Theological questions for exploration

The New Media Project’s Research Fellows have written six probing theological essays on social media. Those essays were shaped by our case study research and writing and other inquiries during the last year.

Before you read the essays, you may wish to explore the theological questions below. We hope they will prompt and expand your own exploration into social media. Each question cites essays and other documents that might help your exploration. Those resources can be found on the New Media Project website.

Questions for exploration

1. Embodied relationships are central to Christianity: we believe in a God who became human and we value close relationships and church communities. How do new media practices line up with a Christian commitment to embodiment or “incarnational life”?

   For a helpful discussion on embodiment, read “X-Reality and Incarnation,” by Kathryn Reklis.

2. Many people worry that proliferating new media platforms are making us more distracted and disconnected. We can barely pay attention to the people we are with because we are so busy checking our email or updating our Facebook status on our smartphone. What does our theology have to say about the practices of paying attention in the age of distraction?

   For a discussion about distraction, read “X-Reality and Incarnation,” by Kathryn Reklis. Jason Byassee’s essay, “Practicing virtue with social media: An ‘underdetermined’ response,” also explores the dangers of distraction.

3. The Gospel of John refers to Jesus as the “Word of God.” Many Christians refer to the printed Bible as “the Word of God.” Now that a growing number of people access the Bible and experience church community through the Internet, should we think about the “Word of God” differently?

   For a discussion on this topic, read “New media: A savior for a digital age,” by Monica A. Coleman. Lerone A. Martin’s essay, “How media changes American culture and religion,” also addresses the proclamation of the word.

4. Many Christians understand Jesus Christ as the one who mediates between God and humanity, drawing us into closer relationship. As new media connects our experiences of worship, fellowship and relationship, how should we think about
new media’s role in our salvation?

For a discussion on salvation, read “New media: A savior for a digital age,” by Monica A. Coleman. Jason Byassee and Verity A. Jones both address the question of salvation in their essays as well.

5. In her essay about salvation, Monica A. Coleman explores the role of Christ as mediator, teacher, liberator, and as the content of faith. Where do your theological views lean regarding Christology? How do you see Christ?

For this discussion on salvation, read “New Media: A savior for a digital age,” by Monica A. Coleman.

6. How are social media helping to create, nurture, and maintain communities of faith? Or do social media hinder the creating and sustaining of ‘real’ Christian community?


7. How might we evaluate whether or not social media tools will benefit or harm a community? What questions should we be asking?

For a discussion on this topic, see the section in “Faith communities in high relief: Reflections on the Trinity” by Verity A Jones about the six Cs in social media functioning. In fact, all six essays in this collection raise important questions we should be asking and suggest ways to evaluate harm vs. benefit.

8. How "new" is new media to Christianity? Given how many times Christianity has adapted to new media patterns and tools, why are we asking these questions now?

For a discussion on the newness of new media, read “How media changes American culture and religion,” by Lerone A. Martin. Jason Byassee’s essay also raises important questions about history and new media.

9. Who’s "in charge" of new media? What do religious authorities think about changing expectations of authority?

For a discussion on authority, read "How media changes American culture and
10. What does your tradition teach/believe about ecclesial authority? Is it an episcopate through which ecclesial authority is passed on through ordination by bishops? Is it congregational by which congregations raise up leaders from their midst? Is it something in between, or something else?

*For a discussion about models of church and authority structures, read Jim Rice’s essay, “Models of church and social media.”*

11. Do the ecclesiological assumptions of your religious organization, community, or network affect how it approaches the use of social media?

*For an exploration of theologies undergirding certain church structures, read Jim Rice’s essay, “Models of church and social media.”*

12. Conversely, do the corporate electronic practices of your church or religious body reflect your theological understandings and commitments? What are the theological assumptions behind your organization or community’s practices? Could your body/organization/group/entity act in ways that reflect a more conscious awareness of such assumptions?

*For a discussion on this topic, read Jim Rice’s essay, “Models of church and social media.”*

13. What in you wants to reject use of new media and social media in the church today? Why do you think that’s the case?

*For a good discussion on this topic, read Jason Byassee’s essay, “Practicing virtue with social media: An ‘underdetermined’ response.”*

14. What would be lost if the church foreswore use of new media the way, say, some Christians have sworn off violence, or all have sworn off adultery?

*For a thorough discussion of this topic, read “Practicing virtue with social media: An ‘underdetermined’ response,” by Jason Byassee. Also, Lerone A. Martin explores how new media changes culture in his essay.*

15. If Christian faith is largely conveyed through story and narrative, how might Christian faith be conveyed in a social media world when the utterances are so much shorter and in different forms (tweets, Facebook updates, images, videos, slogans, links, etc.)?
Lerone A. Martin’s essay, “How media changes American culture and religion,” addresses this question in the section about proclamation. Other essays in this collection approach this question as well, especially Monica A. Coleman’s essay.

16. What if storytelling moves in a network pattern rather than linearly—linking through to particular bits of information that may lead to a new path of thinking; moving through webs of new information shared by friends; exploring images and experiences in addition to words? How might this impact the storytelling of communities of faith?

For examples of how real communities are trying to do this, explore the six case studies that comprise the foundational research of this project.

17. Could a social media “revolution” help Christians recognize anew the intense importance of community life and relationships? If so, might it help us recognize a shift in what it means to be human today?

Both Verity A. Jones’ essay and Kathryn Reklis’s essay get at this question about community and what it means to be human.

18. How do we interpret the high value on transparency in online communication, and how does this challenge or support teaching the faith and nurturing religious communities?

Both Jason Byassee’s essay and Jim Rice’s essay address this question of increasing transparency. Jason is cautious about the benefits. Jim attempts to trace it to ecclesiology.

19. What can we say theologically about the Internet as a “network of networks?” How might it challenge or support our understanding of church life or individual human life?

Explore Verity A. Jones’s essay for discussion of the Internet as a network. Also Kathryn Reklis’ essay and Monica A. Coleman’s essay bring much insight to how we understand ourselves as humans in relationship to God as we use the Internet.