-political, economic, and social changes such as the shift from national to global, alongside a re-emergence of the local and localization, that our world is currently engaged in (Fourie, 2017). Technology is no longer something that we use in our culture, but it has developed its own culture and people are just a part of it (Fourie, 2017). Social responsibility is no longer something that organizations and other mass media producers must take into account, but it's something that all media participants do (Fourie, 2017). As technology has evolved and the world has shifted with it to capitalize on it, there has been an increase in user participation, which fosters a greater space for dialogue and growth, but also for disagreement and hostility (Fourie, 2017). This is why normative theories are important (Fourie, 2017). They can function as safeguards for organizations and individuals as they attempt to produce media and engage with their consumers (Fourie, 2017).

Summary

Chapter two was a thorough literature review of pre-existing research and studies. First discussed was the overarching concept of church communications accompanied by a history of church communication. The current state of church communications was then presented, followed by an introduction into media convergence. The two primary theories, new media theory and normative media theory that this case study rely on are also reviewed. The next chapter will cover the study proposed and its intricacies.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Overview

      The proposed study is a qualitative exploratory case study of churches in the Bible Belt region of the United States and how they use new media in their communication practices. This study will focus on ten influential evangelical churches in the Bible Belt that are actively using new media in multiple ways, to ensure all data collected is relevant and valid. The primary way this study will be conducted through a series of qualitative interviews with those leading the communication efforts of these different churches. The churches and how they use new media communications will be evaluated through the lens of new media theory as well as normative theory. These fall into the cybernetic and sociocultural traditions of communication study respectively.

Research Method and Design

    This study falls into the cybernetic tradition, using the lens of new media theory paired with normative media theory. This is a case study on how churches in the Bible Belt region of the United States of America have employed and introduced new media communications into their environment. The criteria for the churches in the sample is to have a website, at least one accessible and active social media account, and some form of broadcast of their services. The new media communications of the selected churches will then be examined in comparison to the six foundational questions of normative media theory, with the questions being reframed for the church context. The answers to these questions will be used to determine whether the new media communication efforts of the church are to be considered effective or not. These questions will help filter the content these churches are producing and provide insight into how churches can make their new media communication practices better.

Normative media theory is typically associated with these six questions:

1. What is being communicated and how is being circulated as a matter of public concern?

2. How are different societal perspectives being presented?

3. What is the public is interested in and is there a specific reason why?

4. How is this level of interest being measured?

5. What are the social responsibilities of the entity sharing this content?

6. What needs to change for digital media to be recognized as the carrier of public values? (Fourie, 2017).

For this study, these six questions will be reframed for the church context. The questions that the content will be analyzed through will be:

1. What kind of content is the church sharing and how is it being shared?

2. Is the church executing their communications with social and cultural awareness or does the content this church provide seem to originate from a singular perspective?

3. Does there seem to be certain topics, connection points, or items that the target audiences of this church seem to resonate more with than others?

4. What steps are the church taking to measure the effectiveness of their communication efforts?

5. Does this church carry certain social responsibilities that could affect their communication practices?

6. Is this church establishing themselves as a carrier of public values and a communicative force in their span of reach?

The new media communication efforts of churches in the sample will be evaluated through the lens of these questions. Depending on the answers to these questions in the context of these churches and their content, will their efforts be considered effective or not. The first question of normative theory, in a church digital communication context, is what kind of content is the church sharing, and is it reaching and resonating with the members of its congregation? The

answer to this will be determined by identifying digital communication channels and what is being shared there. Studying the analytics, the goal is to determine what kind of content is resonating with the audience. This information is important to understand because knowing what kind of brand is being linked to the church and how people are perceiving it can play a major role in the content strategy. Humans tend to associate human personality traits with brands so that their self-expression and social needs are met (Hu et al., 2018). A church brand that takes on personality traits, will eliminate the stereotype of being a stale, boring, legalistic, and judgmental organization that people have no interest in engaging with it. Personality traits such as kindness, joy, and love will generate high levels of engagement.

The second question of normative theory in a church digital communications context is whether the church is celebrating diversity through its digital media content. Just as every other organization in America must be intentional and recognize diversity, so must the church. While many churches across America do an excellent job of celebrating diversity and including it in the church and on their communication platforms, there are still several stigmas within the church. Diversity is important as it opens communications to new audiences. Representation and inclusivity of diversity in a church is one of the greatest ways to grow a church and experience success when using new media.

The third question normative theory asks when applied to a church communication setting is what content are church members connecting with and is there a specific reason why? This is another reason understanding brand personality is important. As people connect with certain types of content, certain tones, and certain personality values, this will create longevity and equity with the organization (Hu et al., 2018). The next step in this plan is to answer the fourth question. How is this level of connection or interest being measured? The way this can be

done is through the development of key performance indicators (KPIs). These indications should be things that are created in alignment with the vision of the organization, communicated within the organization and to their audiences, and it should be the driving factor in all decisions (Bishop, 2018).

Five key characteristics must be taken into consideration when developing KPIs. The first is to ensure the KPIs are based in the business needs (Bishop, 2018). When developing KPIs ask these questions:

1. What problems need to be solved?

2. What information would make a significant difference in the decision-making process?

3. What questions need to be answered for the betterment of the organization? (Bishop, 2018).

The second characteristic of a good KPI is that it should provide new information to the organization (Bishop, 2018). The third characteristic of a good KPI is that is grounded in previous research (Bishop, 2018). Organizational KPIs need to be based on set values, not just experimental wants or desires or trends (Bishop, 2018). The fourth characteristic of an effective KPI is that it is actionable (Bishop, 2018). If KPIs are not providing data that is actional then there is no reason to have them (Bishop, 2018). Lastly, the fifth characteristic of a good KPI is that they are predictive (Bishop, 2018). KPIs should be used to gather a better idea of what the future of the organization will look like – whether that is studying trends in society, how culture is shifting, or how the demographic of the audience is changing (Bishop, 2018). An example of KPIs in a church environment would include general attendance (both online and in person),

which campaigns generate the most revenue (whether that is monetary or otherwise), and which ministries receive recognition from congregation members on digital platforms.

The fifth question that must be answered as a part of normative theory is what are the social responsibilities of the church? The social responsibility of the church in the digital communication realm is to produce and distribute a diverse collection of content which has as an objective the individual, social, cultural, and educational enlightenment of media users, the preservation and protection of agreed-upon social and cultural norms, theologically sound doctrine, and good Christian values while allowing for healthy fellowship, discipleship, and conversation and dismissal of the un-Christlike behavior and false teaching (Fourie, 2017). Is the content the church is publishing in new media outlets fulfilling this responsibility? The way to determine this is to examine the content through the lens of scripture, prayer, and discernment as we have already discussed in this paper.

The sixth and final question of normative theory in the setting of digital communications produced by a church or other Christian society is how does the church need to adjust to ensure that there are being taken seriously as a media-sharing entity? The answer to this question can be found in the answers to the previous five. The answers to the previous questions will determine the validity and seriousness of the church in question functioning as a respectable media-sharing entity.

Every church body is different, and their goals are unique; however, most churches will share the same answers to these questions. Every church to a certain degree is sharing inspirational, biblical content through digital media platforms. Most churches feature diversity and celebrate that. Most churches have communication channels to measure and learn how their content is being received whether that is through face-to-face communication or digital analytics.

A lot of churches do an excellent job fulfilling their responsibility to produce and distribute a diverse collection of content which has as an objective to the individual, social, cultural, and educational enlightenment of media users, the preservation and protection of agreed-upon social and cultural norms, theologically sound doctrine, and good Christian values while allowing for healthy fellowship, discipleship, and conversation and dismissal of the un-Christlike behavior and false teaching (Fourie, 2017).

Research Questions

As a reminder, this study has three primary research questions.

RQ 1. How are evangelical churches in the Bible Belt using new media?

RQ 2. Why do some churches seem to experience more success than others when using new media?

RQ 3. Are churches seeing a difference or an impact in their congregations and communities from their communication efforts using new media?

Setting

The setting for this study is the evangelical Christian church in Bible Belt region of the United States. None of the churches in the study have denominational affiliations and are all well established in their communities for over ten years. All of these churches studied feature multiple outlets of communication ranging from music streaming, film and television, social media, web pages, email, and more.

The Bible Belt is the region of the United States that encompasses the majority of the Southern United States as well as a large portion of the Midwest. Traditionally the states considered a part of the Bible Belt are Georgia, North and South Carolina, Florida, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, and

Missouri, with part of Kansas, Illinois, Ohio, New Mexico, and Iowa falling into this

classification.

Figure 1

The United States Bible Belt
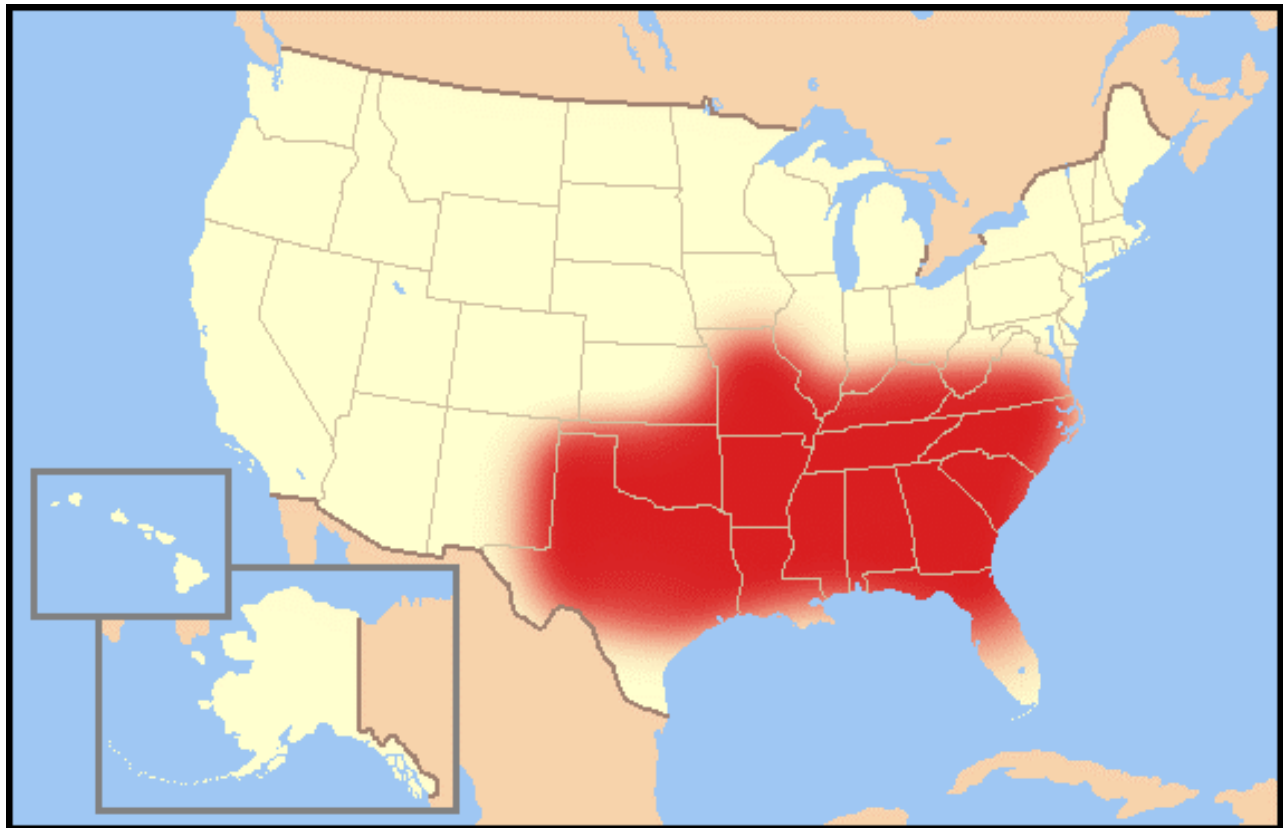
Participants

      All participants invited to participate in this study are currently employed by large

evangelical churches with substantial influence in the space of new media communications.

These organizations and the participants in the study are all pushing the boundaries and the limits

of technology and new media communications in the church sphere and are considered to be at

the forefront of their trade.

Table 1

Participant Number	Church Location	Church Size
Participant 1	Charlotte, North Carolina	14,000 Members
Participant 2	Palm Gardens, Florida	32,500 Members
Participant 3	Lawrenceville, Georgia	17,000 Members
Participant 4	Alachua, Florida	5,000 Members
Participant 5	Tulsa, Oklahoma	5,000 Members
Participant 6	Jacksonville, Florida	14,473 Members
Participant 7	Tifton, Georgia	5,000 Members
Participant 8	Gainesville, Georgia	13,568 Members
Participant 9	Norcross, Georgia	16,000 Members
Participant 10	Alpharetta, Georgia	23,000 Members

these membership numbers reflect primarily in-person attendance

Procedures

This study was conducted entirely virtually. Individuals from churches that were identified as large, influential, and fast growing were sought out and invited to participate in the study via email. A formal letter recruiting them for the study was emailed to each of the participants with a consent form if they chose to participate. 30 recruitment emails were sent out and 10 agreed to participate. 60-minute zoom interviews were then conducted and recorded, transcribed and analyzed by the researchers for the purpose of writing this manuscript.

Researcher's Role

I, Robert Peerson, the primary researcher, work for a large influential evangelical church in the Bible Belt, helping further the great commission through new media communications. I am

incredibly thankful for the organization I am a part of and our desire to innovate and use new media to reach people; however, I have witnessed first hand, this is not the case in all churches across America. Many churches across America struggle to use new media and some have even forsaken it entirely. This means droves of people across the United States who would never set foot in a church but use new media communications every day are not being reached for the gospel. I have chosen to pursue this research and conduct this study in hopes to use the findings and this manuscript as a tool to help churches who have yet to fully embrace and learn how to use new media communications in their organization. The gospel must be shared and new media may be the most powerful tool the human race has ever had access to, to do so. We must not squander our opportunity to tell people about Jesus.

To avoid any bias, I have refrained from interviewing anyone in the organization I am employed by as well as cast aside any viewpoints I hold personally or the organization I work for holds. This findings presented in this manuscript are entirely based on educated observation, previous research and literature, and the qualitative interviews conducted as a part of this study.

Data Collection

The information for this study will be collected through a series of qualitative interviews, conducted by myself. The interviewees will be the communications leaders of these churches. This may be a communications director, a creative director, a pastor of media; whatever individual the church has appointed to oversee outgoing communication. In the interviews, the six questions previously mentioned will be asked along with a collection of questions regarding mediums, strategy, motivations, successes and failures, as well as individualist perspectives and opinions.

Data Analysis

        The hoped for outcome of this study is to create a resource to equip churches across America to become better at utilizing new media. Based on preliminary research and previously conducted studies, there is evidence that shows that new media does have a role in the modern church and can be successfully leveraged to grow the church and bring people to Christ. These interviews will hopefully showcase how new media can be successful used in the modern evangelical church.

Trustworthiness

Credibility

        This study and data presented are credible as they originate from multiple, varying perspectives. Each of the participants met a selection of criteria to ensure that the data collected this study would further this research correctly and effectively.

        1. 18 years or older.

        2. Actively serving as a significant stakeholder (director, coordinator, or manager) in the new media communications department of an influential evangelic church in the Bible Belt region of United States of America.

        3. Voluntarily agreed to participate in the study with the long-range desire to help further the Gospel through this study.

Dependability and Confirmability

        This data has not been altered in any shape or form from the initial collection made in the qualitative interviews. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, saved to an SSD drive, and reviewed frequently to ensure that all data presented maintains its initial quality as collected.

This data is confirmed through a series of checks and rechecks. It is coded in a file structured labeled by participant and research question. This study would be easily repeatable by a future researcher if they choose to do so.

Transferability

The primary usage of normative media theory is in the political sphere and this study has successfully transferred its principles to an entirely new setting. This manuscript presents multiple correlations between the settings and how this study can be transferred and used across multiple spaces. This study features several clear assumptions and substantial contextual interfaces between the settings and the participants.

Ethical Considerations

This study was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Liberty University. The procedures this study is built upon have each been thoroughly reviewed to ensure that all who participated and are involved with this study are protected. All individuals that participated in the study names are omitted from the manuscript and replaced with numerical labels. The names of influential, evangelical, churches they are associated with have also been omitted, only being identified by size and location. This study featured no incentives or deception as well as thorough consent procedures were followed and executed when interacting with the participants. After three years, the data collected in this study will be destroyed. The only risks associated with the execution of this study are informational risks.

Summary

As we have presented here, one of the leading facets of the technological revolution is new media communications. From television to virtual reality, new media has found a way to touch every aspect of the modern American life. As world fights to come back from a pandemic,

humanity is relying on new media communications more than ever. The hope is that this study can provide insight on how this happening across America, in business, medicine, the corporate arena, and particularly in the modern church.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Overview

The interviews conducted as described above yielded incredibly interesting results. So many churches across America achieve similar results which such different methodologies as well as perspectives. At the start of this study, the anticipated findings were not as polarizing as what has come to light following these interviews. While many answers were expected, some of the more in-depth information behind certain perspectives and initiatives was truly fascinating. In this chapter, the findings of these interviews will be disclosed along with an analysis of these findings through the lens of normative media theory as well as new media theory.

Participants

After identifying multiple individuals with different influential organizations across the United States, invitations to participate were extended and several people agreed. All representatives are in the Bible Belt region of the United States and their organizations all met the requirements previously stated in the study. To protect privacy, names of participants and the organizations they find themselves a part of will remain confidential. Out of the thirty invitations to participate that were extended, ten individuals agreed to a qualitative interview.

Table 1

Participant Number	Church Location	Church Size
Participant 1	Charlotte, North Carolina	14,000 Members
Participant 2	Palm Gardens, Florida	32,500 Members

Participant 3	Lawrenceville, Georgia	17,000 Members
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Participant 5	Tulsa, Oklahoma	5,000 Members
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Participant 8	Gainesville, Georgia	13,568 Members
Participant 9	Norcross, Georgia	16,000 Members
Participant 10	Alpharetta, Georgia	23,000 Members

These membership numbers reflect primarily in-person attendance

Interview Questions

As presented in chapter 3, the methodology of this exploratory case study was qualitative interviews. These 60-minute interviews were guided by 10 questions that have yielded multiple helpful answers and data to further this research. These questions were designed in such a way to not only achieve a greater understanding of the practical applications of new media theory in these environments but also to learn more about the norms that these churches are employing in their attempt to further the gospel through digital communications. The interview questions are as follows:

1. How long has your organization been using new media as a regular part of their communication efforts?

2. What kind of content is this church sharing and how is it being shared?

3. When executing communication efforts, do you feel as the organization communicates with social and cultural awareness or does the content this church provide seem to originate from a singular perspective?

4. Does there seem to be certain topics, connection points, or items that the target audiences of your church seem to resonate more with than others?

5. What steps is your church taking to measure the effectiveness of their communication efforts?

6. Does your church carry certain social responsibilities that could affect their communication practices?

7. Do you feel as if your church has established themselves as a carrier of public values and a communicative force in their span of reach?

8. How do you foresee your church changing communication practices as technology changes over the next 5 years?

9. Do you think new media communications hinder or grows the church? Why or why not?

10. What would you say to a church that may be struggling or hesitating to incorporate new media into their communication efforts?

The answers to these questions shed light on some very interesting elements of what the impact new media communications have in these organizations.

These questions were formulated by examining the framework of normative media theory and the 6 questions that are used in that theory. Normative media theory is typically associated with these six questions:

1. What is being communicated and how is being circulated as a matter of public concern?

2. How are different societal perspectives being presented?

3. What is the public interested in and is there a specific reason why?

4. How is this level of interest being measured?

5. What are the social responsibilities of the entity sharing this content?

6. What needs to change for digital media to be recognized as the carrier of public values? (Fourie, 2017).

For this study, these six questions have been reframed for the church context. The questions that the content will be analyzed through will be:

1. What kind of content is the church sharing and how is it being shared?

2. Is the church executing their communications with social and cultural awareness or does the content this church provide seem to originate from a singular perspective?

3. Does there seem to be certain topics, connection points, or items that the target audiences of this church seem to resonate more with than others?

4. What steps are the church taking to measure the effectiveness of their communication efforts?

5. Does this church carry certain social responsibilities that could affect their communication practices?

6. Is this church establishing themselves as a carrier of public values and a communicative force in their span of reach?

The first three framework questions were used to develop the questions that focus on application. These are interview questions 1 through 5. The second three questions in the framework adjust perspective to the theoretical/philosophical usage and strategy of new media usage in these churches. These are interview questions 6,7, and 8.

Research Question Findings

This study featured three primary research questions. These research questions focus in on the application of new media communications in their environment while revealing the unique norms and that these organizations carry in their pursuit of furthering the gospel through communications. The following paragraphs here will focus on the application of new media theory in a **real-world** context as it pertains to answering the research questions of this study..

RQ 1. How are evangelical churches in America using new media?

These organizations all have been using new media outlets for well over a decade and positioning themselves in a place of influence in the digital space. The one outlier in this conversation with participant 9's organization. According to the interviewee, this organization has "only been using new media for the last 5 to 7 years" as they have attempted to carry all gospel messaging on foot, focusing on "physically building" their church. This participant said

that they began to use new media prior to COVID-19 but felt like the pandemic is what "really forced us to take it seriously".

The outlets these organizations focus on are Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, church branded web pages, and certain streaming services. Some organizations focus more on informational content while others focus on more motivational or encouraging content. Participant 2 described their social media philosophy as, " a place where our community and congregation can find everything they need to know about everything happening the in the life of the church," while Participant 4 noted their strategy as "we don't want to make our social media look like the bulletin board." Participant 10 explained "streaming is a major part of our organization. We use podcasts, social media streams, television, and web players to resource our congregation members with what we believe they need." Participant 7 noted that they also have a "large podcast following" in addition to using "all major social media platforms, a television broadcast, and uploading services to a faith-based streaming service."

In terms of types of content, while most of the organizations represented use a lot of the same mediums, each have their own specialty. Participant 1 said "our catalyst for growth revolves around their digital music releases on popular streaming" and they position their musical platforms as one of the main ways they communicate. Participant 2 said "our organization does not find value in releasing original music and we prefer to push sermon clips or other forms of encouraging content on our platforms". Participant 4 noted that as an organization, "we specialize in long form content, releasing highly produced cinematic narrative pieces at least once a month," as a key competent of how they use new media. To counterbalance this, participant 3 stated, "Our organization counterbalances that by only regularly releasing content less than a minute long." Participant 10 is a part of one of three organizations that

accepted the invitation to participate in this study that actually still maintains a traditional television broadcast and explained that they still find much success in their broadcast output that comes on during the late night television block on several major networks. Participant 7 said "we have found great success in sharing content featuring congregant members. We get greater traction when we show the faces of those in attending our church rather than those leading it."

To measure effectiveness, all the participates stated their organizations do regularly use and study the analytics they receive from the various platforms they engage on and find those extremely helpful. In regard to digital analytics, participant 6 had a unique approach saying, "In our church we probably use digital analytics less than I believe probably most churches our size do, we prefer to look at the physical analytics, such as baptisms, salvations and attendance". One important analytic that all participants agreed upon is the usage of the QR code. Scans and clicks are one of the most effective tools for measuring the response to call to actions in these organizations' communications efforts. Participant 10 spoke of an additional measure of effectiveness through surveys. They stated "we send out some kind of survey at least once week. This helps us gauge what our people need and how we can reach them better."

Participant 8's ministry does a lot of "analogue" ministry. They send out written communication, CDs, DVDs, and even USB drives with digital files on them as part of their communication efforts. While this may be more of a traditional approach, this does allow for greater accuracy in gauging what content is working and what is not as they are able to correlate their inventory numbers, profit, and number of resources sent out.

RQ 2. Why do some churches seem to experience more success than others when using new media?

The participants interviewed for this study are all currently employed as key stakeholders

in these churches that would be on the more successful side of the spectrum when it comes to using new media. A reoccurring theme in these interviews was participants sharing the importance of pinpointing the content that their congregation relates to the most. All participants could agree that the current digital landscape, no matter where they are in the United States, was highly over saturated. This forces these participants and their organizations to find ways to stand out. Participant 4 said "one way we stand out is by providing our congregation with quantitative statistics from every Sunday gathering, major event, or holiday". This participant provided examples of certain types of content that highlighted salvations, attendance, and giving numbers that were extremely successful on their platforms. This organization finds great success in celebrating the wins with their congregations on a regular basis and has built that into their communication strategy. Participant 2 said "the content we find to be most successful is that involves our partnerships in the local community". This organization has been a well-established entity in the region for nearly 40 years and the leadership of the church has made significant connection with the local governments and are consistently partnering with them to help the community. The church does their best to capture and publicize these partnerships and find extreme success quantitively when they do so.

Participant 9 shared that their content is designed to be "very convicting, polarizing, and unapologetic." This participant shared that this organization has found its greatest successes when they put aside the "wishy washy, plain, face level encouragements" and made an intentional effort to pierce to the core of certain issues. "Our pastor does not care about keeping people happy and keeping our numbers up with complacent messaging, he wants to see significant life change and because of that we design all of our content to achieve that in some form or fashion. We do our best to accompany every piece of content we output with a challenge

or call to action for the viewer."

Participant 8's ministry also has incredible longevity in new media communications. This organization has been on television since the 1980s and have become a "very well recognized and respected name among believers and churches across the globe." This participant explained how this organization has found a niche in resourcing families and providing content that is family oriented and not only do Christian families across the world search out and connect with the content this organization outputs in terms of parenting, legacy, and praying for your children and the next generation, but the leaders of this ministry are in high demand to travel and teach on these subjects.

Participant 5 said that "our congregation resonates deeply with content regarding relationships, faith, and building community so we create a lot of content that channels those topics". Participant 10 shared in their organization they had found a lot of success with "New Testament based practical teaching". This participant explained how they feel as "practical applications based on Biblical truths" is what their congregations really seemed to crave. Participant 1 said their encouragement, if they were speaking directly to a church asking how to be more successful with new media, would be, "Figure out what the reason is to add new media to your environment. Ask yourself what is going to serve your leadership and your congregation best? Don't look to big churches or anything like that, focus on the people God has entrusted to your organization and learn how to serve them best. That is how you will find success with new media." To accompany this thought, participant 3 also felt it was important warn churches that "success should not be measured in the number of likes, shares, follows, etc., but by the health of the church and its people."

RQ 3. *Are churches seeing a difference or an impact in their congregations and communities*

from their communication efforts using new media?

One unique thing that each participant mentioned in their interview, without knowing any of the others had brought this up, was a comparison of technology and new media to the letters and roads that the Apostle Paul used to spread the gospel. They all said, not only in their direct, physical sphere of influence, are they seeing dividends of people's lives being changed and made better by their new media communications, but people from around the world, that may never even set foot in their buildings are being impacted in significant ways. Participant 5 in particular attested to this fact. This organization in particular has one of the largest reaches of any of the participants but only has one physical location that holds 5,000 people. Their pastor is one of the most followed pastors in the world and their organization is recognized as one of the most innovative and involved churches when it comes to new media communications.

Participant 5 said "our pastor is one of the most media centric pastors in the space. He is involved with every aspect of how we communicate and wants to see how we can push technology to every limit and reach people in new and exciting ways." Participant 5's organization has a motto they operate by internally, "RePresent – change the way we do things so that the lost see Jesus in a new way." They believe this perspective is one of the keys to their success, along with extreme obedience to the guiding of the Holy Spirit.

Participant 5 also disclosed the interesting position that their church has been brought into in regard to how they have been given the opportunity to be extremely influential in the realm of celebrities and other influential individuals. Participant 5 said that "our pastor has been blessed with high levels of relational equity with actors, athletes, and musical artists and often has them as guests in our church." He explained, "This is such a unique opportunity, because if their lives can be changed by the love of Jesus, imagine the ripple effect if they were to use their

platform and influence to share His gospel". This changes their messaging not only from the pulpit but also in their outward communication practices. He said, "we are very intentional of the content we share on social media and other outlets as we wish to continue to grow in our influence, particularly in this space and want to avoid offending anyone". This is just one example of many. New media can be incredibly helpful in reaching and impacting people around the world for Jesus.

Theoretical findings

The uniqueness of this study lies in the theoretical perspectives. Normative media theory is typically only applied to political communications, so why is it important for church communications to also be evaluated in this way? By definition, a democracy is a system or entity in which fundamental freedoms are respected and celebrated and the culture of the entity supports them and the furtherment of them. In a similar way, a church should be an entity in which Biblical values should be upheld, respected, and valued, and its culture should be furthering them. If a church's communication practices do not reflect this, then their norms are not furthering Christianity, just like what could be said if a political candidate was not communicating information in a way that would not be considered furthering democracy. This can be gauged by a church's view on social responsibilities, public values, and originating perspectives.

Social Responsibilities

One important topic in normative media theory is social responsibility. In terms of social responsibilities, most of the organizations do feel at a certain level that they carry these, but each one is different. Participant 2 stated "our social responsibility is to be available in disaster situations as our region they are in experiences quite a bit of severe weather." Participant 3 says,

"we focus on the school system, providing lunches and supplies at the beginning of every school year." Participant 1's organization focuses on "global impact, we give large amounts of funds every year to international charities and outreach foundations." To counteract these organizations, participant 6 stated that within their organization, "the great commission is our only social responsibility" and that "social agendas are not important." Participant 5 stated, "we have the unique opportunity of connecting with other churches and providing them with assistance and healing" in their region.

Participant 8 detailed how their organization has a unique global social responsibility that no other organization participating in this study is carrying. This church has been given the unique opportunity to support Christian ministry in Israel. While they do honor the space and historical contexts of Judaism, they believe they are called to help reach this nation with the message that Jesus is the Messiah. They have been able to partner with several influential organizations in that region to build nursing homes and provide care for survivors of the holocaust, bomb shelters for families in Gaza, and supply different charities with food and resources that are helping the impoverished there. Participant 8 said, "we believe that supporting Israel and the Jewish people is something that biblically we are called to do and we consider it our primary social responsibility and focus many of our resources there."

Participant 10 shared how their organization carries a unique social responsibility that has actually caused quite a bit of controversy over the last year on a nationwide scale. This organization has taken it upon themselves to champion those who identify as Christians but find themselves in the context of parenting a child that has chosen to pursue a lifestyle that does not fall within Biblical gender and marital boundaries. This participant shared about how this ministry is something that this organization feels passionately about and has been providing

resources and safe spaces for parents that find themselves in this situation for nearly 20 years but over the last year, admittedly due to some "poor messaging choices" in their communications around a new initiative within this ministry, extreme controversy arose and this organization was faced with the choice of laying down this social responsibility they had taken on, or they had to find ways to clear the air around their beliefs and choices as an organization. They henceforth have chosen the latter and are continuing to work through this situation as an organization. They are truly dedicated to carrying social responsibilities, even when it costs them their reputation. In response to the interview question on social responsibility, Participant 7 said, "we channel everything through our mission statement. If our content doesn't line up with it then we don't share it. Our mission statement is *Love God, Love People, Multiply Disciples* and if we are not fulfilling that promise to our community, then we are wasting not only our time and resources, but the community's. Exercising those three statements is our social responsibility."

Another interesting finding in the theme of social responsibility is the regional differences. The churches located in Florida felt a strong social responsibility to helping their communities in terms of natural disasters and outside variables. All of the participants located in Florida referred to partnering with local organizations to assist with hurricane response and recovery. The churches in Georgia and North Carolina felt social responsibility as making a worldwide impact or helping schools. As mentioned, the participants in Tulsa talked about how their social responsibilities are less physical and more emotional and mental. This was a very interesting and unexpected finding.

Public Values

Public values are something that the church is forced to juggle as they navigate the modern world. A common concept in Christianity is to live in the world but not of it. Jesus

teaches on this subject several times throughout the four gospels. When the concept of being a carrier of public values was presented the participants of this study, the feedback received was quite interesting.

Participant 4 went in depth to explain how their organization relies solely on the perspective of neutrality. They do not affiliate their organization with any public value, cause, social justice platform, or anything that could be misconstrued in anyway. Participant 4 said, "we use the mantra of 'if you're for something, or someone, it means you're against something or someone, else'." They consider their organization a beacon in the community and do not want to anyone to see them as otherwise. This organization goes as far as to recognize or celebrate significant holidays in their messaging, such as MLK Day, Memorial Day, and others. This perspective stood out as it goes against the grain of common church practices. Most churches in this study may choose to abstain from addressing more controversial topics but do at least celebrate things like the civil rights movements and black history month. Participant 4 explained that "the reason we take such an extreme stance on this is simply the fact that we on an average Sunday, our attendees are made up of the residents of seventy-two different zip codes. With a regional influence so wide, our demographic is so diverse in every way. To retain the massive reach we have acquired, we must remain neutral."

In comparison, participant 5 explained how their church identifies as predominantly African American. This completely changes the conversation on public values. This participant admitted that with the leadership of the church, as well as the congregation being majority black, "forced us to change our approach to how we address certain topics". One example he gave was the topic of abortion as situational contexts and different standpoints can cause this issue to be more sensitive or offensive to those of the African American race than to those that would

identify as white or Caucasian. Participant 5 also explained how within the city their church is located, there is a lot of "historical, racially charged trauma and hurts that run very deep in the community." This changes how they celebrate certain holidays or craft certain messaging when trying to reach their local community.

Participant 9 said, "we feel as our organization has been called to teach people how to navigate tough things." He detailed how from their perspective they feel like the general public "lacks the knowledge, wisdom, and guidance" they need to navigate social issues. This could vary from things such as racism, pro-life versus pro-choice, and politics, to finances, family issues, and grief. This participant said, "we do our best to never associate ourselves with any organization, person, or entity other than Jesus, but we do our best to present the facts and what the Bible has to say about them."

Participant 3 said "our church is not influential or a carrier or communicator of public valuables." Their reasoning for this was that the "church leadership believes we are called to carry things that are so much more important than what people would refer to as public values. We stand firmly on the foundation that we preach the truth unapologetically and often public values do not align with the truth so we would rather not even be associated with them." This participant explained they do encourage their team members and congregants to have interpersonal dialogue on these things, but they believe that public values have "no place in church messaging."

To contrast this, participant 2's church considers themselves very valuable to their community and a large carrier of the public values and wishes to continue to maintain that status. They have been in their region for nearly 40 years and have great connections to their local governments and are consistently recognized by the community as an organization that has their

best interest in mind when it comes to most topics. This organization strives to equip their congregants with the information they need regarding a variety of topics. Participant 10 shares a similar view as their organization "has the unique opportunity to be involved in state level government," due to location and proximity to congressional leadership and other government figures. They have used new media in their span of reach on several occasions to provide people with valuable insights into the political climate on multiple scales and in multiple facets.

Participant 7 provided a very interesting response to this question. From an outside perspective, their church would probably be considered the most successful organization in their county and in surrounding areas. They have grown substantially since 2021 and have shown no signs of stopping. They are capitalizing upon new media communications in every way possible and are innovating at a very high level for being one of the smaller churches participating in this study as well as being in one of the most rural regions of this study. Participant 7 explained that while this growth for their organization has been incredibly beneficial, recently, they found out through reaching out to other churches in the surrounding areas that over the last 3 years, these other churches found themselves struggling to keep up and losing ground in the community because of the success of this singular organization. Participant 7 said, "we heard from several of our local pastors about how they feel like they don't have the resources we do and how they feel their congregation slipping away because of it." Upon learning of this, participant 7's organization has made the conscious decision to observe a "digital blackout" in the month of June this year. They will be shutting down all new media communications aside from streaming their Sunday gatherings for 30 days. In these 30 days, they hope to divert some of their resources to help train and equip other churches in the community to begin their own new media communications efforts. Participant 7 said, "it's not the technology that moves people, but we

would never want to degrade any other church in our community, we want to link arms with these other organizations and help build them up."

Originating Perspectives

Another question in these interviews that received some interesting feedback less revolved around the perspective at which organizations originated content but in how they originate their content. Participant 3's answer was very interesting. When it comes to the communication efforts of this organization, participant 3 explained, "everything is connected. We are always in a series; every piece is connected to another." The connection and the retention of engagement from piece to piece is one of the ways this organization measures effectiveness. The participant used the example of dominos, "if a domino in the line does not fall, then something is wrong, and the content must be reevaluated." To achieve this, they are very intentional in how they craft all messaging. In their eyes, every piece must maintain the same thread. The way they achieve this is by several weeks ahead of time, the pastor, the marketing director, and a team of other key stakeholders in the organization sit together to write the sermons for every Sunday in that series. The marketing director and the other team members then go and create messaging and communications surrounding these sermons. This allows for multiple originating perspectives in the communication efforts of this organization.

Participant 9 discussed how their organization is "statistically, one of the most diverse churches in the nation" and how this forces them to communicate from multiple perspectives. This participant stated that "it is very important to our leadership team that every choice in messaging is intentional and originating from an educated understanding of the world around us." One way they do this is by partnering with several other faith based organizations in their community and around the world to keep a pulse on the status of the people around them.

Participant 1 explained they followed a unique process as well, developing the invitation list to a meeting before even deciding the topic, to ensure all appropriate perspectives are accounted for. Participant 5 stated their organization has a document that "accounts for all the potential demographics they could reach, all the down to individuals characters, that they could project their content on," and use that as a guide to ensure their content originates with the input of multiple perspectives in play.

Another opportunity that participant 10's organization has that other organizations might not is keeping a pulse on global culture/climate through partnership through the He Gets Us campaign. This church has partnered with the He Gets Us organization that is taking a unique approach to revitalizing evangelism and Christian community in America. With access to their research, this church has begun to tailor their communications to align the perspectives and to speak to the most prominent situational contexts that are found in their region.

Participants' Definition of Success

As stated in chapter one, success in this study has been defined by quantitative means. Variables such as size, follower numbers, engagement analytics, giving numbers, locations, events, and more have been the measure of success from a researcher perspective; however, what was found in these interviews is that these organizations don't use these quantitative identifiers to measure their success. As already mentioned, most of the organizations referenced that they care more about healthy, spiritually developed people than they do lots of likes, followers, high attendance, and financial gain. Many of them stated that if new media wasn't helping change lives, its usage was pointless.

Summary

This study had three primary research questions. The first is how are evangelical

churches in Amer using new media? The purpose of this question is to gain insight into how evangelical churches across Bible Belt are using new media and how they are not. The findings of these interviews showed that church across Bible Belt is using new media in many ways. From multi-site streaming, social media posts, television broadcasts, to short films, email chains, virtual and augmented reality, and music releases, churches across the United States are finding ways to reach people with new media. Each is unique in strategy, but most use the same platforms.

The second research question is why some churches seem to experience more success than others when using new media? The answer to this question is less in the church and their techniques and strategies and more in the people they are reaching. Different things work for different target audiences and success is measured differently by each organization.

The third and final research question is in their usage of new media communications is are these churches seeing a difference or an impact in their congregations and communities from their communication efforts. The answer to this is "yes!" All the participants have stated that in their organization, they have seen significant impact from their usage of new media. They have been able to reach more people than ever before with the message of the gospel, information on important topics, and engage with their congregation in more ways than they ever have with the usage of new media. Each participant said that if they had the ability to encourage church that maybe is not using new media or is struggling too, to keep pushing as it is worth the effort.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Overview

In this final chapter, discussion around the findings of this study and what implications it yields to this field now and in the future are brought to the table for consideration. While most implications of this research hinges upon the development of technology and its role in culture, the base principles will remain the same. The goal of this chapter is to summarize all this research into a comprehensible conclusion as the future of modern American church may lie in the hands of new media communications.

Summary of Findings

To summarize, new media communications play a very important role in the life of the modern American church. The world has been overrun by screens. Nearly every adult in America has access to technology and is going interact with some form of new media communications in the next 24 hours. This reality is one that modern American church has chosen to capitalize on. Using new media communications allows the modern church to reach people across the globe in ways they never have with the message of the gospel daily. The church has also taken to digital means to help carry social responsibility and public value. These organizations all measure effectiveness differently, but all see dividends upon dividends of success when using new media in their environment.

Discussion

As discussed in Chapter 1, the Bible Belt is a somewhat derogatory term used to label the states that fall within this region that is generated from community and demographic stereotypes that are projected on people that live in the southeastern and midwestern region of the United States. Overly conservative political views, historical racism and prejudice, along with high

levels of divorce, poverty, and crime have cast a shadow of vulgar stereotypes over this region, its people, and its churches for nearly a century (Brunn et al., 2011). But what if that was not the case? What if the churches in this region had the ability to change that?

When looking at this study and its findings from the perspective of new media theory, two things can be noticed. The first is the role of media convergence. These churches and organizations have placed a high emphasis on social media platforms, particularly Instagram. Instagram is possibly the most convergent platform available to organizations today. On Instagram, organizations have a plethora of different kinds of content that can be shared in a single space. This helps organizations focus more on tailoring content to people and less on tailoring content to platforms. The second thing we see is the implication of the theory of Mediapolis. Mediapolis as previously discussed is an expansion of new media theory and convergence. For nearly 2 millennium now, the Christian church has been exclusively something that took place in person, through face-to-face communication. In the last five years, we have seen the rise of new church culture, which takes place entirely online. All the participating organizations in this study, some with maybe a greater emphasis on this than others, have online church spaces and have people that attend their worship gatherings and have community with other believers, exclusively through a screen. The modern church post COVID-19 pandemic is the perfect example of the theory of Mediapolis.

In this study, 10 organizations have been presented to show their attempt to change the narrative surrounding the Bible Belt. Each of these churches are actively fighting back against things like bias, racism, and prejudice, all while pursuing neutrality, modernizing their messaging, and increasing their reach. One of the steps that has helped these organizations to reach this level of influence by establishing norms in their communication efforts that focus on

furthering Christianity. As previously stated, the framework of normative media theory lies in six primary questions. These questions are as follows:

1. What is being communicated and how is being circulated as a matter of public concern?

2. How are different societal perspectives being presented?

3. What is the public is interested in and is there a specific reason why?

4. How is this level of interest being measured?

5. What are the social responsibilities of the entity sharing this content?

6. What needs to change for digital media to be recognized as the carrier of public values? (Fourie, 2017).

In traditional normative media theory study, the answers to these questions are used to determine if a political entity is furthering democracy with their communications. In this study, the questions have been reframed and posed to individuals in these influential churches across the United States. What was found in these interviews is that while each church takes a unique approach to how they execute new media communications, the consistent thread that could be traced from organization to organization was a set of biblically based norms that they operated within. And while each may prioritize certain values more or less than others, each of these organizations shared these norms to a certain degree and used these norms to formulate all their communications practices. In this study, there have been five norms identified through interviews with the participants and their description of how their church uses new media communications.

The first norm seen in these organizations is providing moral guidance. Is the content that is being shared by this organization going to help people? The answers to this question can vary in category. It could be practical or deeply spiritual or more philosophical. Scripture is filled with instruction and guidance on how to live and sometimes people find themselves in need of

assistance or reminders on how to live a Godly life. Every individual interviewed shared this desire to create and share content that helped people in some way. This norm of moral guidance is the primary force in evaluating content for these organizations.

The second norm found through these interviews is promotion of Christian ideals. This is just as important as the first norm. This is creating content that broadcasts fundamental Biblical teachings. A common saying is that Christians may be the only Bible people ever read. This can also be applied to new media communications. That post, song, reel, may be the only exposure to scripture a person ever gets. Creating content with scriptural values is another key norm that all of these organizations that participated in the study subscribed to.

The third norm is influencing behavior and belief. In scripture, it is made clear that Christians are called to grow in their faith. Becoming a Christian is not just a one step process, but a life of refining and growing to be more like Christ. Content that can help guide people in this way, would be considered a form of discipleship. Developing content that challenges people to grow in their faith, creates a stronger and more influential church. Christ radiates in a healthy, discipled church. The more discipleship a church provides it attendees, the more attendees that will go and disciple others in their sphere. It is spiritual domino effect.

The fourth norm that these churches shared is equipping for success in life. These organizations want their congregations and audiences to have knowledge and know how to approach real world situations. This ranges from grieving the passing of a loved one, to how to run a successful business, to who to vote for, to how to handle conflict. While often times, scripture can be considered outdated or invaluable in the modern world, the reality is most of the most successful people in the world have based their practices in what the bible teaches. God gives man so much practical advice that people are often unaware of. The church is not only

called to be a spiritual refuge for people but to be a cornerstone of the community and help its people thrive.

The fifth norm that these interviews unveiled is the desire to build community and establish outreach. This norm is all about taking it outside the walls of the church. This is the informational norm. This norm is what shapes content that invites people to events, lets them know about generosity opportunities, and comes alongside them in their walk outside of the church.

Every church is going to take a different approach to their new media communications but overall, they all function with the same goal. The goal of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This overall driving factor creates these norms in each of their organizations. Just as the original intention of normative media theory is to determine whether communication is furthering democracy, the norms that this study has unearthed are showing that these church's communication efforts are furthering Christianity.

As presented here, the pursuit of establishing effective new media communications that will assist the furtherment and solidification of healthy Christianity in an organization's span of reach should be one of the major goals of every church in the Bible Belt. Based on the findings of this exploratory qualitative case study, a few practical steps have been identified to achieving the goal of becoming more influential with new media communications. These three strategic steps may be all it takes to provide lift to an organization and help them reach more people for the Kingdom.

The first step is to identify the organization's norms. The five presented in this discussion are a great starting point but may not apply to every organization. This can be through prayer, conversation, polling, combing analytics, and evaluating long term goals for the organization.

Once these norms are identified, agreed upon, and in place, the next step is to allow them to begin shaping the organization and its efforts.

The second step is to adjust the cultural perspective on new media communications within an organization. Once norms for the organization's communication efforts have been identified, share them! Scripture says, "And the LORD answered me: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay." (English Standard Version, 2016, Habakkuk 2:2-3) Share with the key stakeholders of the organization and with the congregation what the vision is for the communication efforts of the organization. Shift the cultural mindset around technology and new media from a distraction to a tool. As already discussed, all participants in this study mentioned Paul and how the Roman built roads and the letters he wrote the churches were his form of new media communication. Surely people in his day speculated at his methods just as people do technology in this modern age. The Apostle Paul did not let these concerns stop him from using the tools he had identified as a way to spread the gospel.

Lastly, the final step is just to begin communicating through new media. Create a social media account, begin designing, begin recording, begin writing, and begin sharing it. It is truly that simple. Not all organizations may have the ability to start a television broadcast over night, but it would be nearly impossible to find an organization without access to at least one smart phone. The cameras and microphones and applications that most smartphones now have access to is all that is needed to make an impact. Participant 6 in this study suggested, "open it up to the congregation. Find someone who loves it, ask them to help lead new media communications for the church for free. There's got to be at least one person in the church that has a passion for

technology and wants to use that passion to help further the gospel in some way."

Implications

      In scripture, we see a very clear pattern in the letters from Apostle Paul to the early churches scattered around what we now consider the Middle East and Mediterranean. Throughout his letters, Paul instructs these small, struggling churches to change the community around them and further the gospel through different changes and provides them with the information and wisdom needed to do so. The hope of this study is that this manuscript would be considered adjacent in a modern context and in application of outward communications to the works of Paul; a resource to small struggling churches in the Bible Belt that have the desire to make a difference in their community for the Kingdom.

      The implications of this research range in category but overall can be considered beneficial statements in the real-world applications of the topics discussed as well as to the research field of new media communications in the context of the evangelical church at large. This research lays foundation for further research and greater scholarship in the field. These findings and implications may also be transferable to other fields, just as this study is built upon research conducted in the field of political communications.

Theoretical

      The primary theoretical implication of this study is that developing and setting norms within an organization is beneficial. As seen here, each of these organizations have standards and norms that they operate within that have helped them reach a high level of influence in this field. Not only have norms helped the organizations that participated grow quantitatively, but we also see from a qualitative data perspective that these norms do make a difference.

Methodological

Methodologically, this study functions as an exploratory qualitative case study. These types of studies are strong and perform well in this context as the goal is studying a phenomenon in a real-world context (Channaveer & Baikady, 2022). It also works well as it is focused on studying a smaller sample size at greater depth (Gromm et al., 2000).

The primary methodological implication here is that based on the findings of this exploratory qualitative case study, further research can and should be conducted on these topics at a larger scale. This study has limitations and delimitations that could be overcome using different methodology. The methodology used for this study lays excellent groundwork for future research.

Practical

The practical implication of this research is that new media is in fact a valid mode of communication in this field. It could be up for debate that something as crucial as religion should not be carried by something as fickle as new media communications, but as we have seen in this study, churches throughout the Bible Belt and around the world are receiving testimonies of life change and salvation through their digital communication efforts. Participant 7 specifically mentioned in their interview, "we view ourselves as just a small church in rural Georgia but because we have intentionally grown our digital footprint, we get messages and letters from people around the United States that interact with our content on a regular basis, thanking us for what we are doing. We could have never reached those people otherwise." Churches around the world need to begin to incorporate new media into their communications efforts.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study had one primary limitation. This limitation is sample size. The original

intention of this study was to be nationwide qualitative interview study but due to a severe lack of willingness to participate, this study has been converted into an exploratory case study or pilot study, focusing on a small group of churches from all in the Bible Belt region of America. The lack of willingness to participate from churches across the United States that was encountered in this research journey was shocking. Many invitations to participate were extended over an 8-week period but regardless of the amount of effort presented by the research team to develop a significant sample size and data pool to prove the validity of this study, it was nearly impossible to secure interviews. Other limitations would be considered time constraints, inability to travel, and lack of variation or depths in answers to interview questions.

The delimitations of this study focused primarily on the churches participating. For a church to be included in the study, the church had to meet certain requirements of size, denominational/theological background or tradition, and digital footprint. The identified individuals representing these organizations in these interviews also had to meet certain requirements regarding age, role in the organization, and experience level. Without these requirements, the results could have been wildly different from organization to organization and substantial findings would have been difficult to summarize.

Future Research

Looking to the future, each participant in this study agreed that communication and technology is ever changing and that there is no idea what to expect in the coming years. Participant 4 adamantly said, "over the next 5 years there is a great chance that we see new media technology begin to take a step back and things like print become highly relevant once again," and they already experimenting with what that looks like in their environment. Participant 5 is preparing for either further technological integration and is working on solutions

for hologram and virtual reality church. Participant 3 says, "we could see the church body changing as a whole and are moving further away from global church messaging and beginning to allow localization to take place in our multi-site locations as well as offering resources to home churches that are looking for a larger corporate oversight." All could agree, that for the foreseeable future, technology will be important in the church remaining relevant.

One possibility for future research is the study of immersive technologies, such as virtual and augmented reality. These technologies are becoming more and more powerful, and more and more people are leaning into their abilities. It was particularly noted by several participants in this study, that with the release of the Apple Vision Pro, they felt like immersive communication was becoming a more prominent reality than ever before.

Another path is one of the forsaking of technology. There are multiple published studies on screen fatigue and other negative connotations of technology in communications. Also already mentioned, Participant 4's church has already begun to experience this in their environment and have begun to slowly integrate more and more physical elements into their communications, such as print media and even yard signs for specific events or campaigns.

Both participant 10 and participant 8 mentioned the study of artificial intelligence and its role in new media communications. Artificial intelligence seems to be becoming more and more prominent by the day and it seems that more and more people are leaning on it for assistance. Could artificial intelligence truly communicate the gospel? Is it a tool or a hinderance? These are questions that the church community will want answers as this technology develops.

Future research on this topic could also include a study with a larger sample size. This study could also be opened to churches outside of the evangelical tradition all throughout America. Exploring new media communications in the Orthodox churches, Anglican

congregations, Catholicism, and other Christian traditions would yield for very interesting results. Opening up to the region outside of the Bible Belt as well could provide insight into how churches handle things such as social responsibility and public value in cities that with different cultures and political climates.

Summary

In conclusion, the Modern American Church currently needs new media communications. Technology is the greatest tool humanity has been equipped with to fulfill the Great Commission. The purpose of this study has been to gather information on the status of the usage of new media in the modern American evangelical church. Through this study, light has been shed on how churches across America have found success using new media communications to further the gospel. In future days, the hope is that this manuscript can be used as a tool to equip churches as they begin the pursuit of reaching people through new media communications.

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