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Digital Resources for Teaching and Preaching: A Review Article

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The number of digital resources available to today's teachers and preachers is staggering. On a single screen you can be one "alt-tab" away from a Working Preacher article, your favorite lectionary podcast, an interactive Greek or Hebrew text, a *New York Times* article, a Twitter thread, an email newsletter from Richard Rohr, a Netflix series that one of your confirmation kids said you "had" to watch, and that ever-present Amazon page with its customized list of sinister temptations. "No way! I even have rewards points!" Click, click, shipped . . . back to sermonizing. I have a feeling I'm not the only one whose workflow looks something like this.

Of course, the explosion of digital resources is primarily due to the rapid expansion of the internet, the proliferation of smartphones, increased access to content-creation tools, etc. These technological advances, along with the seemingly endless capacity for human creativity, have placed a remarkable array of resources into the hands of Christian leaders. In so many ways, there has never been a better time to be a preacher who wants to dwell deeply in the Word and in the world.

This brief essay explores three practices I try to use in my own sermon preparation: knowing the audience, engaging the text, and cultivating empathy and understanding. Beneath each practice, I discuss and evaluate digital resources I have encountered over the years. Some of these are helpful and some of them less so. Reader beware that the internet's scope makes it impossible for this essay to

Navigating the almost endless number of digital and online resources for Christian leaders is almost a full-time job in and of itself. This article examines some of the leading resources and suggests further possibilities.

be exhaustive. I inhabit a very small corner of Protestant Christianity, and my discussion below will undoubtedly reflect that limited vantage point. This will be especially apparent to readers outside the United States, where I primarily operate. As a secondary step, I will also reflect on potential problems and pitfalls associated with the named sources. In the end, I hope to expose readers to new digital tools and inspire interesting ways of leveraging those tools in service of the gospel.

Knowing the Audience

Now more than ever, it is easier to learn about the people you are called to serve. Let's imagine for a moment a pastor in the 1980s. She is passionate about her confirmation students and particularly interested in knowing what they are like when there are no adults (like her) in the room. What are their big questions? Where did they pose those questions and to whom? What are their deepest hurts and uncertainties? This pastor has a very difficult job. Fast-forward to the 2020s and she still has a difficult job. But she also has other ways of answering those questions, most especially through digital resources.

To name just a few examples: She might turn to the Barna Group, a research and data-gathering organization that tracks and studies "the role of faith in America, developing one of the nation's most comprehensive databases of spiritual indicators."[1] Or she might dig into the Fuller Youth Institute's Churches Engaging Young People (CEYP)[2] project, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI),[3] or Pew Research.[4] Other resources could be named.

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But the larger point is that Christian leaders have access to immense amounts of high-quality, professionally accumulated data that can inform their preaching and teaching. In the past, this kind of information might have been available, but only at the speed of print publications, which you might have access to if you lived near a theological library with a commitment to populating its shelves with books relevant to youth ministry. The problematic issue of access should be apparent.

[1] "About," Barna, accessed December 14, 2021, https://www.barna.com/about/.

[2] "The Research for Growing Young," Fuller Youth Institute, accessed December 14, 2021, https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/growingyoung/research.

[3] PRRI, accessed December 14, 2021, https://www.prri.org/.

[4] "Religion," Pew Research Center, accessed December 14, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/topic/religion/.

Modern Christian leaders are awash in data. But in most cases our theological degrees do not prepare us to interpret qualitative or quantitative data. This is a significant skill gap that Christian leaders of all sorts should consider filling on their own. They will find themselves far more capable of interpreting the vast amounts of data available to them and translating it into actionable insights.

The modern internet also allows Christian leaders to follow, observe, and even interact with their congregation members on the platforms they prefer. The pastor above, for instance, might follow, observe, and interact with her students on their favorite social media platforms like TikTok or Instagram. She might spend time trying to understand Snapchat, and why its unique combination of photography filters, messaging, and social networking is of interest to younger people. Or if she has a lot of gamers in the group, she might jump onto Discord (a platform that allows groups to communicate via audio, video, and text within discrete communities) or watch her students' Twitch channel (a social media platform that allows gamers to livestream their game play). And what would happen if she began to let the communicative practices of her youth impact how she preached the gospel? What would happen if the insights she mined from attentively listening on these platforms found their way into her teaching? Similar opportunities exist for every age group.

But using digital media to understand one's congregation or audience also has its pitfalls. For instance, let's say a deacon wants to use Twitter to understand the young adults he is teaching on Wednesday nights. Most of them are in their mid- to late twenties, and the deacon also knows that this happens to be Twitter's most widely represented age bracket. Learning about young adults through Twitter might seem like a great idea on its face, except when one considers that 80 percent of Twitter's American, adult-generated content is created by a mere 10 percent of its users.[5] Moreover, in comparison with the general public, Twitter users are more likely to be Democrats. None of this is to say that the deacon will not learn anything, only that he will need to calibrate his assumptions accordingly and recognize that Twitter is not the real world.

Engaging the Text

Today's internet offers teachers of the Bible innumerable tools. Many of them are free, and some of them require money or institutional status to access. Not all of them are credible or trustworthy, but the ones that are can be an immense help for teachers and preachers in need of expert insight.

There has been a proliferation of resources for lectionary preachers. This includes a wide range of websites like Working Preacher,[6] Preaching Today,[7] and

[5] Adam Hughes and Stefan Wojcik, "Key Takeaways from Our New Study of How Americans Use Twitter," Pew Research Center, April 24, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/24/key-takeaways-from-our-new-study-of-how-americans-use-twitter/.

[6] Working Preacher, Luther Seminary, accessed December 14, 2021, https://www.workingpreacher.org/.

[7] Preaching Today, *Christianity Today*, accessed December 14, 2021, https://www.preachingtoday.com/lectionary/.

Ministry Matters,[8] and even podcasts such as *Pulpit Fiction*[9] and *Sermon Brainwave*.[10] Some of these digital properties have been in existence for a long time and, as a result, have deep archives of material a person can draw on as she prepares to engage the week's texts.

Non-lectionary-based resources also exist that will help teachers and preachers understand the Bible and the history behind it. The Society of Biblical Literature, for instance, hosts the Bible Odyssey website.[11] This website was created in part with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. As a result, it engages the Bible humanistically, without any theological commitments. It has an ever-growing library of entries organized according to three categories: people, places, and passages. Luther Seminary is in the process of revamping Enter the Bible, a rich trove of digital content that focuses on interpreting the Bible theologically.[12] The website includes commentaries, timelines, maps, videos, and audio files, paired with a robust search function to help one track down relevant materials. Both Bible Odyssey and Enter the Bible are freely available to the public.

For institutions or individuals able to pay, Oxford University Press hosts Oxford Biblical Studies Online.[13] Oxford University Press is one of the world's most prolific producers of biblical studies research. Its array of reference resources on the Bible is unrivaled. Many of its most significant resources are digitized and searchable on Oxford Biblical Studies Online. Most of this content is academic in nature, though some is made with specific religious communities in mind. For instance, I frequently consult the Jewish Study Bible when preaching from Old Testament texts. It contains invaluable essays and commentary that are primarily directed toward a Jewish audience.

For those interested in engaging the biblical texts in their original languages, several paid options exist. Since the closure of Bibleworks, Accordance[14] and Logos[15] have dominated the Bible software market. Both run on PC and Mac, have mobile options, and include a variety of packages that allow you to customize the features and resources to which you have access. Free options do exist (e.g., Bible Hub).[16] While these resources tend to be awkward and difficult to use on a mobile device, they allow a person to engage the biblical texts in their original languages.

[8] Ministry Matters, accessed December 14, 2021, https://www.ministrymatters.com/preach/.

[9] *Pulpit Fiction* Podcast, accessed December 14, 2021, https://www.pulpitfiction.com.

[10] "Our Podcasts," *Sermon Brainwave*, Working Preacher, accessed December 14, 2021, https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcast-type/sermon-brainwave.

[11] Bible Odyssey, Society of Biblical Literature, accessed December 14, 2021, https://www.bibleodyssey.org/.

[12] Enter the Bible, Luther Seminary, accessed December 14, 2021, https://enterthebible.org/.

[13] Oxford Biblical Studies Online, Oxford University Press, accessed December 14, 2021, http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/.

[14] Accordance Bible Software, accessed December 14, 2021, https://accordancebible.com/.

[15] Logos, accessed December 14, 2021, https://www.logos.com/.

[16] Bible Hub, accessed December 14, 2021, https://biblehub.com.

Cultivating Empathy and Understanding

This final practice is somewhat narrower than the previous two, but it is one that I have been experimenting with lately. It is cliché these days to decry the digital silos we find ourselves in. Some of these silos are determined by cryptic algorithmic forces, and others are self-selected. An endless array of options allows us to select and silence whatever voices we like. We can curate our ideological intake in the same way that we curate our Spotify list, and one of the many victims of this situation is human empathy.

But thankfully, the same dynamics that allow us to click our way into self-reinforcing echo chambers also allow us to self-select our way into digital spaces where we feel less at home. The only difference is that in the case of the latter, we have to act against both our deep-seated tribalistic tendencies and an increasingly acrimonious cultural context. That is no easy task.

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As a seminary professor, I am often in conversation with Christians from a variety of social locations in the church: parishioners, lay leaders, bishops, volunteers, synod staff, college ministry leaders, etc. I consistently hear that our faith leaders struggle in this time of polarization to lead in ideologically diverse contexts. This is also a struggle I detect in myself.

While the present digital environment conspires against us, there are ways of "hacking" the system in order to fight for a more empathetic world. In this final practice, I encourage readers to consider adding discordant voices to their regular regimen of digital content. Perhaps that means listening to a podcast from a perspective you disagree with or subscribing to a YouTube channel that features content from a different ideological and theological angle. Consider downloading audiobooks from "that" side of the aisle or reading a blog that disrupts your theological convictions. There are innumerable ways to find content that challenges your ideological and theological assumptions. And I would argue that there are also innumerable theological and ethical reasons for doing so.

The goal in all of this is not that you come to the relativistic conclusion that all opinions are of equal value. They are not. Empathy is not identification. The goal is to cultivate empathy in the face of radical difference. Empathy strives to obtain understanding and comprehension, even while maintaining space for critical distance. Empathy is what allows us as ministry leaders to see people of diverse

opinions not as obstacles to be removed or avoided but as human beings to be cherished and loved. The point of this practice is to resist prevailing cultural winds fueled by business models built on rage, anger, and tribalism. When the church is compliant with this kind of system, our ability to preach the gospel with compassion and integrity is quickly eroded.

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