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HOW MIGHT SOCIAL MEDIA LIKE TWITTER SHAPE OUR COMMUNICATION OF THE GOSPEL?

Alan Wenham

Christians are faced with a rapidly-changing technological environment, which affects how the gospel can be communicated. This article explores the way in which social media might best viewed, with a particular focus on Twitter.

Historically, evangelical Christians have been among the first to utilise new internet technologies to promote the gospel.¹ It was therefore predictable that they would quickly adopt social media like Twitter. Amid the flurry of tweets, some have paused to reflect on the impact of this technology, with determinists arguing that technology has some power to influence humans independently of their choices, and instrumentalists objecting that technology is an instrument that merely amplifies, but is controlled by, human ability. However, given their concern for faithful gospel proclamation, it is surprising that evangelicals have written little on the question of how internet technologies might shape their communication.

The perceived degree and manner of technological influence on humans (and vice versa), will affect one's ethical position on how it should be used. The influence of a technology is related to its nature; its purpose, function and access. Christians wishing to formulate biblical responses to internet technologies will therefore have to understand the nature of the media in biblical terms. However, delineating the nature of this technology is difficult. First, our society is increasingly internet dependent. Consequently, there is a danger of cultural blindness and an acceptance of the mythic claims of technology,² from the spin of marketing agents selling products to the “dystopian” and “utopian” ideologies that subsume technology.³ Second, the realm of internet technology is a vast, dynamic, diverse and multi-dimensional field, which changes rapidly.

¹ Amber M. Stamper, “Building the Narrow Gate: Digital Decisions for Christ and the Draw of Rhetorical Space,” *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 3 (2014): 118.

² Neil Postman, “Five Things We Need to Know about Technological Change” (paper presented in Denver, 28 March 1998), 4, <http://www.cs.ucdavis.edu/~rogaway/classes/188/materials/postman.pdf>.

³ Anastasia Karaflogka, *E-Religion: A Critical Appraisal of Religious Discourse on the World Wide Web* (London: Equinox, 2006), 110.

Third, the novel nature of internet technologies creates “conceptual muddles.”⁴ An internet user is located within a context in which rules and values are employed. However, to work out how these principles or ideals apply, one must discern which descriptive categories or analogies best encapsulate the technology in order to formulate a theological and ethical response.⁵

This article will seek to explore from a theological perspective how one technology, Twitter, might be said to shape gospel communication, including biblical and theological teaching, the imparting and reception of meaning.

First, we will try to understand the nature of Twitter in terms of biblical categories. We will begin by briefly describing the technology’s purpose, function and access and will then outline and theologically evaluate the dominant categories used by a sample of Christian bloggers to describe the media. Second, in light of its nature, we will reflect on the possible influence of Twitter from a biblical perspective by evaluating two theological arguments for what we will call, instrumentalism and determinism. Insights from Walter J. Ong on the influence of western communication technology will then be applied to Twitter to consider how the medium might specifically shape beliefs, values and practices of users.

In summary, it will be argued that Twitter should be seen less as an environment and a social medium, and more as a communication tool that creates a form of culture. As such, although Twitter will amplify God-given human culture and can be used for good, it will also reflect fallen human creations, embodying and shaping self-centred beliefs, values and practices. Twitter will therefore shape but not absolutely determine gospel communication in use, which should inform the way Christians use the technology.

1. The Nature of Twitter

The influence of Twitter on gospel communication relates to the nature of the technology. We will therefore begin by briefly describing the purpose, function and access of Twitter to understand the medium’s characteristics.

Twitter was designed by Jack Dorsey and launched in March 2006. His vision was to create communication software to distribute efficiently

⁴ Deborah G. Johnson, “Computers,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Ethics*, ed. Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker (New York: Garland, 1992), 1:191.

⁵ Johnson, “Computers,” 1:192.

text messages to multiple recipients.⁶ The “mythic” claim by Dorsey, to have invented a “new way to communicate,”⁷ is exposed when the function of Twitter is seen within the context of digital technology development.

Twitter is a piece of software that followed in the footsteps of Web 2.0, messaging boards and the earlier social networking sites. Developments in “smartphone” technology allow the posting of information (“tweets”) from mobile electronic devices, as well as computers, by limiting messages to an optimal 140 characters. From a simple software interface, users log in to a microblog webpage with a public profile, where they can post short messages, including text, photos and videos. The information is displayed in reverse chronological order on a user’s page, which is then disseminated among “followers,” who can decide to receive, reply or repost the message. As with preceding Internet Relay Chat networks, keywords can be marked with a hashtag (#), so that users can signify and follow topics, rather than just people.

In terms of access, according to Twitter’s official figures, the site had approximately 320 million active monthly users in December 2015; 80% of whom used a mobile telephone, rather than a computer to view the site.⁸ A large global market research study in January 2014 showed that the biggest group of Twitter users was aged 25–34 years old (31%), and people in the Middle East and Africa were the most engaged, with 28% of people using the medium in the preceding month.⁹ As well as individual access, businesses may set up pages on Twitter and in 2011 companies were allowed to pay to promote tweets, accounts, and even “trends” in topics.

Describing the nature of Twitter in terms of the technology’s purpose, function and access shows that Twitter was designed and functions as a microblogging internet site and is accessed by registered individual and business users to distribute and read short text messages on the internet. It is therefore a distinctive but not a new communication form. Having briefly described its characteristics, we will now consider how the nature of the technology might be construed in biblical terms.

⁶ David Sarno, “Twitter Creator Jack Dorsey Illuminates the Site’s Founding Document. Part I,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 February 2009, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2009/02/twitter-creator.html>.

⁷ David Sarno, “Jack Dorsey on the Twitter Ecosystem, Journalism and How to Reduce Reply Spam. Part II,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 February 2009, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2009/02/jack-dorsey-on.html>.

⁸ “Company | About,” *Twitter About*, <https://about.twitter.com/company>.

⁹ Jason Mander, “GlobalWebIndex Social Summary - January 2014,” <http://www.slideshare.net/globalwebindex/gwi-social-summary-2014>.

Categorisation of Twitter

To explore this subject, a sample of 30 blogs written by Christians on the topic of Twitter was identified by a keyword search and the text was analysed to see how the authors described social media and Twitter.¹⁰ This was not a representative sample of data, and generalisations from specific cases are often inaccurate.¹¹ However, in keeping with broader trends, two dominant ideas seemed to be used by the writers either exclusively or interchangeably: that Twitter was a “tool” and/or an “environment.”¹² The proponents of the former appeared to view Twitter more as a cultural “object”; the latter more as a cultural “creator.” The term “social” was universally used of Twitter, but sociality was construed in different ways. We will seek to evaluate theologically these descriptive categories and the underlying ideas of culture to help elucidate the potential influence of Twitter.

Tool

The majority of the Christian writers categorised social media, generally, and Twitter, specifically, as a tool. For example, one blogger wrote, “Let’s be clear, Twitter as a digital network is ... only a technological tool.”¹³ Christians who conceptualised social media in this way used the terms of “technology,” “digital network,” “network media,” “social media,” “social networking tool,” and “ministry tool.”

The category of tool is certainly found in the Bible, the closest analogy to Twitter probably being the communication technology of writing.¹⁴ We will return to the idea of writing as a technology and compare it with Twitter later. However, at this point, we will simply note that there seems no particular biblical problem with applying the terminology of tool to a communication technology like Twitter.

¹⁰ For full results, see Alan Wenham, “How Might Social Media like Twitter Shape Communication of the Gospel?,” <https://sites.google.com/site/gospelcommunicationresults/>.

¹¹ The Google search engine “ranks” information using complex algorithms. My search results were predominantly evangelical websites written at a “popular” level.

¹² For the terms “environment” and “tool” and for broader trends, see Karaflogka, *E-religion*, 55.

¹³ Luke Gilkerson, “3 Thoughts on Why and How Christians Should Use Twitter,” <http://www.covenanteyes.com/2011/08/22/the-tweetdom-of-god-3-thoughts-on-christians-using-twitter/>.

¹⁴ Cf. Isa 8:1, Jer 8:8, Rev 1:11. See, D. J. Wiseman, K. A. Kitchen, and A. R. Millard, “Writing,” *NBD*³ 1251–1259.

Environment

The words employed by Christians who thought of Twitter as an environment included “world,” “virtual world,” “digital world,” “cyberspace,” and “digital space.” For example, an American headmaster of a Christian school wrote of his concerns about children roaming “virtual worlds,” doing anything, going anywhere, and “being anybody they desire to be.”¹⁵ He defines these “worlds” as an “online community that takes the form of a computer-based simulated environment through which users can interact with one another.”¹⁶ A helpful analogy that exposes the ambiguity of this paradigm is provided by a website that accompanies a Church of England report on internet ethics. It compares cyberspace to a dream: “Dreams are … things that we never fully control. Computers belong to dream worlds in at least these two ways: they help us realise possibilities (fulfil our dreams), and they (like most technology) appear to develop a power all of their own, to become dreams we ‘inhabit’.”¹⁷ Cyberspace is therefore seen as a liminal space that is real and, although not physical, can create material realities for which humans both hope and fear.

While capturing the dynamic and creative potential of Twitter, there are at least two problems with this categorisation. First, in the secular discourse, the language of cyberspace and alternate worlds has fallen out of favour because of the growth in mobile smart devices, which have conflated notions of online and offline worlds and made the distinction almost meaningless.¹⁸ Second, from a theological perspective, the language of “place” is misleading because in Scripture being implaced is an aspect of embodiment, which the internet lacks. Place is important in the Bible: the message moves from Eden, to the Promised Land and Jerusalem, to the incarnated Jesus, and the hope of the new heavens and earth.¹⁹ Bartholomew argues that it is therefore important to make the distinction between the lived everyday experience of “place” and the Modernist abstract, theoretical concept of “space.”²⁰

¹⁵ Tim Euler, “Social Media, What? Part 4,” *Cambridge Christian School*, 18 February 2014, <http://ccslancers.com/lancer-blog/social-media-what-part-4/>.

¹⁶ Tim Euler, “Social Media, What? Part 4.”

¹⁷ Nicholas Beale, “Cybernauts Awake!,” <http://www.starcourse.org/cybernauts/>.

¹⁸ Mike Crang, “Cyberspace,” in *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, ed. Derek Gregory et al., 5th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 140.

¹⁹ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 31.

²⁰ Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell*, 3.

Social

Most of the writers sampled referred to Twitter as a *social* medium but, again, sociality was expressed in different ways. Some websites highlighted the function of cognition in social life. For example, the Diocese of Rochester produced guidelines for social media use, saying that it was very much in their interest “to be aware of and participate in this sphere of information, interaction and idea exchange.”²¹ The guidelines from the Virginia United Methodist website draw attention to communication in sociality: “How does the Christian community adapt new communication tools to the mission of the church?” they ask.²² Other blogs view cooperation as an important dimension of social media: one blogger wrote that Christians can utilise Twitter to witness to each other, sharing the “struggles in their own walks, prayer requests, and inspirational stories of how God is working in their lives.”²³

Fuchs argues that social media encompasses all three views of sociality, being cognitive, communicative and cooperative. However, this view of sociality is arguably deficient in at least two regards. First, in the realm of Twitter, collaboration is reduced to communication and cognition. Fuchs borrows theory from Tönnies and Marx to define cooperation as “community-building and collaborative production.”²⁴ However, although physical labour (in the traditional Marxist sense) may be coordinated in Twitter, it cannot take place within the medium itself. Second, as Bonhoeffer highlights, sociality in the Bible is more than thinking, communication or, even, cooperating bodily with others. Sociality is not an ideal or psychic construct, but a divine and spiritual reality that only comes “through and in Jesus Christ,” who graciously brings together a physical or embodied community of believers (Eph 2:14).²⁵ In this view, therefore, communication without an “implaced” Christian community is sub-social: being part of but not the sum of sociality.

²¹ Diocese of Rochester, “Social Media Guidelines,” <http://www.rochester.anglican.org/communications/guidance/social-media-guidlines/social-media-guidelines.php>.

²² Virginia Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, “Guidelines for the Responsible Use of Social Media for Virginia Conference Clergy and Religious Professionals,” 11 March 2010, <http://www.vaumc.org/ncfilerepository/MinServices/SocialMediaGuidelines.pdf>.

²³ Kelli Mahoney, “What Can a Christian Do With Twitter?,” *About Religion*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20150923124731/http://christianteens.about.com/od/christianliving/a/What-Can-A-Christian-Do-With-Twitter.htm>.

²⁴ Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (London: Sage, 2014), 44.

²⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM, 1998), 10, 15.

Views of Culture

Underlying these categorisations of Twitter, it is possible to see different understandings of culture. Some Christian bloggers seem to reflect a “Classical” notion of culture.²⁶ They treat Twitter as a cultural artefact, which has a monolithic and universal meaning and function, albeit one that evolves over time. For example, Halloran describes the “worldwide connectivity” of Twitter bringing instant news updates and “your daily dose of funny cat pictures and videos of babies laughing.”²⁷ He fails to consider that Twitter has a different significance and utilisation in other countries.²⁸ Such writers appear to have a one-size-fits-all approach to communicating the gospel through Twitter. For example, Taylor encourages people to use Twitter to “share what God is doing in your life,” without reflecting on how the message might be applied differently to specific audiences.²⁹ The problem with this static approach to communication is that it does not account for the creative interaction between people and technology, and that the content of people’s writing is influenced by their context. Without accounting for this dynamic, gospel communication can sound incomprehensible or irrelevant to a different culture.

Others do account for the techno-social aspect of Twitter and have a more Structural Functionalist view. For example, Kruger reflects on the dynamic effects of the social media culture both to communicate detrimentally but also to “advance the cause of Christ.”³⁰ For these writers, Twitter seems more like a machine: a diverse and integrated instrument that functions to help people understand and influence the world

²⁶ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

²⁷ Kristen Wetherell, “15 Questions to Help Christians Follow Jesus on Social Media,” *Unlocking the Bible*, 26 September 2013, <http://www.unlockingthebible.org/15-questions-to-help-christians-follow-jesus-on-social-media/>.

²⁸ Nigerian worshippers tend not to share personal feelings on social media, for example, and trends in topic vary greatly across countries. See Innocent Chiluwa, “Community and Social Interaction in Digital Religious Discourse in Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon,” *The Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 2 (June 2013): 1–37.

²⁹ Bryony Taylor, “What Would Jesus Tweet? – A Guide to #Twitter for Christians (by @vahva),” *The BIG Bible Project*, 14 April 2011, <http://archive.bigbible.uk/2011/04/what-would-jesus-tweet-%E2%80%93-a-guide-to-twitter-for-christians-by-vahva/>.

³⁰ Michael J. Kruger, “5 Ways Facebook May Be Harming Your Christian Life,” *Christianity.com*, <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-life/5-ways-facebook-may-be-harming-your-christian-life.html>.

differently in distinct contexts. They appear to be more aware of Twitter as a communication idiom in which the gospel needs to be inculcated. For example, Gilkerson argues on his blog that Christians need to become “digital scribes,” becoming more concise and compelling communicators to adapt to the limited number of characters in a tweet.³¹ The problem with this (and the Classicist) view is that Twitter tends to be viewed as a value-neutral entity, rather than a medium that communicates and shapes our beliefs and worldview. Theology involves a hermeneutical spiral that fluctuates between praxis (experience) and reflection (Scripture), and so immersion within Twitter will affect people’s perspective. The idea that the gospel needs to be dressed in the cloth of Twitter suggests a naked “supra-cultural core,” a gospel kernel that exists outside of culture, which arguably misunderstands the contextualised nature of language.³²

A Post-structural understanding of Twitter is evident in some of the more scholarly Christian websites. These writers seem to understand Twitter as being like a microcosm, an organic whole that reflects particular beliefs, values and a worldview. For example, Olson writes that, “We think of social networking software as a tool we use, while, in fact, we often become its tools. It uses us. Like all technology, social networking technology ... raises questions about what it means to be human, to be persons, to be good persons.”³³ In this view, Christians need to be aware not just of the offline culture of readers but also the online culture to contextualise the gospel message in communication. Hence, for example, Groothuis advocates “competent cultural criticism” of social media to “allow us to discern what is typically out of view” in Christian communication.³⁴ Such insights are helpful in reminding us of the value-laden nature of the cultural medium, but there is a danger of a cultural determinism that denies the possibility of “transcultural” gospel communication—that the message is universal and speaks into and is of

³¹ Gilkerson, “3 Thoughts on Why and How Christians Should Use Twitter.”

³² Benno van den Toren, “Can We See the Naked Theological Truth?,” in *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*, ed. Matthew A. Cook et al. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2010), 93.

³³ Roger E. Olson, “When Jesus Said ‘Follow Me’ Did He Mean ‘on Twitter?’ Ethics and Social Networking,” *Roger E. Olson*, 12 March 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/03/when-jesus-said-follow-me-did-he-mean-on-twitter-ethics-and-social-networking/>.

³⁴ Douglas Groothuis, “Understanding Social Media,” *Christian Research Institute*, 31 January 2011, <http://www.equip.org/articles/understanding-social-media/>.

value to every culture.³⁵ This risk seems particularly acute among those who employ the metaphor of an environment. They tend to see Twitter not just as a cultural object and creative microcosm, but as a creator of cultural worlds. This notion is linked with ideas that the gospel must be radically contextualised to fit these new realities. Although extreme views were not found in the websites that I reviewed, one can find examples of Christians that portray the internet as an experience of “transcendence,” the “new Jerusalem,” “heaven,” the “principle of moral perfection” and, even, “God.”³⁶ In effect, these revisionists have created a syncretistic gospel that is indistinguishable from the social media paradigm.

Evaluating the nature of Twitter, then, helps us to discern the possible influence of Twitter on gospel communication. It has been suggested that, from a theological perspective, Twitter should be viewed less as an environment or social medium and more as a microcosmic tool that creates a form of culture through user participation. As a cultural medium, we would expect the technology to shape the behaviour, beliefs and values of users. We will now consider whether a cultural tool, like Twitter, might be deemed deterministic or instrumental from a theological standpoint.

2. The Influence of Twitter

To try to formulate a theological understanding of Twitter’s influence on gospel communication, we will evaluate and compare four writers: Beeching and Clough who take an instrumentalist position and Bennett and Dyer who adopt a determinist stance.

Theological Views

Beeching and Clough advocate an instrumentalist analysis of the internet but offer surprisingly little biblical justification. For example, Beeching argues that the internet is mainly “neutral” and not evil, reasoning that it is only legitimate to ascribe moral categories of good and bad to persons.³⁷ Similarly, while Clough accepts that the internet

³⁵ Toren, “Can We See the Naked Theological Truth?,” 93.

³⁶ Examples are cited by Jana Marguerite Bennett, *Aquinas on the Web? Doing Theology in an Internet Age* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 43; Karaflogka, *E-religion*, 109–110; and Stephen D. O’Leary, “Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks,” *The Journal for the American Academy of Religion* 64 (1996): 793.

³⁷ Vicky Beeching, “Children Must Learn to Live in the Online World,” *The Church Times*, 24 January 2014, <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2014/24-january/comment/opinion/children-must-learn-to-live-in-the-online-world>. See also, Vicky

can “dominate” people, he says that this threat is caused by the concrete activity of humans; there is no “internet-related demon” driving humans to this use.³⁸ He refers to the “cultural mandate” of Genesis (1:28) and human freedom to “stand over *this* world as its Lord” but he does not account for the effect of the fall on culture.³⁹ The difficulty with Beeching and Clough’s view, given that they accept the existence of purposeful activity on the internet in a theistic universe, is that the internet must be value-laden. As Monsma et al. argue, values are ultimately defined by the will of God, and these relate not just to outcomes but also to the means for achieving those ends. In other words, the internet cannot be neutral because, as an object of creation in the world, presuppositions, valuing, and normative principles are intertwined in the analysis, design and end product of the technology.⁴⁰

Bennett agrees that the internet mirrors human activity but, in contrast, she thinks it is deterministic, in the sense that it is a culture that shapes people according to its own logic. She argues that the internet should be viewed as one of the “powers” and “principalities” of Col 1:15–16 and Rom 8:38–39, and asserts that in the New Testament these terms refer to a huge variety of intellectual, moral, social or political structures.⁴¹ Her point is not that the internet is demonic, but that it is part of the created but fallen world; it can exercise power to control, distort and deceive, but it can also be “redeemed.”⁴² Bennett’s emphasis on power is helpful, but her biblical justification is questionable. The problem with equating “powers” and “principalities” with the internet is that the terms in these passages are usually taken by commentators to refer to spiritual beings, rather than earthly powers; they describe Christ’s supremacy over the beings, rather than human creations.

A more careful biblical theology is offered by Dyer. He argues that at creation, God gave humans a purpose and function, including a “cultural mandate” and an ability to use technology, reflecting his characteristics as creator. Having made humans in his image, God’s command to subdue and cultivate the earth assumed the use of tools, and his command to

Beeching, “Technology, Friend or Foe?,” *Vicky Beeching*, 10 July 2010, <http://vickybeeching.com/blog/technology-friend-or-foe/>.

³⁸ David Clough, *Unweaving the Web: Beginning to Think Theologically About the Internet*, Grove Ethics E127 (Cambridge: Grove, 2002), 24.

³⁹ Clough, *Unweaving the Web*, 6.

⁴⁰ Stephen V. Monsma et al., *Responsible Technology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 28, 31.

⁴¹ Bennett, *Aquinas on the Web?*, 90.

⁴² Bennett, *Aquinas on the Web?*, 109–10.

name the animals required the creation of language, imbued with identity and values.⁴³ This cultural mandate had limits: humans were forbidden from eating certain fruit but, otherwise, they had creative freedom to fulfil their purpose, mirroring the ruling, relational and communicative characteristics of God.⁴⁴ However, in rebellion, humans used technology in a way that distorted God's purpose, while still reflecting their programming as image bearers. For example, following the fall, Adam and Eve made garments and Cain built a city.⁴⁵ This technology partly fulfilled humanity's cultural mandate but did so to replace God and ameliorate the effects of sin. Hence in the design of these objects, we see "a tendency of usage from which a set of values emerge."⁴⁶ The resulting curse of God meant that humans would no longer communicate directly with God; his presence would be mediated, and technology would be constructed from "sin-cursed material."⁴⁷ However, in redemption, God did not condemn technology; he used it (with its inherent values) graciously to accomplish his redemptive purposes. For example, God gave Moses the law written on tablets and, ultimately, Jesus died on the cross, using wood and nails.⁴⁸ God also promises a final restoration, when humans will be remade in a right relationship with him and technology is used in a right way—God is pictured dwelling in a city with his people; tools are converted from implements of war to cultivation.⁴⁹ Dyer concludes, then, that technologies should be seen, not as neutral but as embodying certain purposes, values, tendencies and extensions, which can be used for good or evil, despite their original designed purpose.

Not everyone would agree with Dyer that Genesis provides a cultural mandate; some would question whether God works redemptively in culture outside of the church; and others might be cautious about taking the pictorial representations of technology in the New Creation literally. However, our focus is on cultural influence, and both Bennett and Dyer seem right in arguing that the biblical picture is that all of human culture is affected by the fall; it shapes beliefs, values and practices, but not absolutely—hence, technologies can reflect God-given human characteristics and be used for good.

⁴³ Gen 1:26; Gen 2:15–20. John Dyer, *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 45–46.

⁴⁴ Gen 2:17.

⁴⁵ Gen 3:21; 4:17.

⁴⁶ Dyer, *From the Garden to the City*, 141.

⁴⁷ Dyer, *From the Garden to the City*, 71.

⁴⁸ Dyer, *From the Garden to the City*, 101–108, 135.

⁴⁹ Isa 2:4; Rev 21. Dyer, *From the Garden to the City*, 137.

This biblical perspective would therefore seem to confirm what the nature of Twitter suggests: that the medium will shape but not absolutely determine the behaviour, values and beliefs of users. In the next section, we will try to tease out what specific behaviours, values, and beliefs might be engendered by Twitter by drawing on Ong's historical and comparative analysis of communication technology.

Ong's Typology

Professor Walter J. Ong (1912–2003) was a Roman Catholic who spent his life studying the social effects of technology and their impact on noetics in Western culture. His thesis, summarised in *Orality and Literacy*, was that human communication and the preservation of knowledge is tied to technological innovation: technologies not only direct our thinking but even “restructure” human consciousness.⁵⁰

Ong's work is useful for our purposes because he considers the ecological or holistic influence of technologies as a historical trajectory which can be extended to Twitter. He also examines how technologies transform the characteristics of orality and literacy, which is an important standard of comparison for Christians who want to preserve both the proclamation and the writing of Scripture.

Ong divides Western history into four main stages of communication development: Oral, Residual Oral,⁵¹ High Literate and Secondary Orality.

i. Oral

Western culture was initially untouched by the knowledge of writing and print; language was merely spoken. Drawing on anthropological studies of oral societies, Ong argues that the characteristics of communication during this period would have related to the auditory, fleeting nature of sound, and the necessity of making words memorable in the absence of visual signifiers. Ong argues that this mode of interlocution shaped people's beliefs, values and behaviour in various ways. For example, there was a greater emphasis on memorisation through performance, interaction with the group was preferred to solitary interpretation; and knowledge relating to hearing was valued over seeing.⁵²

⁵⁰ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 30th anniversary ed., New Accents (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 8.

⁵¹ James C. Raymond, “Media Transforming Media: Implications of Walter Ong's Stages of Literacy,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 10 (1980): 56.

⁵² Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 55–70.

ii. Residual Oral

A transitional age began with the invention of the phonetic alphabet and lasted through the medieval period. It was characterised by the increasing influence of literacy, but with the persistence of oral habits of thought and expression. The invention of the phonetic alphabet by the Semitic people around 1500 BC enabled humans to represent individual sounds visually (not just objects with signs), allowing the exact meaning of written words to be determined.⁵³ This move from sound to vision allowed experience to be fixed and reordered in space, enabling greater analysis and creativity, and it brought about a further restructuring in behaviour, beliefs and values. For example, language and grammar became standardised; narratives became more chronological and linear in structure; an abstract sense of time and space developed; and oral sources of knowledge became seen as inferior to the text.⁵⁴

iii. High Literate

The movement from the oral to chirographic culminated in a high literate culture, in which writing developed independently from its oral base.⁵⁵ The catalyst for this phase was the invention of the European alphabetic printing press in the fifteenth century. “Whereas writing moved language from sound to space, the print locked words into that space,” Ong wrote.⁵⁶ The exact repetition and arrangement of words on a visual plane enabled complex sequencing and analysis. The engagement with freely available printed matter gave rise to a new “inter-textuality” and “higher unity”; but also a greater division and isolation, as personal thoughts seemed more “thing-like, impersonal and religiously neutral.”⁵⁷ In practice, the greater legibility of text and smaller size of books facilitated private silent reading, rather than reading out loud socially; the creation of clear indexes and attentiveness to spatial layouts encouraged observational sciences. The beliefs and values fostered by this change included notions of privacy and plagiarism; and romantic individualistic ideas of originality and creativity.

⁵³ Ong argues that the phonetic alphabet was invented only once (all other forms being derivatives in some way) and it operated “more directly on sound as sound than the other scripts, reducing sound directly to spatial equivalents and in smaller, more analytic, more manageable units than a syllabary.” Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 83–91.

⁵⁴ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 95, 109.

⁵⁵ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 107.

⁵⁶ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 119.

⁵⁷ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 130.

iv. Secondary Orality

The final phase of development in Ong's typology he calls the age of "secondary orality," where some of the characteristics of primary oral culture were revived and transformed by "electronic media." Ong argues that the innovation of the telephone, radio, television, and sound tapes resulted not in the eradication of printed text or the loss of all typographic characteristics. Instead, the commitment to space and sequencing (characteristic of print), was combined with motion and spontaneity (characteristic of oral speech), resulting in communication that was more informal than print, but more deliberate, programmatic and self-conscious than orality. In terms of thought and behaviour, Ong argued that electronic media reintroduced oral patterns such as the sense of participation, a focus on the present, and the use of formulaic elements.⁵⁸ However, like print, electronic media brought a sense of the larger group; but engagement with this community was manufactured and therefore more self-conscious. Although appearing spontaneous and open, there was more closure to the communication; it was tightly controlled and interactions were staged and adapted to the medium.

In summary, then, Ong thought that as technologies moved away from the primacy of orality—amplifying, amputating and mediating aspects of human communication—humans underwent a "consciousness-raising" and an "inward turn."⁵⁹ In other words, as communication technology developed, people's behaviour, values, and beliefs became more self-aware and self-centred. Before applying Ong's framework to Twitter, two criticisms of his work should be noted.

The major secular argument against Ong's thesis was that he did not prove his oral-literacy polarity or the causal connection between technology and consciousness, particularly as communication technologies coexist in cultures.⁶⁰ However, for the Christian reader, Ong's hard determinism maybe of more concern. According to Ong, knowledge is historically constituted, to the extent that it is questionable whether humans are able to think and act independently of these processes. Such an absolute connection between medium and message would mean that it is impossible to know universal truth, contrary to Christ's claims.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 134.

⁵⁹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 174–75.

⁶⁰ See John Hartley, "After Ongism. The Evolution of Networked Intelligence," in *Orality and Literacy*, 30th anniversary ed., New Accents (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 211, 219.

⁶¹ John 8:32.

Ong's analysis may be too deterministic and stops before the digital era, with the invention of social media like Twitter. However, his trajectory and oral-literacy comparison can still elucidate ways in which Twitter might influence human behaviour, values and beliefs.

Twitter: A "Twertiary" Orality?

The digital age of Twitter arguably sees a Twertiary or tertiary orality, where language resembles but is further abstracted from primary orality.⁶² The features of literacy, such as the commitment to visual space, sequencing and process, are greatly developed and transformed by computer processing power, which further frees human memory and automates analysis. This is illustrated by the hypertext hashtag (#) in Twitter, which allows a user to search a topic, indexed chronologically, across the vast global network, simply by clicking on a linked keyword. The diachronic is combined with the synchronic, the referential with the relational and navigational, enabling users to view subjects in "real time," as well as the past.⁶³ A new and enhanced form of inter-textuality is made possible because this feature is combined with certain characteristics that are typical of primary orality, namely situational, spontaneous, informal, and participatory qualities. However, the instantaneous nature of communication can only occur through the limitation of text to 140 characters. Hence, although the greater processing power allows more breadth of analysis, the increased volume of short, disconnected sentences retards depth of understanding. Similarly, although it is possible to search diachronically and read slowly, users are drawn into the fast-paced discussions of the moment.

These characteristics of Twitter can be seen to shape behaviour, values and beliefs in similar ways to the broader internet paradigm. In practice, for example, Twitter allows users almost instantaneous textual interaction with people around the globe. Hence, Christians can potentially use Twitter to communicate with a greater number of previously unreached people. However, while "inspirational" quotes may enable some Christians to have a greater influence than expected (relative

⁶² "Twertiary" is a tongue-in-cheek term that I have invented, conjoining Twitter with tertiary. However, the term reflects a serious point about the growth of language within the medium, which is not just independent and divorced from the offline vernacular, but is born in and refers only to interactions in Twitter—the terms "retweet" and "cuttwee" are good examples.

⁶³ Karaflogka, *E-Religion*, 155.

to their number of followers),⁶⁴ the powerful and wealthy offline still have the most influence online.⁶⁵ Users are also only able to communicate in two short sentences and often adopt an abbreviated form of language. Although Christians like John Piper argue that it is possible to utilise a “proverbial” form of concise and compelling communication for the medium,⁶⁶ not all Scripture and doctrine can be explained in two lines and Twitter does not lend itself to detailed, linear argument.⁶⁷

In relation to values and beliefs, Twitter engenders a shared sense of “absolute”⁶⁸ or “timeless time”⁶⁹ as people are unified across time and space; and an awareness of eternality as “our traces become potentially uncancellable.”⁷⁰ Notions of place are challenged as the medium creates the “death of distance”⁷¹ offline and the appearance of a Twittersphere online. New ideas of creativity also emerge as all users can become publishers and even edit the software infrastructure of Twitter.⁷² However, although the medium may appear to provide a more open or democratic space to exchange ideas, in some ways it is more closed than previous technological forms. Not only are users subject to rules of use, search results prioritise messages that are popular and pay, stifling unpopular

⁶⁴ Amy O’leary, “Christian Leaders Are Powerhouses on Twitter,” *The New York Times*, 2 June 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/02/technology/christian-leaders-are-powerhouses-on-twitter.html>.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Lewis Wiltshire, “2013: The Year on Twitter,” *Twitter Blogs*, 12 November 2013, <https://blog.twitter.com/en-gb/2013/2013-the-year-on-twitter>.

⁶⁶ John Piper, “How Do I Think About Tweeting? — A Response to John Mayer,” *Desiring God*, 25 July 2011, <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/how-do-i-think-about-tweeting-a-response-to-john-mayer>.

⁶⁷ People have attempted to use Twitter to present a linear story or line of argument by writing in two line sections, but this use is difficult given the medium’s function. However, this possible subversion again shows that the medium does not absolutely determine use.

⁶⁸ Clough, *Unweaving the Web*, 14.

⁶⁹ Karaflogka, *E-Religion*, 157.

⁷⁰ Antonio Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet*, trans. Marian Way (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 13. At the time of writing, it is possible to delete your own tweets, but not your tweets quoted or “retweeted” by other users. However, personal information published by search engines may be subject to legal challenges.

⁷¹ The Archbishops’ Council 1999, *Cybernauts Awake! Ethical and Spiritual Implications of Computers, Information Technology and the Internet* (London: Church House, 1999), 3.

⁷² Twitter is “open source” software that allows programmers to develop software applications.

messages, including certain aspects of the gospel.⁷³ Twitter can manipulate and censor truth, concealing such intervention more readily than with previous communication technologies.⁷⁴ The opinions of certain groups, particularly the poor, elderly and uneducated, are also marginalised because they are not able to access the medium.⁷⁵

The overall effect of the digital age of Twitter could be summarised as a further inward turn—in other words, the medium makes users more self-centred and self-conscious. People are free to form relationships independently of physical features on Twitter,⁷⁶ but this is only possible if they make themselves visible through a tweeted persona. The dilemma created by the internet is who to “be” online. Similarly, the possibility of tweeting anywhere fosters a sense of intimacy and “massively shared experiences,”⁷⁷ but a user has to be information conscious and interrupt offline life to tweet.⁷⁸ As Turkle says, the result of this relentless connectivity is a new solitude: being “alone together.”⁷⁹ Hence, the imperative to tweet, in order to create an online existence and identity, arguably creates a greater awareness of and distance from these aspects of the self.

Twitter might therefore be said to influence gospel communication by providing a greater breadth and analysis of but less depth in communication. The medium values information that is popular, paying, present-focused and personal, while creating new human-centred beliefs about place, time, creativity, identity, and existence.

Conclusion

In considering how Twitter might influence the communication of the gospel, this article has suggested that Christians need to start by trying to cut through the myths about Twitter and ask, “What sort of tool

⁷³ See, “Real-time Local Twitter Trends,” *Trendsmap*, <http://trendsmap.com/>

⁷⁴ See, “Twitter to Selectively ‘Censor’ Tweets by Country,” *BBC News*, 27 January 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-16753729>.

⁷⁵ Fuchs, *Social Media*, 190.

⁷⁶ Clough, *Unweaving the Web*, 19.

⁷⁷ Sarno, “Jack Dorsey on the Twitter Ecosystem, Journalism and How to Reduce Reply Spam. Part II.”

⁷⁸ Ted Turnau, *Popologetics : Popular Culture in Christian Perspective* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2012), 301.

⁷⁹ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 18.

is it?"⁸⁰ Twitter is a micro-blogging website, not simply a new way to communicate. The Bible's emphasis on embodied place and sociality, suggests a preference for understanding Twitter as a communication tool like writing (rather than an environment), which creates a form of culture (rather than a social life). In relation to Twitter's influence, the technology is a cultural form in which purposeful activity is pursued in God's world. It is therefore value-laden, like all cultural forms, and not a 'neutral' medium, as instrumentalists claim. A more biblical deterministic view is to see Twitter as a reflection of fallen creation, which shapes behaviour, values, and practices independently of human choice, although not absolutely—hence it can be used for good. In terms of specific practices that Twitter might engender, on the one hand, the medium extends breadth of analysis and communication but, on the other hand, it limits depth of understanding. It arguably fosters values and beliefs that are human-centred, prioritising popular information and challenging Christian notions of identity and existence, as well as time and place. As for a Christian response to Twitter, it is vital to recognise that Twitter is never used as a sole means of communication; it coexists and is utilised in conjunction with other communication forms, mitigating its influence. Nevertheless, as our world becomes increasingly internet dependent, evangelicals need to reflect theologically on the ethical ramifications of communicating the gospel through media that have particular deterministic proclivities. Even if Twitter is used by Christians in a careful, limited and specific way, the question of how we should use the technology must be related to the question of how the technology shapes the proclamation and reading of scripture, along with other practices, values and beliefs.

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⁸⁰ Ian Paul, "Children and the Internet," *Psephizo*, 26 January 2014, <http://www.psephizo.com/life-ministry/children-and-the-internet/>.