



Reaching Out for Community in a Digital World: Problems and Possibilities

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Unable to leave the house safely for worship and fellowship in March of 2020, many turned to social media to socialize and maintain community. This turn to media (and, for others, turning up the input of logged online engagement) was an attempt to not drown in isolation. After all, not everyone has built-in community in their place of residence. And not everyone who *does* have the company built in is sustained by those relationships.

From anxiety, disruption, and loneliness people reached out for community through digital platforms.

I was one of those people. Early on, I organized social events as I would in non-pandemic times but on platforms: happy hour with other teachers on Google Hangouts (because it had the best plugins); playing DJ for a Zoom karaoke night; and of course, hours of scrolling Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to see how my fellow humans were faring. In the fight against Covid-19 and white supremacy, I and others turned to social media to not feel so alone and to find a community of empathetic coconspirators.

Even before the pandemic the intrusion of technology into our lives and communities was accelerating, and now it is clear that the anxieties of the digital age are magnified by these new platforms. Christians are called to take charge in creating genuine and authentic communities, whether digital or otherwise.

Well before March 2020, I had been attuned as a scholar and theological educator to the possibilities of connection that these digitally mediated worlds make possible. (For the record, all of reality is, and always has been, mediated; our current reality is just a new expression of mediation, but I digress.) But I also have been attuned to its dangers—that is, to the powers and principalities in the social media ecosystem that corrupt community, thrive on fear and divisiveness, and make authentic connection more difficult to attain.

In this essay I bring the spirituality of Henri Nouwen into the possibilities and problems of community (mal)formation through social media technoculture.¹ I do this in the hopes that natives to this technoculture with a call to spiritual leadership will have language to speak to the spiritual disciplines and practices that can be implemented to improve the health of communal identity and formation online *and off*. Because even if Facebook pulls the plug, even if Instagram fades into the night, social media are here to stay. And so are the underlying issues of spiritual (mal)formation that are amplified in these media platforms, not just created by them.

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FIRST THINGS FIRST: STOP (ONLY) BLAMING TECHNOLOGY

In all honesty, we cannot blame social media alone for the broken relationships and hostility that exist in our world, digital and otherwise. If you take away the humans who are engaging the media platforms as participants and designers, you have nothing and no one to blame.

A phrase my students often hear me repeat in class comes from technology historian Dr. Melvin Kranzberg:

“Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral.”²

Kranzberg was also one of the founders of the Society for the History of Technology and an editor of the journal *Technology and Culture*. In his 1985 presidential address to the Society, Kranzberg summarized three decades of work with six laws framing the discipline of the history of technology. The quote above is

¹ I will use this term, borrowed from Susan J. White, throughout the essay instead of “technological culture.” Like White, I am not merely concerned with the tools that technology introduces and requires; rather, I am interested in exploring technology’s influence at the level of knowing and communication. See Susan J. White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

² Melvin Kranzberg, “Technology and History: ‘Kranzberg’s Laws,’” *Technology and Culture* 27, no. 3 (July 1986): 545.

his first law, and a call to historians to be carefully attuned to technology's historical existence. What seems good in the moment may end up having bad consequences on the ecology of our world. What seems bad may offer some good. All of this may depend simply on the point of view of the one making an assessment. Thus, our tools are to be neither shunned nor embraced wholesale. Nor are they to be ignored. There is no such thing as neutral or non-impact of our technological advancements. Thus, it is the work of historians to pay attention to these trajectories and to educate those who make policy.

What if theologians in the academy and in day-to-day ministry also took Kranzberg's first law to heart? Undoubtedly, a growing number do, including Angela Williams Gorrell in her 2019 book *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape*. In this book, Gorrell articulates certain postures by which Christian communities can develop "hybrid faithful living."³ She is one of a handful of Christian theologians offering theo-practical guidance to pastors for spiritual formation in our digital age.

In his 1990 Gifford Lectures—before social media—Christian ethicist Ian Barbour articulated the relationship between technology and religion. Barbour contended that technology is a powerful force. It is a force for good *and* bad. It can liberate and threaten human life. It has evolved to address issues of global hunger and poverty, and it has evolved as an agent of global climate change and nuclear war. Humans have power to do good and bad in this world with emerging technologies. It is a risky endeavor, for we are all part of one fabric and face consequences that may have ripple effects beyond our immediate comprehension. Like Kranzberg and Gorrell, Barbour reached the conclusion that we have the responsibility to identify and reflect over and over again on what technology imposes and how we can modify it for the well-being of people and the planet through political processes.

There is a tendency to approach technological change from one of two poles in a binary scheme. One pole is technological determinism, or technophobia. This is often the posture of Nicholas Carr and Neil Postman, as well as others who see an unavoidable future wherein our machines will overpower humanity, dehumanize us, strip us of culture, program us in machinelike fashion, and erase our species from the planet. On the other side is technological embrace, or technophilia. This is the worship of technological development as if it were a tool for humanity to become perfect. At its extreme, this approach assumes that we will eventually conquer death and the limits of our biological bodies with our brilliant technologies. Neither of these poles is a generative starting place for us as we think about how spirituality and technology interact with one another to (mal)form community.

Process theologian and computer consultant Jennifer Cobb, writing in 1998, makes a link between a process understanding of God as the Supremely Related One and cyberspace. In *CyberGrace: The Search for God in the Digital World*, Cobb deconstructs the mind/body binary schema in order to construct a view of virtual

³ Angela Williams Gorrell, *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 121.

reality as an evolving place of process and connection, years before the emergence of social media.⁴ This space, according to Cobb, transcends both the mind and the body, as well as divisions between the world of the spirit and the world of the machine. She celebrates cyberspace as a place where the Divine may be encountered and spirituality deepened in the emergence of complexity there.

Too often, when we wish to right the wrongs of algorithms, surveillance, and trolls that make Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok hotbeds for hate, all we do is approach the social media designers and the powers that be in the digital world. But what if, as Christian leaders, we also addressed this crisis from the ground up? What if we saw this as a new chapter in our work of spiritual formation for the times in which we live? What if we prepared disciples for life *in* the digital world but not *of* it, rather than telling people that they need to delete the apps entirely? “If it is the human spirit animating the connections we experience [online],” says Daniella Zsupan-Jerome in her book *Connected toward Communion*, “then these connections can and do convey our presence and invite us into a relational, communal experience online.”⁵

To begin framing this approach to spiritual decline in our digital age, I turn to Henri Nouwen and his book *Reaching Out*.

HENRI NOUWEN’S *REACHING OUT*: SPIRITUALITY FOR DIGITAL TIMES

I first read *Reaching Out* sometime in the early 2000s. It was a time before Facebook (slightly). Nonetheless, Xennials and elder Millennials were in the early stages of engaging platforms to build community and a sense of belonging online. My two spaces of connection were Xanga and Blogger. The social aspect of these blogging platforms was the capacity to subscribe to a community of bloggers and perhaps be followed back. Most of my engagement in that space revolved around articulating devotional reflections (heavily influenced then by Young Life) and sharing reflections on my favorite music (mostly indie Brit pop and Ben Folds).

Nouwen was impacted by his own technoculture, of course. The first edition of the book was published in 1975, the year my father graduated from high school. By that time, Pong had been invented and, with it, the beginning of interactive video games. In 1973, the first cell phone call was made, and Ethernet and fiber optics were getting started. Vinyl dominated music technology, but cassette tapes were gaining ground.

Maybe those insights have nothing to do with Nouwen’s description of the three movements of the spiritual life, but seeing as we are all products of our ecosystem, including technology, surely it left its mark. By the time the *Reaching Out* reprint I own was published in 1986, technological shifts were picking up speed.

⁴ Jennifer J. Cobb, *CyberGrace: The Search for God in the Digital World* (New York: Crown, 1998).

⁵ Daniella Zsupan-Jerome, *Connected toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2014), 102.

Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* argued that television and the move from literate to visual forms of communication set the stage for cultural decline.

Perhaps Nouwen was attuned to these conversations about cultural decline as he proposed a means for spiritual ascent in three movements: (1) from loneliness → to solitude, (2) from hostility → to hospitality, and (3) from illusion → to prayer. But the journey is not one that can be rushed, nor can we bypass our loneliness, hostility, and illusions on the way to receptive solitude, a hospitable spirit that creates space for strangers, and a rich prayer life that draws us closer to God.

There is no doubt in my mind that what most of the world sees in the social media environment is humans operating out of undeveloped spirituality. We see people trying to avoid reaching out, their innermost selves existing in solitude as they distract themselves to spiritual death. Sherry Turkle made these observations in 2015 in her book *Reclaiming Conversation*. She writes that “the capacity for solitude” enables us to accept people for who they are, which makes it “essential to the development of empathy.”⁶ Or, as Nouwen would phrase it, essential to the movement from hostility to hospitality, wherein Christians can reach out to our fellow human beings with an open hand rather than a closed fist.

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It is easy to avoid the quiet space and the free moments of time that allow us to cultivate solitude. A silent drive is replaced by a laundry list of podcasts. Waiting in line to pay for groceries is another opportunity to scroll the Twitter feed. An observation from Nouwen comes to mind: “When we try to shake off our loneliness by creating a milieu without limiting boundaries, we may become entangled in a stagnating closeness.”⁷

Stagnating closeness. That is what we can fall into if we are not reaching out to our fellow human beings from a place of solitude. This is the case on social media. It was also the case before, manifesting in other ways. Social media are not the only media to blame. Twenty-four-hour news cycles from broadcast media can also fuel the stagnating closeness that keeps us lonely and prevents us from being present to our solitude. And so, these media can also fuel in us the movement from crushing loneliness to overwhelming hostility to lives lived under the illusion of immortality.

⁶ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 61.

⁷ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Image, 1986), 32.

Illusion, notes Nouwen, is not easily unmasked. In part, he says, this is because an existence of illusion, namely the illusion of immortality, is so much a part of Western culture. Technology is often a partner in this illusion. Better medicines and machines can help us live longer. This illusion's two most "visible symptoms" can help us grasp what we risk when living and building community under the spell of illusion: sentimentality and violence.⁸ The two are often linked and related to people "demand[ing] from our fellow human beings what they cannot give" to meet their unmet restless needs, thus "mak[ing] them into idols and ourselves into devils."⁹ Rather than putting all of the blame on technology for our inhumane behavior, Nouwen argues that putting the expectation on these idols to be extra human tempts us to "behave as less than human."¹⁰ A lustful violence is a result of our sentimentality and unmet expectations. Acting out of the illusion that the church, nation, neighborhood, media belong to us as "private property which nobody ever can take away from us, we become a threat to each other and make intimacy impossible."¹¹

When you scroll on social media, what sort of community do you see? Community rooted in solitude and reaching out to fellow humans with curiosity and hospitality? Or anxious, lonely people desperately reaching out for an idol to meet their unmet needs, and so acting with hostility toward any other human being who threatens to challenge their illusive quest for control?

Friendship and love cannot develop in the form of an anxious clinging to each other. . . . As long as our loneliness brings us together with the hope that together we no longer will be alone, we castigate each other with our unfulfilled and unrealistic desires for oneness, inner tranquility and the uninterrupted experience of communion. It is sad to see how sometimes people suffering from loneliness . . . search for a final solution for their pains and look at a new friend, a new lover or a new community with Messianic expectations.¹²

The devices and platforms work together to keep us plugged into a stagnating closeness that develops toxic community. Unless we as Christian leaders begin to design intentional spiritual practices and disciplines for natives to this technoculture, we will disempower disciples of Christ. And if media literacy is not part of this formation and religious education, we will allow idolatry and a false display of Christianity rooted in troll farms to influence the actions and anxieties of ordinary people. As a case study for how dangerous it can be to form community from the place of loneliness described by Nouwen, we turn to the phenomenon of clickbait in the social media landscape.

⁸ Nouwen, 117.

⁹ Nouwen, 119.

¹⁰ Nouwen, 119.

¹¹ Nouwen, 119.

¹² Nouwen, 30.

CLICKBAIT COMMUNITY: REACHING OUT FROM LONELINESS AND FEAR

Technology, including social media, is not neutral. Nor are we. The open-source, nonhierarchical infrastructure of social media means fewer checkpoints for vetting false and misleading information. Communities of illusion, fueled by loneliness and hostility, can breed easily. And the economy of social media means entrepreneurs around the globe are quickly creating programming that results in netting the greatest amount of clicks rather than publishing true or authentic information. Amid this dynamic, clickbait Christian communities are made.

According to an October 2019 report leaked to *MIT Technology Review* by former Facebook employee Jeff Allen, troll farms infiltrate the platform with their clickbait material, reaching as many as 140 million users in the United States each month in 2019. The study looked at troll farms specifically based out of Macedonia and Kosovo. These professional organizations “work in a coordinated fashion to post provocative content, often propaganda, to social networks” through Facebook pages, whether or not a user has even followed any of the troll farm’s pages.¹³

In the early days of the Facebook platform, individual profiles (once only for students with an .edu email address) could gain presence in a network through increasing the number of friends connected to their page. Today, “Pages is the broadcast distribution product on [the Facebook] network,” according to Allen. Individuals and organizations can create pages with unlimited follows and likes. “It is where the ‘largest voices’ of our communities live.” And the disturbing truth, according to Allen, is that Facebook’s platform “has given the largest voice in the Christian American community to a handful of bad actors, who, based on their media production practices, have never been to church.” The data show that all fifteen of the top pages targeting Christian Americans were run by troll farms. According to Allen, “when combined, the troll farms run the largest Christian American Page on Facebook by 20x.”¹⁴

You see that correctly—the largest page presence on Facebook by twenty times that of its nearest competition. And this creation and curation of Christian content is not from a church, denomination, pastor, or theologian—but from troll farms based out of the Balkans with no experience of or concern for religion in America. The project has nothing to do with Christian mission or formation and everything to do with easy money through getting the most clicks and content shares. The troll farm pages are anonymous, and the content is scraped and reformatted from other sources in the hopes that it will go viral. As if eating junk food produced by anonymous companies out of nothing organic, we consume the content devoid of spiritual calories. The body of Christ loses strength and energy

¹³ Karen Hao, “Troll Farms Reached 140 Million Americans a Month on Facebook before 2020 Election, Internal Report Shows,” *MIT Technology Review*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/09/16/1035851/facebook-troll-farms-report-us-2020-election/>.

¹⁴ Jeff Allen, “How Communities Are Exploited on Our Platforms: A Final Look at the ‘Troll Farm,’ Pages,” October 4, 2019, <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/21063547/oct-2019-facebook-troll-farms-report.pdf>.

to act as Jesus would in the midst of crisis after crisis. We snap at one another and create fake messiahs doomed to fail to meet our needs.

But what if the fake-news phenomenon was reframed theologically as an illusion counter to God's reality? Because the truth is, behind every troll, every meme, every tweet is a person in a web of persons. Our social media landscape amplifies the worst side of humanity. So, can these social media environments amplify the best of humanity?

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COMMUNAL POSSIBILITIES: REACHING OUT FROM SOLITUDE AND CURIOSITY

You do not have to look too long and hard to see Christian denominations and entrepreneurs engaging holistic community formation in the social media environment. When you look to these leaders, you can see the three movements of Nouwen that enable the curation of beloved community through new media.

Broadcast forms of media awakened to the impact of ministry and community in new media after the sudden and tragic death of Rachel Held Evans in 2019. Evans was not ordained and never pastored a conventional church—four walls, stained glass, pulpit, and pews. But she was a minister and a hub of communal connection through her presence on Twitter and beyond. She stood up for women, people of color, and LGTQIA+ people marginalized by the church. Her accumulated tweets and posts formed the framework for what would become published books. She was present to her digital congregation, evidenced by the deep grief of thousands when she died.

Recently, a colleague and friend of Evans, Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, was installed as the first pastor of public witness in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. This role includes serving an “experimental gathering of spiritual misfits” online called “The Chapel.”¹⁵ Nadia is online as @Sarcasticluther on Twitter and @sarcasticlutheran on Instagram and Facebook. Another example of community gathering and formation is the work of Rev. Dr. Melva Sampson

¹⁵ Emily McFarlan Miller, “Nadia Bolz-Weber Installed as ELCA’s First Pastor of Public Witness,” *Episcopal News Service*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2021/08/24/nadia-bolz-weber-installed-as-elcas-first-pastor-of-public-witness/>.

and her Pink Robe Chronicles: “a digital hush harbor that centers faith and spirituality using the womanist and Afrocentric values of self-determination, serious engagement, and liberating self-love to highlight the importance of collective work and responsibility in healing and sustaining marginalized communities.”¹⁶ Other spiritually rooted leaders reaching out from solitude, through hospitality and prayer, to form holy online communities include Cole Arthur Riley, who describes her digital space of Black Liturgies in this way on her website (<https://colearthurriley.com/>). Riley is on Instagram as @blackliturgies and Facebook and Twitter as @blackliturgist. Kate Bowler is active through her Facebook author page as well as the *Everything Happens* podcast.” She is on Insta and Twitter as @katecbowler. One finds that on entering these mediated spaces, one is invited into a spirit of solitude, empathy, compassion, and authenticity from which healthy communities can grow and subvert the malformation amplified and marketed in social media platforms.

Maybe I place responsibility back on humans because I am operating out of a process theology worldview. I do not believe that God has all the power and we have none. I do not believe that what happens in the next hour is foreordained by God without my collaboration. It is interesting to observe how technology is framed in fundamentalist theological terms to be omnipotent and omniscient by people who would not call themselves God followers, let alone Christians. In doing so, we remove responsibility from ourselves. And it gets us nowhere fast. Our technoculture lacks life-giving purpose and will continue to toss humans to and fro without theological leadership in its atmosphere.

This essay is an invitation for Christian leaders to engage the task of spiritual formation in our digital age through the movements expounded by Henri Nouwen: (1) from loneliness → to solitude, (2) from hostility → to hospitality, and (3) from illusion → to prayer. It is not enough to ask people to turn off their devices, nor to assume “no harm, no foul” when folks fully embrace new media. The pandemics of Covid-19 and white supremacy, as well as the radical changes to our climate due to environmental negligence, have made it easy for Christians to lose hope in Christ and drown out the call to pay attention to our innermost selves and our fellow human beings so that the ascent of spiritual connection with God can begin. We have great distraction at our fingertips. But we also have the capacity to shift the conversation, take responsibility, and build communities on earth—and online—as they are in heaven. ⊕

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¹⁶ Melva Sampson, Pink Robe Chronicles, accessed February 3, 2022, <https://www.drmmelvasampson.com/pink-robe-chronicles>.