

***Some thoughts on evangelism, technology and power: Or, what a non-Christian is looking for in a Christian website***

**Maura McCarthy**

**Who I am, what I studied and where my work is coming from**

- I've just finished a doctoral thesis in social anthropology at the University of Oxford.
- I study of American varieties of Christian evangelism and their interplay with new technologies.
- I'm going to speak briefly about my discipline and my research findings. I'll also suggest how anthropological methods might help in reaching non-Christians.

**About anthropology**

Anthropology is a wide field, and means in its most basic sense “the study of Man”. Most people are familiar with anthropology through one of its sub-disciplines - the study of human physiology (physical or forensic anthropology); the study of human evolutionary development (which can include primatology, the study of the great apes); the study of language (linguistic anthropology); or the study of the material remains of our shared human past (archeology).

My branch of anthropology, which is called social or cultural anthropology, is probably best known to the public through the work of seminal researchers in the field like Margaret Mead and Franz Boas.

Boas, Mead and other early figures in the field of anthropology realized that to understand a culture, one must take every possible aspect of a society into consideration – its institutions, history, politics, religion, art, architecture, the physiology of its people and the landscape that surrounds them.

Implicit in the work of both was a unifying belief in the equality of all of humanity. They also had an ability to see our species as homogenous in our will to create cultures, and yet endlessly diverse in our expressions of that will – that is, in the cultures that we create. These studies made people think more critically about their own culture and ritual practices.

**About ethnography**

Today, anthropologists study every culture on earth, and often specialize in certain aspects of a culture: law, religion, trade or gender. The common denominator that defines social anthropology today is the creation of an ethnography based on a lengthy first-hand fieldwork period, in which the anthropologist lives with the subject community and as much as possible, tries to participate in the community. The resulting ethnography is a written description of a society that incorporates as many aspects of its culture as possible to give a complete, in-depth account or a particular group of people at a particular time.

The primary methodology which social anthropologists use is participant observation. Participant observation is the gathering of information about a community by living with that community, and trying as much as possible to become a part of that community.

Contemporary anthropologists typically incorporate a bit about their own background and beliefs into their ethnographies, so that readers know something of the writer's allegiances and biases, and can criticize the snapshot that emerges in light of those biases. This practice has become known as reflexivity.

A bit about my own faith background – I'm a “faith-friendly” non-believer.

**About my fieldwork**

I spent eighteen months performing fieldwork in LINC-Net, one of Campus Crusade for Christ's ministries which heavily employs computer technologies in its international evangelistic efforts.

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During my fieldwork I was looking at two separate, but intersecting issues: the lived daily experience of being an evangelical Christian (taking into account not just what people say about their faith, but how they live it through their daily actions); and the social impact of computer technology.

### **My research findings**

#### **Finding 1: Technologies are ambiguous**

- Technology can be (or mean) anything:
- technology is anything that humans create and use
- technology is also the learned information that humans possess and exchange, which tells them how to use these artefacts.
- Even within what looks like a fairly homogenous population, technology can have some radically different meanings, associations and powers.
- Sometimes it is difficult to tell where technology ends and its human – and divine – users begin.

#### **Finding 2: Context helps to determine the meanings of technology**

Context is crucial to understanding the values and expectations placed upon technology by any society. The first steps in establishing context are to orient your question in time and space, and to specify the boundaries of the group that you are discussing in some way

My context encompassed both a delimited community of believers (Campus Crusade for Christ International), and the wider American society from which they spring. Therefore, my conclusions make both broad statements about technology in the industrialized world, and the specific community of believers at Crusade's Orlando headquarters.

#### **Finding 3: Technology in context among American evangelicals at Crusade - a wellspring of spiritual and social power**

Two general points about the Internet: The first point that large studies of technology use in Europe and North America have confirmed is that there is no such thing as "virtuality". Online activities reflect a real person, and his or her real priorities.

The second, and related finding, is that the employment of new technologies almost always seems to be an expression of power in some form. Logging on to the Internet says something about the power of individual – access to computer technology and the knowledge of how to use it implies membership in what we call the "first world" - the possession of material and economic resources, and education. Once on the Internet, individuals act to further their real-world goals. Whether keeping power, forging new sources of power, or combating the dominant power structure, almost everyone who uses new computer technologies does so with some expectation of achievement. What is achieved may be economic, social, political or commercial power.

In the specific context of Campus Crusade for Christ, I saw the Internet and computer technologies being used in a variety of ways that support the finding that technology imparts power. But the power that Crusaders were pursuing online was primarily *spiritual*. What distinguished Crusade's acquisition of power through the Internet from that of a secular organization was how they used that power – the ministry routinely turns economic and social power into spiritual power.

Secularization refers to the removal of religion from the public sphere. There was a time when secularization was seen as an inevitable process that would come to all societies in time. My observations while at Campus Crusade seemed to contradict the secularization thesis. To describe what I was seeing, I adopted the term *sacralization*, taken from sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke. This term refers to the infusion of social life and secular institutions with religious symbolism, language and meaning.

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In order to fulfill the Great Commission, people at Campus Crusade use technology to try to transform areas of public life from strictly secular domains into places where religious beliefs have influence. They use the economic or social power that they acquire through using the Internet to reach ever more people with the gospel. Prayer is the key mechanism through which economic power and social power is transformed into spiritual power.

### **Using the power of the Internet wisely when encountering non-Christians**

The final segment of my talk will deal with how non-Christians may view attempts to evangelize on the web, and how Internet evangelists can apply anthropological principles to better understand the communities they want to reach.

#### **Perform participant observation on your own**

By performing a little participant observation of your own, you may be able to improve the quality of the contacts that you make, and draw more people to your site.

#### **Observe!**

“Bridge sites” incorporate information about the gospel in a website that is (on the surface) dedicated to a secular topic. A good bridge site incorporates the language and iconographic symbolism of their targeted audiences. Two of my favourite bridge sites: David Bruce’s Hollywood Jesus and Crusade’s Leadership University administrated site, Stonewall Revisited.

The term I use to describe the cumulative effect of language and symbol in establishing the tone of a secular website is “representational register”. The term “speech register” is used by linguists to describe a variable speech pattern that is used in distinct social circumstances, like baby-talk, technical jargon or even ethnicity-specific accents and verbal mannerisms. In a website, a representational register performs a similar function, by incorporating a written language form with symbolic visual and audio elements in order to establish an authoritative identity.

#### **Participate!**

Determining the representational register of your target community is just a matter of observation. But to get a real relationship with your target community going, you have to emphasize the “participant” part of participant observation. You have to get involved with the people and secular sites that constitute your community. If you want to share the gospel with people online effectively:

- stay connected through reciprocal links with non-Christian sites
- stay interested and show that interest through topical chat on the boards with other community members
- make your website and your contacts an ongoing commitment in your real life.

#### **Be Reflexive!**

And finally, be sensitive to how the members of your new community see the power of the Christian church. Be aware of the worldly power of Christianity in America today, and be honest with yourself and your new non-Christian friends about it. Consider it potentially useful baggage that, like it or not, you take into the mission field with you.

Performing your own participant observation with a secular community will help you see, from the non-Christian perspective, exactly what a non-Christian is looking for in a Christian website.