

FACEBOOK: A NEW INSTRUMENT FOR THE PROPAGATION OF PEACE IN THE WORLD?

■ LUIS ERNESTO DERBEZ-BAUTISTA

Introduction

The Internet has reached a scale and level of impact that no business, industry, religious institution or government can ignore. Like any technological phenomenon with its scale and speed, it presents myriad opportunities, which consumers and enterprises have been quick and enthusiastic to grasp. However, some businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises (SMEs) – the labor engine of many economies – have been uneven in their uptake, but they are moving online in increasing numbers and with an increasingly intense commitment.

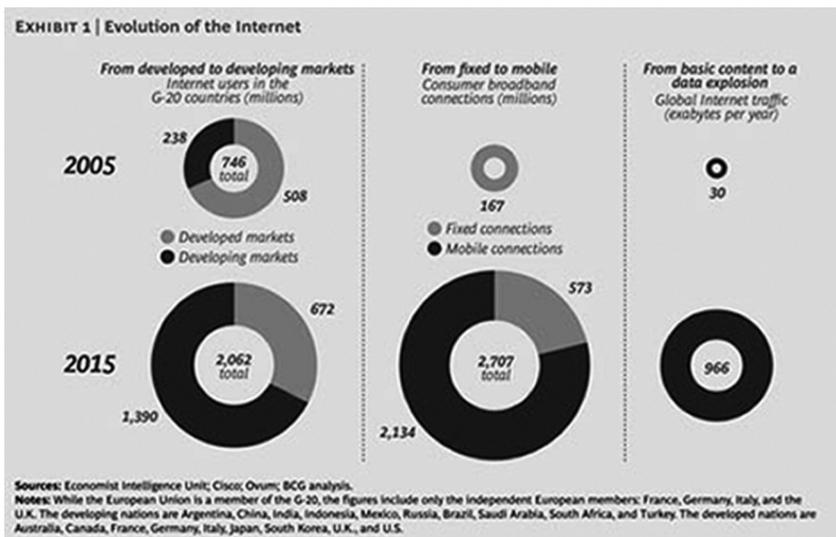
Since its beginning in 1985, the Internet has not stopped growing. A recent Ernst and Young study¹ found that, (a) the Internet economy is contributing up to 8 percent of GDP in some economies, powering growth, and creating jobs and (b) social networks reach about 80 percent of users in developed and developing economies alike. The estimate of this study is that by 2016 there will be 3 billion Internet users globally – almost half the world's population, and mobile devices – smartphones and tablets – will account for four out of five broadband connections. And technological progress in this area has long been characterized by exponential growth in processing speed, bandwidth, and data storage. An example should suffice to illustrate it: whilst the Intel 80386 microprocessor, introduced in 1985 held 275,000 transistors, today's Intel Core i7 Sandy Bridge-E processor holds 2.27 billion transistors, or nearly 2^{13} times as many. As growth motors along, it is easy to lose track of just how large the exponential numbers get.

What has been changing even faster than technology in the Internet is the way it is used to establish social communication amongst people. As the advent of the so-called *social network sites*² strongly demonstrates, users have established new manners of interaction when using the web. As these changes

¹ Ernst&Young, *The Internet Economy in the G20*, March 19, 2012. Obtained via web at E&Y international page.

² This genre of Internet-based services includes blogs, wikis, podcasts, content-sharing sites (e.g., Flickr, YouTube), collaborative productions (e.g., Wikipedia, OhMyNews) and virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life).

in use of *social networks* take place at a dizzying speed, they have become increasingly difficult to understand either by those using them, as well as by large organizations (such as the Catholic Church) that seem unable to understand the use of the new technologies of information (TICs) in their everyday life. *Social network sites* such as Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn to use just a few examples, have ingrained in the daily life of the majority of the population, to the extent that most young users no longer think of them as anything new or special; *social networking* has become the new factor which defines their lives to the point where most of them believe that belonging to one of such networks is indispensable for their existence.



Many users however do not understand the threats imbedded in using these *social networks* – as is often the case with fast-paced change and complex issues – thus many governments and religious institutions are still trying to determine what their role in establishing rules for their use should be. Whatever decision each one takes, it has become clear that no one – individual, business, government or religious organization – can afford to ignore the ability of the *new social network sites* to deliver more value and wealth to more consumers and citizens than any technological transformation since the Industrial Revolution. It is because of this, that we must consider whether use of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and the like, can help the Catholic Church pass along in a better way its message of *Pacem in Terris* to the world.

Facebook as an instrument

A recent paper stated that “moral panic is a common reaction to new forms of communication. . . . The story with social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook and MySpace is not any different. Unsafe disclosure of information, cyberbullying, addiction, risky behavior and contacting dangerous communities are but a few of the concerns raised in the media about the use of online social networks”.³

All *social network sites* are simply that, an instrument to a purpose, instruments which can be positive or negative in their effects. However, the more one looks at the new *social network sites* and their behavior, the more one learns about the interaction between its users as *both producers and consumers of content*; a trend which is forcing our society to review the way information is presented to the general public when one wishes to promote a good, a service, a faith or any other product. One in particular, Facebook, merits our attention for the speed of its growth and the importance it has taken on in the lives of many young people around the world.

Facebook is a *social networking service* launched in February 2004, operated and privately owned by Facebook Inc. Its popularity has being extraordinary allowing it to count on more than 845 million active users as of February 2012. As can be verified in the ensuing table, the success of Facebook has allowed it to grow from a college *social network*, to the largest source of social communication in just an eight-year period.

Facebook: Total active users

Date	Users (in millions)	Days later	Monthly growth
August 26, 2008	100	1,665	178.38%
April 8, 2009	200	225	13.33%
September 15, 2009	300	160	9.38%
February 5, 2010	400	143	6.99%
July 21, 2010	500	166	4.52%
January 5, 2011	600	168	3.57%
May 30, 2011	700	145	3.45%
September 22, 2011	800	115	3.73%

Source: Wikipedia April 2012

³ Sebastian Valenzuela, Nemsu Park and Kerk F. Kee, Lessons from Facebook: The Effect of Social Network Sites on College Students' Social Capital, Paper submitted to the Ninth International Symposium on Online Journalism, Austin, Tx., April 4-5, 2008.

Whereas Facebook and MySpace have become the favorite *social networks* for the young, older consumers see online networking as an occasional practice. This difference in approach has created an age divide which is becoming more and more important for businesses and other organizations in their quest for world-wide sales of their products.

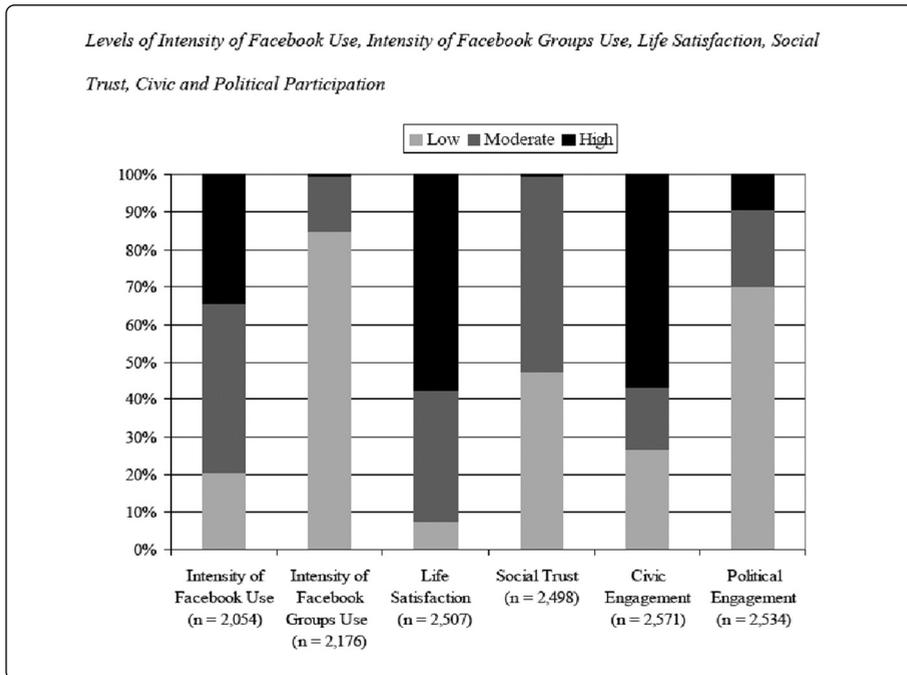
Older participants in *social networks* are wary of providing personal information on the web, using the sites to fill a specific need, such as connecting with old classmates, posting resumes or networking with colleagues. On the other hand, younger users are generally willing to divulge personal information in order to receive targeted messaging – they typically have fewer privacy concerns than their older counterparts. Overall, there is a prevalent sense of resignation across age groups that personal information can be easily accessed via the web, and consumers typically accept advertising on *social networking sites* as a way to maintain free participation in the web.

Like most *social network sites*, Facebook provides a formatted web page into which each user can enter personal information. After completing their profile, users are prompted to identify others with whom they have a relationship, either by searching for registered users of Facebook or by requesting their contacts to join Facebook (usually by e-mail). Once someone is accepted as a “friend”, not only the two users’ personal profiles but also their entire *social networks* are disclosed to each other. This allows each user to traverse networks by clicking through “friends” profiles, so that one’s *social network* snowballs rapidly across people and institutions.⁴ This capability is the backbone of Facebook and other *social network sites* and is what attracts millions of users around the globe.

Facebook profiles also include two types of messaging services. A private system, which is very similar to a webmail service, and a public system called “The Wall”, where “friends” leave comments to the owner of the profile that can be viewed by other users. Usually, “The Wall” contains short messages that reflect sentiments, common activities between “friends”, or call attention to external websites or events. Among the most popular modules users can incorporate in their profiles is “Facebook Groups”, which allows users to create and join groups based around common interests and activities. The “Groups” application displays each individual’s groups as well as groups their “friends” have joined recently. Thus, an important share of the

⁴ Walther, J.B., Van Der Heide, B., Kim, S.-Y., Westerman, D., & Tong, S.T., The role of friends’ appearance and behavior on evaluations of individuals on Facebook: Are we known by the company we keep? *Human Communication Research*, 34(1), 28–49, 2008.

civic and political impact of Facebook should occur within groups developed by users and organizations. This includes contacting officials, protesting, boycotting or buying products for political reasons and signing petitions. Obviously, participation in *social networking* mostly for entertainment can lead to a user's isolation, rather than a user's participation, in those social issues confronted by their living communities.⁵ However such conclusion may be inaccurate as the evaluation of Valenzuela *et al.* seems to imply that contrary to common opinion, participation in Facebook encourages strong civil involvement in those users of the site.⁶



Utilizing Facebook

As the Valenzuela *et al.* study suggests, new types of communities may be emerging based largely on interactions devoid of physical contact capable of encouraging people to participate in civic engagement in the societies they belong to physically. Furthermore, as events leading to the “Arab

⁵ It is frequently said that Facebook isolates family members living together and integrates family members living apart.

⁶ Valenzuela *et al.*, *op. cit.*

Spring” corroborate, use of the Internet and *social networks* to communicate events happening in a determinate place or situation can have tremendous real effects in the development of political and social changes. One can therefore think of using such instruments to create positive and/or negative trends in pushing change. Indeed as a paper by Piselli⁷ illustrates, social networks can exist without traditional reciprocal recognition of identities, as in modern society this is just one of the many ways in which people interact today thanks to the Internet. As Piselli concludes, the new process of communication via the Internet enriches and expands, rather than replaces, the traditional social networks that were defined by geographical presence, redefining concepts of residence and friendship in a way that completely transform their functions, features, and symbolic meanings.

Thus, today’s *social networks* are key to many of the myriad flows within society that diffuse information and knowledge, processes that in turn influence people’s behavior and actions. A great deal of evidence has been generated lately to sustain this argument and show that who you talk to in your own *social network*, can be very influential on what you learn and what you do regardless of where you live. This new paradigm of social communication and its influence on individual and collective decisions is just getting attention from businesses and experts in marketing and communication all over the world.

The new paradigm challenges two traditional concepts: that of the geography of social networks – it was generally assumed that proximity was fundamental to network structures and operations as we are more likely to know near than distant neighbors, and more likely to interact with those who live close to our homes and whom we may encounter in a range of structured as well as unstructured arenas. Now thanks to Facebook and other similar sites the spatial concentration of *social networks* has changed, a fact which has substantial implications for the geography of attitudes and behavior. It also challenges the concept about the passive consumer. Whereas in the past sound marketing indicated you had to present an attractive proposal to entice consumer appetite for your product, today’s *social networks* are integrated by persons who enjoy *consuming and producing material simultaneously*. For the first time in our modern history, users of *social network sites* are fully interactive: who you are influences who you interact with; who you interact with influences what you learn and how you interpret the information and knowledge

⁷ Piselli, F., Communities, places, and social networks, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 50: 867-78, 2007.

gained; and such local sources of “valued” information influence how you behave – all of which takes place in spatially-undefined contexts linked not by geography but by inputs, processes and outputs in the shared space of the *social network* you join.

Learning how to use and profit from this new paradigm is essential if the Catholic Church wishes to make its message acceptable to large numbers of young participants in this new phenomenon.

How the Catholic Church can learn to love Facebook

Properly defined, group membership can encourage an open engagement of its members through a number of mechanisms. First, it can be an excellent vehicle to open channels for discussion of the Church’s message. As we know, we are finding more and more difficult to engage the young in an open discussion when using traditional methods. Use of the new Internet instruments such as Facebook could allow large groups of people discuss the message of the Church’s Encyclicals such as *Pacem in Terris*. Discussion is integral to learning and to encourage efficacy among believers and non-believers alike, leading to more informed decision-making and higher rates of participation in the general population.

By utilizing the instruments chosen by users themselves, this discussion process could encourage learning and understanding of the Catholic Church’s position amongst citizens by requesting the expression of their views, and forcing more thoughtful consideration of other prevailing viewpoints. Engaging in open debate is especially important in helping people develop skills that encourage a deeper understanding and subsequent engagement in religious affairs, highlighting the importance of diverse discussion groups to reach a consensus.

By breaking the traditional paradigm of discussing issues inside geographical close boundaries – that is, among like-minded people who largely resemble each other socially and religiously – the Catholic Church could respond to the new technological environments which today are more diverse when compared to personal interactions. People have more ability and desire to exercise a participative approach where they receive information but also provide information about the issues discussed. New, albeit intangible, venues unrestrained by geography will enable diversified discussion groups and a more engaged participant than otherwise would be. Facebook exists as an emporium of diverse and low-cost information where people can communicate freely, without the restriction of time and space.

Additionally, discussion that takes place online could engage people who otherwise would never participate in the Church’s message. Although Face-

book has an application for chatting and discussion, most dialogue takes place on message boards and over the course of a few days or months. A group member can post a comment on a message board and either never return to see if others have responded, or return several days later to continue the conversation. Either way, this type of discussion adds a new dimension to our traditional understanding of deliberation.

Conclusion?

It is not easy to determine whether using Facebook or any like *social network* would enhance the passing and discussing of the Catholic Church's message to the world. As the jury now stands, we have many competing as well as consistent expectations of the influence of online group activity on religious engagement. Whereas for the business community it is becoming quite evident that they must engage Facebook in order to stay in the market with their products, evidence about the political and religious advantages of using such *social networks* has just recently begun to be studied. The experience of Internet messaging could be useful for an initial evaluation of the value of Facebook to propagate the message of the Catholic Church in today's technology-oriented society.

Whereas with the advent of Internet messaging early work quickly called into question the exchange of face-to-face interaction for online correspondence, later work identified areas in which the two forms were similar and even complementary. Thus, as we continue to move forward in understanding the effects of *social networking*, greater attention must be paid to the type of information being exchanged, specific venues being used, and the quality of opinions being expressed online. Nevertheless one conclusion cannot be avoided: given the explosive use of Facebook and other *social networks* the Catholic Church cannot remain passive and must enter the field if it wishes to remain present in the hearts of the young generations of this world.