

Effects of New Media on Youth Ministry

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For Graduation in the Honors College

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The College at Brockport  
December 9, 2015

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## *Abstract*

The purpose of this study is to determine the effects that new media, including social media and the mobile internet, have had on teenagers by examining youth ministry. Research is conducted in the field of communication on the subject, but the majority of the information comes from personal interviews with youth ministry leaders. These individuals are either program leaders at a specific church or are on staff with the youth ministry organization called Young Life. James Carey's two definitions of communication, ritual and transmission, will be used to analyze the information gathered through the interviews and the research.

Technology has been affecting religion since the dawn of humanity. One of the more prominent examples is the printing press, which was first used to print a bible and later played a role in the Protestant Reformation. When the United States of America was born, religious diversity was a cornerstone, and that is still true today. However, church attendance and the number of people claiming to be religious has declined drastically in recent times. At a time when religion is losing influence in America, new media have come into play. Social media and mobile internet have had a significant impact on culture, particularly on generation z, which includes anyone born after 1995. These young people have grown up in the digital age, but how has that affected them? An analysis of youth ministry, a sector that is based on social relationships between leaders and students, provides an interesting perspective on how teenagers have been affected by these new media.

*Table of Contents*

I.	Religion in America.....	1
II.	Technology and Religion.....	4
III.	New Media.....	6
IV.	Research and Methodology.....	8
V.	Body.....	11
	a. Social Media: Transmission.....	11
	b. Social Media: Ritual.....	15
	c. Mobile Internet: Transmission.....	21
	d. Mobile Internet: Ritual.....	26
VI.	Conclusion.....	30
VII.	References.....	35

## *Religion in America*

The perception of Christianity in the United States of America is not what it used to be. The Bill of Rights allows for the freedom of religion in the First Amendment. However, limitations on religion's ability to interfere with government were put in place with the concept of separation of church and state. These clauses allowed religious diversity to thrive in a country full of primarily European immigrants without putting the government under the influence of any belief systems. However, religion has consistently been a controversial and oft-debated topic. Some modern-day discussions include the Pledge of Allegiance and its use of the words "under God;" the tension between religious institutions and homosexuals; the occurrence of prayer in public spaces; the Westboro Baptist Church. The development of storylines such as these has affected the view of Christianity in the eyes of the public, and may be related to the apparent change in the importance of religion in daily life.

Tobin Grant is a blogger for the Religious News Service. In one of Grant's "Corner of Church and State" blog posts, he addresses what he refers to as the "great decline" of religion in America. Grant compiles graphs based on data provided by Gallup that show some of the religious trends in the United States. According to the information collected by Gallup, 94 percent of the population identified with a specific religion in 1994. In 2013, that number is down to 85. Grant explains that the main reason for this change is the increase in "nones," or people that answer "none" when asked what religion they identify with. Gallup reports that in 1948, one percent of the people polled claimed that they were unaffiliated with any religion. In the year 2014,

those claiming to be unaffiliated made up twenty percent of the population. Not only are less people identifying themselves with specific religions, but church attendance is also decreasing. Around twenty years ago, 62 percent of the population said they attended church more than “seldom” or “never.” Two years ago, that percentage was 53. From 2012 to 2013, there was a three percent drop in people attending church more than “seldom” or “never.” While some of these decreases are not very dramatic, church attendance has been dropping an average of two percent every five years (Grant). But why are these numbers important? To answer this question, one has to look back at America’s 250-year history.

The nation was born on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776 when the founding fathers signed the Declaration of Independence to secede from the rule of England. From the beginning, religion has been entwined in politics in the United States of America. The original text of the Declaration contains several references to a deity. For example, the very first sentence of the document;

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. (Rakoye)

In this statement, the founding fathers allude to the fact that the colonies deserve to be a nation because it is God’s will that they be equal to other countries. The writers also mention a deity in the next sentence, one that has become one of the better-known statements in the Declaration.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. (Rakoye)

Again, a single deity is referred to when the founders describe the rights of an individual. They state that it is because of a “Creator” that everyone is allowed the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Although the existence of a single entity is present throughout the Declaration, forcing religion on citizens was not in the agenda.

The First Amendment to the Constitution addresses the role of religion in America. Its two clauses allow religious freedom while prohibiting religious imposition. Thomas Jefferson’s idea about having a “wall” that separates church and state was meant to protect the government from religious influence as well as protect individuals and churches from government intrusion (“Freedom of Religion”). It is a double-edged sword where both edges need the other in order to function. Decades later during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln gave the Emancipation Proclamation speech, which was put into practice on January 1<sup>st</sup> of 1863. At the conclusion of the speech, Lincoln alluded to his personal religious beliefs.

And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.  
 (“Emancipation Proclamation”)

In this statement, Lincoln sounds as if he is almost praying in the moment, asking for the favor of God to rest on the decision he has made. These documents and transcripts depict several examples of government officials proclaiming their religious beliefs, but there is also the general population to consider.

Many of the first settlers to come to America did so to achieve religious freedom. These groups, including the New England Puritans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians,

and Quakers, came across the Atlantic to establish roots in a new land. Some religions created utopias where people with common beliefs could govern themselves. The Mormons are perhaps the best example of these communities, having several utopian societies that were established in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Religions that traced their roots back to over-arching European ideologies began to fragment as they migrated across the Atlantic. The result was a growing number of religions in America, where tolerance was becoming a necessity even as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century (“History of Religion”). Once the colonies became a country, religious tolerance became law with the First Amendment to the Constitution. While the earliest newcomers in America belonged to mainly Christian sects, the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a large influx of non-Protestant immigrants, which began to change the religious landscape of the country (“History of Religion”). Fast-forward to recent decades when blogger Tobin Grant refers to recent religious trends as a “great decline” and the difference in the view of Christianity can be measured. Grant observed that the number of Americans who do not find religion to be out-of-date has dropped by 10 percent in the last 17 years. There is a steep 4 percent drop between 2010 and 2012 (Grant). What are some of the factors that can affect religion? The history of religion in the United States is full of shifts and changes, and the case can be made that technology has the ability to affect Christianity in America.

### *Technology and Religion*

Technology and religion have been intertwined for centuries. One of the most important inventions in the history of mankind was the printing press. Johannes Gutenberg

developed the metal-type press in the late 1430s. What was the first book that was printed with this world-changing invention? The 42-line Gutenberg Bible (Chappell). Printing a bible was not the only early religious application for the printing press. The Protestant Reformation was begun when Martin Luther wrote the 95 Theses, which challenged certain policies of the Church in Germany and Europe as a whole. In a short time span, copies of Luther's writings spread all over Germany and the continent thanks to the capabilities of the printing press. A religious movement spanning an entire continent was initiated by this still relatively new communication technology ("Martin Luther"). More recently, Samuel Morse and his assistant Alfred Vail finished developing the telegraph in the 1840s. The United States government gave the two funding to test their telegraph between Washington, D.C. and Baltimore. The first telegraph that was successfully transmitted contained the phrase "What hath God wrought ("Morse Code")." That is two communication technologies that were first applied with religion in mind. Other technologies, such as the automobile, can also have a lasting impact on the practice of religion. In Robert and Helen Lynd's book *Middletown: A Study in American Culture*, the effect of the automobile on the small city of Muncie, Indiana is analyzed. The Lynds spoke to many residents of this "Middletown" to determine the trends and changes that occurred when the automobile came to the city. In the late 1800s, Middletown residents didn't have vehicles, but rather they walked to places or took a horse-drawn cart. By 1923, there was a car for every 6.1 persons in the city. Many of the local churches saw a decrease in church attendance because people had started to use Sunday as a day to go for a drive (Lynd). One minister spoke about automobiles, saying "the thing those people have who go off motoring on Sunday instead of going to church. If you want to use your

car on Sunday, take it out Sunday morning and bring some shut-ins to church and Sunday School (259).” Churches also lost attendance because of the vast amounts of advertising trying to encourage people to get out on the open road. Other residents stated how they believed family units were weakening with the introduction of automobiles, with one housewife stating that “in the nineties we were all much more together (257).” The invention of new technology has the potential to change culture, and that seems like an understatement when it comes to some of the most recent additions to the communication technology atmosphere.

### *New Media*

Social media have really picked up steam in the last few years. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and other outlets have changed the way people can communicate with others over a distance. Individuals can create an entire personality online that can be viewed by whomever they want. A teenager in the United States can “follow” a politician from Europe, or an international sports figure. Adults can reconnect with old acquaintances by adding them as a friend on Facebook. Photos can be instantly shared or sent with Instagram and Snapchat, respectively. These social media are thriving nowadays, and part of the reason is because of mobile internet. Another technology that has recently hit its stride, mobile internet refers to the ability to connect to the internet from more locations. Whether it is through a wireless connection at a coffee shop or a smartphone that can support its own internet, people are able to connect to the world more easily and in more places than ever before. The combination of social media and mobile internet is a technological revolution that has led to a changed culture. This

culture, which has been around for several years now, has drastically affected all generations, but particularly generation z, which includes anyone born after 1995.

High school students today have grown up in this world where smartphones are owned by many of their peers and social media are rampant in the lives of teenagers. In 2013, it was estimated that 55 percent of mobile phone owners in the United States owned a smartphone. That was at least two years ago. Smartphone sales were predicted to reach one billion in 2015, according to a 2011 projection (Miller). It is almost impossible to look around and not notice the number of people walking with their eyes on their devices. Adolescents of high school age do not know what it is like to be a teenager without internet accessibility fitting in the palm of their hand. As a result of these innovations, teen culture looks completely different than it did a decade ago. Internet accessibility isn't the only effector of teen culture. The discussion must be extended to include what is being accessed. Social media play a significant role in teen culture. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat give young people the ability to express themselves in new ways. Communication from person-to-person over a distance is instant, but there are many who believe that teenagers are losing social skills because they can escape the space around them and retreat into cyberspace whenever and wherever. Perhaps the biggest effect that these new media have had on high school students is on their social relationships.

The purpose of this study is to discover what kind of effects new media have on teenagers' social relationships, specifically in the realm of youth ministry. As previously discussed, religion has changed in the United States, and technology offers observable changes and trends that can affect religion. The same innovations that can influence

religion can influence people. Generation z presents a population that has grown up in an age with mobile internet and social media. Their social relationships are most affected by the digital age, and youth ministry is a platform for developing relationships between students and leaders in churches or other ministry organizations. For these reasons, youth ministry provides an interesting framework through which to analyze the influence that new media have on high school students.

### *Research and Methodology*

Research into this topic occurs on several levels. The first involves learning what discussions are happening in the field of communication that are about youth and technology. Communication experts such as Sherry Turkle, the author of *Alone, Together*, have many valuable insights into communication technology and how it has the power to change culture. Other research has already been conducted on how teenagers navigate the internet and how they use social media to construct an online presence. The main source of information presented in this study comes from interviews with individuals associated with youth ministry, (pseudonyms will be used for these individuals). These people are at the forefront of their respective youth programs, and the findings could have direct effects on their work. Some of the individuals interviewed are in charge of the youth ministry at a specific church. However, others work with the organization called Young Life, which is a worldwide non-profit that works with high school students (Dorrough). All of the subjects have direct contact with high school students on a regular basis and have observed the effects that new media have had on students that are in their programs and students in general. During the course of these

interviews, the subjects shared their thoughts on communication technology, teen culture, and how they have adapted their programs to accommodate changes to society. Each individual was also asked what differences, if any, they have noticed in teenagers now versus when they first started working in youth ministry. In order to organize all of this research, a conceptual framework based on two definitions of communication established by James Carey will be implemented.

Carey refers to the first of these definitions as a transmission view of communication. In his book, *Communication as Culture*, Carey lays out a simple explanation.

The transmission view of communication is the commonest in our culture—perhaps in all industrial cultures—and dominates contemporary dictionary under the term. It is defined by terms such as ‘imparting,’ ‘sending,’ ‘transmitting,’ or ‘giving information to others.’ (15)

Carey goes on to say that a transmission view of communication is about geography and transportation. His assessment of industrial cultures is especially true of the last few years in the United States. The focus of media is on getting information from one place to another as quickly as possible. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before phones, computers, and televisions were owned by most of the population, communication and transportation went hand-in-hand. Carey discusses how the movement of goods and messages were both perceived as communication, and that these messages were transmitted to exert some form of control over a distance. This definition of communication actually has religious roots. During the Age of Exploration, one of the motivations of European Christians was to spread the kingdom of God to other places. This is evident with the establishment of religious utopias in America as discussed before. Carey states that this exploration “was seen as a form of communication with profoundly religious

implications.” While the religious roots of a transmission view have faded over time, Carey argues that the basic definition still applies as it primarily focuses on transportation of messages from place to place (Carey). New communication technologies have also completely changed the transmission view by drastically diminishing the problem that geography presents. Messages can now be transmitted instantaneously with phones and the internet rather than people needing to write a message and send it on the next available buggy or train. As the transmission view of communication is based on the informational side, a ritual view focuses more on the social aspects.

Carey refers to the ritual view of communication as being an older definition than a transmission view.

In a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as ‘sharing,’ ‘participation,’ ‘association,’ ‘fellowship,’ and ‘the possession of a common faith.’ This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms ‘commonness,’ ‘communion,’ ‘community,’ and ‘communication.’ (18)

Ritual communication deals with the social side of message transmission. Carey says that it is about the “maintenance of society in time (18).” This definition also finds its roots in religion. The ritual of a church service is the fact that people come together to experience the ceremony together. One way to evaluate the ritual view of communication is to see it as direct results of a transmission definition. For example, in a church service, the sermon is a transmission of a message. The body of the church comes together on Sunday to hear the message and a community is formed between the people attending. Carey argues that the ritual aspects of communication are critical to maintaining a culture, and that it is losing power in the scholarly world because the focus in America is now on the transmission view (Carey). However, these two definitions

work together more often than not. Using transmission and ritual perspectives of communication provides a valuable framework with which to analyze new media and their effects on youth ministry organizations.

### *Social Media: Transmission*

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and other social media platforms have had some of the most significant effects on culture when it comes to 21<sup>st</sup> century inventions. While there are countless others, these four are among the most popular in high school culture. According to the Pew Research Center, 71 percent of American teenagers use more than one social networking site in 2015 (Lenhart). Looking at social media through a transmission view of communication yields an interesting perspective about the effects on youth ministry.

John Holloway is a Student Community leader at Eastern Hills Bible Church, which is located in Manlius, New York. He has been involved in youth ministry for nine years, the last six as a paid staff member at the church. Holloway acknowledges that social media have improved his ministry's ability to transmit information.

The biggest things we do involve the communication of our information. Whether it's websites, whether it's social media sites, whether it's text messages, we definitely utilize all of those different avenues to get our information out there. Before, we used to do announcements in the mornings and then the students would bring that information to their parents. Then when email came around we could email the information directly to the parents, but email is not really a thing for students anymore these days.

Holloway goes on to explain that the tools they use the most to relay their information to their students are Facebook and Instagram. The type of information they share the most through these platforms are event details.

Sarah Hartford, who works with Holloway in Student Community at the same church, has been involved in youth ministry through both Young Life and Eastern Hills Bible Church for the last ten years. She discussed some of the ways that her team of volunteer leaders used to communicate information about event details, such as paper flyers with map images.

We would print out maps on the pieces of paper that we handed to kids. It's just funny to think about how different that it is now. Some kids had phones but not everybody had phones, so you had to call their parents. I remember sitting down and working down a line of kids' phone numbers. Instead of sending out a mass text you had to just call. Things just weren't as connected.

Hartford consistently referred to the concept of mass communication and how social media have made it much more efficient for the Student Community program. Holloway, Hartford, and the other subjects interviewed all pointed that one of the merits of social media is their ability to be accessible to kids that need to know when and where to be for the various ministries' events. Chelsea O'Malley, a Young Life staff member of 11 years, said that most of her students owned profiles on at least one social media platform, which allowed them to follow a Young Life page to get information. This mass communication among groups perfectly exemplifies Carey's transmission definition as it relates to the sharing of information.

Sharon Smith is the Youth Group Coordinator at Saint Ann's Catholic Church in Manlius, New York. She was involved in Young Life when she was in high school and was a volunteer leader for the organization before becoming a staff member at St. Ann's. Smith talked about social media's information sharing as well, with Facebook being the focus of her experience.

I learned about Paris, (terror attacks in 2015), because of Facebook. But it's because I checked that page first versus CNN. Then, because I checked the social platform, I looked up information about it. So I would say the emphasis today is more on information.

Smith stated that the focus of communication technologies is informational for anyone who is in college or older. Social media often appeal to older generations for reasons that support a transmission view of communication. Parents and grandparents can create profiles on Facebook or other platforms to obtain information about their family members or old friends. News sharing has also become popular on social media platforms and many news forums such as the New York Times or Washington Post now have Twitter feeds so that people can get the latest updates on what is happening in the world. Smith also discussed how effective promotion strategies for her ministry's events have changed over the years.

For the first five years when I was leading Young Life, they were able to be on Facebook and we were able to promote things via that. And they would check it and they would see it and they would come. Now that social media and internet are so much a part of life, there's now 'wow' factor to get them to check something. Instagram is sort of successful but not in the same way that Facebook was.

All of the subjects that were interviewed explained that using social media made it much easier for them to communicate to students the information that they needed to know.

However, Smith believes that it is now more difficult to get a response from youth, whether it is simply acknowledging that they received the information or acting upon the information by attending. As she put it, there is no longer a "wow" factor to get kids to check their notifications. That is why Smith likes to use Remind 101. Remind 101 is an online system that allows people to sign up to receive text blasts from someone, but the sender's phone number is not attached. The sender can send out a mass text that goes to

anyone who has signed up to receive it from that sender but they cannot text back. In terms of transmitting information, it is Smith's favorite platform to use.

It's like a text-blast to all of them. They can read it but they can't reply. It's not like we're texting back and forth but it goes onto their phones so it reaches them where they are. A lot of teachers are using it and so we started using it this fall with our high school students.

John Holloway and Sarah Hartford both explained that they enjoyed using text-blasts as an effective media platform for information sharing within their ministry.

These youth ministry leaders all use social media to share information with their students, but they also have several theories on why they believe teenagers use social media in ways that support a transmission view of communication. Chelsea O'Malley believes that many kids use social media to share information because it is safer.

For some reason my girls feel so much safer on Twitter sharing their feelings and thoughts than they do in their relationship with me, and we have to deal with that and I think that's very interesting.

At this point in the conversation, O'Malley paused to laugh, wondering aloud about how quickly things had changed since she first started leading with Young Life. John Holloway discussed his thought that kids often use social media because they don't have the communication skills, but the reason for that may be social media.

Their communication skills are not growing like they used to because of social media or technology in general and the words on a screen communication that they are used to.

Holloway went on to say that because these young people have grown up not knowing how to communicate face-to-face as well, they are unable to communicate the issues they are having. As a result, they turn to what they know and use social media to express their thoughts and struggles.

Sherry Turkle, the author of the book *Alone, Together*, has similar ideas about generation Z. In a TED talk given back in 2012, Turkle listed some examples of behaviors that have resulted from social media becoming a part of American culture.

People text or do email during corporate board meetings. They text and shop and go on Facebook during classes, during presentations, actually during all meetings. People talk to me about the important new skill of making eye contact while you're texting.

Turkle is highlighting some of the new cultural norms that have arisen due to social media. She describes these examples as acts that we would have found odd or disturbing just a few years ago (Turkle). What Turkle has been studying for years is what youth ministry leaders are experiencing today.

A transmission view of communication, according to Carey, is all about the act of information being shared and transmitted. Social media have made information sharing more efficient, and ministry leaders have used these platforms to advance their programs and communicate with their students. However, several of them have noticed that the communication skills of youth have been affected by these platforms and that kids don't interact with others in the same ways as in the past. What are the effects of these new social media technologies in terms of a ritual view of communication?

### *Social Media: Ritual*

Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have changed the landscape of social relationships, especially in the lives of younger generations. These changes have directly affected youth ministry and how leaders of these programs conduct their missions. A ritual view of communication has its definitional roots in religion, and it can therefore be applied to analyze the social aspects of new media. John Holloway's student ministry is

built on the ability of leaders to build personal relationships with students so that they can choose to experience life as a Christian. Holloway says that social media provide different ways of interacting with his students.

Instagram, for example, you post different things to pass on information, but you can also use it to really speak to the students. You can throw a couple pictures up to say 'happy birthday' to this kid and make them feel good and it helps build relationships that way.

Holloway explained that his students, and teenagers in general, often find value in their posts being liked or shared by others. He believes that when he has a presence on social media, the students find him more "credible." Online platforms provide individuals with the opportunity to participate in a community of sorts, which strongly supports the ritual view of communication.

Sarah Hartford decided to be involved in youth ministry because she enjoyed the idea of building personal relationships with teenagers.

I was at a field hockey game the other day and I took a picture of the game and I tagged girls in it and then they all commented. And I know that on some weird level, it meant more that I did that than it did that I went to their game.

New media have given Hartford the chance to connect with kids in a different way that wasn't possible just ten years ago. While social media can make her job a little easier, she also admits that it is harder to develop a deeper relationship with girls now, even though it is easier to contact them via these platforms.

When asked what the biggest issue is for teenagers today, Hartford stated that it has to do with not knowing their identity.

I think it's identity. I think they don't know who they are and so they look to all these other things for affirmation and for belonging and for someone to listen to them. Being known, feeling loved, feeling like somebody cares.

The most effective way to use social media, according to John Holloway and Sarah Hartford, is to join in with the students and participate in the community that it creates. The aspects of these technologies that contribute to the development of relationships support a ritual view of communication, as evidenced by these ministry leaders and their online social presence.

However, not all of the effects are positive. Hartford relayed a story about a not-very-encouraging side of modern teenagers. In it, she was leading a trip during a summer camp for her ministry.

They don't have their phones at this camp. So this one girl was talking to a boy from different area, but she had a boyfriend at home who didn't come. We were talking to her about that and she said 'whatever nobody has their phones so nobody will know.' I was like, 'what?' That's how her brain works. There's no picture, there's no evidence, I can do whatever I want.

This student has become so entrenched in her online community that her present community doesn't even count. Hartford couldn't believe that so many young people act as if the only things that matter have to be verified by social media. She also recalled a student who said "but you can't instagram memories" when she asked her girls to leave their phones in their pockets rather than take a picture of what they were seeing. Again, the existence of an online community for these individuals has taken away from their real-world communities.

In terms of ritual communication, social media have damaged the idea of physical togetherness, while also cultivating a new kind of virtual togetherness.

Chelsea O'Malley has noticed a dangerous trend related to the use of social media.

I've noticed that people use it, (social media), as a replacement for relationships. And that can be really dangerous. A conversation over the internet as a replacement for face-to-face conversation. And the past few years, a lot of the high school kids have been coming up who don't know how to have a real conversation or even what a real relationship looks like.

Currently, most teenagers in the United States have the ability to speak to others through social media, and O'Malley has decided that the result is a decrease in social skills. She believes that young people having the option to interact over the internet has made them start to prefer it. O'Malley has recently adapted Young Life in her area to address this issue.

Not only are we sharing the gospel with teenagers, but we're also kind of teaching them how to have a relationship in the first place.

She emphasized that it is impossible for her team to try to convince kids to have a relationship with Jesus Christ when they don't always know how to have a personal relationship at all. Before social media became popular, Dorrough was better able to connect with kids and get them to open up about their lives. Now, she says that it may take several years of building a relationship before a high school girl has the courage to open up to a Young Life leader.

The reason for this could be that teenagers feel safer spilling their opinions and feelings online to an audience that can always listen. Young Life leader training now accommodates social media in O'Malley's area.

When I train my leaders now, a lot of it has social media aspects to it. We'll spend time, with each topic we train on, talking about how technology can affect that topic. For example if you find a kid is being abused on social media, how do you handle that situation.

O'Malley joked about how when she started leading, the most advanced platform was email, which was much less complicated than the newest innovations.

One of the most interesting points that O'Malley made was in support of social media, and it has to do with parenting.

Their time is so over-structured by adults that that's the only time they can hang out with their friends, is on their phones...A lot of times that's where they feel safe because their life is so over-structured.

This interpretation turns social media into an escape rather than a relationship replacement. The speed of American culture is now non-stop, and for young people, the only way to spend their time with their friends is on Facebook or through texting. During John Holloway's interview, he had recounted his high school days when he would spend his downtime at home with his family or neighborhood friends. Downtime now is different for high school kids, with it often consisting of scrolling through Twitter feeds for hours to see what their peers are up to.

For St. Anne's ministry program, Sharon Smith and her team made an Instagram account as a way to celebrate past events.

Right now we're using it as an after the fact, let's celebrate what we did tool. And then hopefully they will see 'oh I didn't go to that event, when's the next one?' So that is a change that we have made.

In this way, Smith's students can participate in a community through social media where they can comment on the things they have done and want to invite their friends to the next event so they can add to their community. All of this is made possible by the use of a platform where photos can be shared. As previously mentioned, Smith believes that the emphasis of social media for college students and older is more on information sharing. However, she argues that when it comes to high school students, that emphasis is shifted to the social aspects. In other words, social media for teenagers is more supportive of a ritual view of communication than a transmission view, according to Smith.

They're sending most of their time on the social part of it all so then it's dominating their lives.

She recounted a story of her and some students going to play laser tag at the mall, but the boys at the event never greeted her when she got there. She followed this with a sarcastic, (but slightly sincere), assessment of generation z: "They don't have social skills." However, she explained that they are simply harder to learn now because of technology. Smith believes that social media provide a sort of "cop-out" because if a kid can say hello to someone by posting on their Facebook wall, then they would rather do that because it is easier. When Smith led for Young Life before her job at St. Anne's, the camp trips they would go on always took the phones away from the kids for the duration of the trip. She said that it is so much easier to build relationships with the kids at camp because they couldn't turn to their phones and get their fill of community by using social media. For Smith, there are some positive and negative effects in terms of a ritual view of these online platforms.

The general consensus from these four ministry leaders is that social media make it easier to connect to more teenagers, but harder to connect with them in a personal way. The community that can be built through these online interactions allows them to communicate with their students in new ways, whether it's posting on a Facebook wall or tagging kids in photos from a ministry event. However, because of the existence of an accessible plethora of online relationships, it is difficult to develop face-to-face relationships and have actual conversations with teenagers. John Holloway and Sarah Hartford do not think it is much harder to build social relationships, it just has to be done differently nowadays. From a ritual perspective, the effects of social media on youth ministry necessitate adaptability from these programs.

### *Mobile Internet: Transmission*

The rapid adoption of social media into American culture has a lot to do with the widespread growth of the communication technology known as the mobile internet. Quite simply, it is the ability of devices to access the internet from an increasing amount of locations. In a 2015 survey done by the Pew Research Center, 92 percent of teenagers reported going online on a daily basis (Lenhart). Ten years ago, the internet was mostly accessed through personal computers that had to be plugged in to operate. However, wi-fi networks and smartphones have made it possible to connect online without needing to plug into anything. Now that a large portion of the United States population owns smartphones, people are more connected than ever. Pew Research Center reports that nearly 75 percent of teenagers either own a smartphone or have access to a smartphone (Lenhart). The mobile internet has many qualities that support a transmission view of communication. From an informational standpoint, the mobile internet has had a significant impact on youth ministry and how leaders carry out their missions.

The general opinion of the interview subjects is that the informational abilities of the mobile internet are positive. John Holloway stated that schooling itself has been helped by this new communication technology and he has seen its strengths reflected in his ministry's students.

Most things are designed for intended use. People figure out how to take advantage of that stuff. I think as far as school, like learning environments, the accessibility of information today is phenomenal.

In the past, Holloway has used the mobile internet to access information about his students such as sporting events or school plays. Several times, he has been out and

wanted to attend a high school game but he wasn't sure what time it started, and with mobile internet he can find out right away. Holloway also mentioned the importance of being "plugged in" as being a contributing factor to fostering positive relationships with his kids.

If you're not plugged into it, you are less likely to have an open conversation about something.

This statement was in reference to students using social media to share information about their lives. Being plugged into the mobile internet allows parents or ministry leaders to find see that information in a timely manner and possibly start a conversation with the kid while it is still relevant to them. That is one of the major advantages of the mobile internet. Not only does it allow people to be connected in more places, but in a shorter amount of time.

One statement that really resonated with some of the other ministry leaders came from Sarah Hartford.

I was talking to my roommate the other night about how we just Google things all the time. How we didn't use to do that. And how we just didn't know the answer to things sometimes and we were okay with it. But now we have a way to know the answer and so we look it up.

When the other ministry leaders heard this quote, they agreed that it is strange how they grew up getting the information they needed from a computer or book, but now all they do is turn on their smartphone or tablet. Hartford said later that she loves being able to look information up without having to wait. Information is being constantly transmitted online and the instant accessibility provided by a smartphone or wi-fi network strongly supports a transmission view of communication. Going back to Hartford's story about the female student who had a boyfriend but was speaking to another boy at summer

camp, that is an example of the culture difference between now and five years ago. At that camp, the students were not connected to the mobile internet because they did not have their phones on them for a week. The student felt like she was cut off from the world because of a lack of accessibility, so it didn't matter what happened because it couldn't be shared with anyone else. Mobile internet has created a new culture, especially among teenagers who have grown up in a world where they are always connected so long as they have a smartphone on them.

Chelsea O'Malley enjoys the information side of the mobile internet as well.

I actually like the internet. It can be very useful and it's a very good invention. And I love the mobile internet because it's really convenient to have it ready at your fingertips all the time. There are definitely negatives to that but I am one of those people that enjoys technology and am excited about the future that it can bring.

O'Malley made a point of saying that the internet is made much better, in her opinion, by the fact that it is now more mobile and accessible. Carey's transmission definition of communication is evidenced by this accessibility because it allows people to have information, as O'Malley says, at their fingertips. She was the only interview subject who expressed her excitement for the future of the mobile internet. Seven years ago, very few people had smartphones. Now, the majority of mobile phone users own them. What will the country look like seven years from now? However, one of the negatives of the mobile internet, according to O'Malley, is its tendency to lead to early exposure for young people.

I have noticed that kids have grown up faster in the past five or six years. The stuff that they're dealing with in middle school are things that my friends and I, 15 or 16 years ago, were struggling with in our late teens, early twenties.

O'Malley argues that this is a result of pressure. Being exposed to so much information and seeing what other people are doing makes young people feel like they need to perform at a certain level. With mobile internet exposing them to these pressures at younger ages, the kids have to deal with it sooner. This statement by O'Malley begs the question; how much cultural exposure is too much? Also, does mobile internet cause this cultural change or has cultural change caused the mobile internet to affect young people in this way? Either way, O'Malley believes that her ministry has witnessed the pressure put on teenagers, and that the accessibility provided by mobile internet may be a part of the reason why.

Sharon Smith acknowledges that mobile internet is useful but that there are some downsides to it in regards to her job at a school.

It's hard to turn off, which is a downside. Working in a school, parents can reach you at anytime. So people are emailing you and they expect you to have access to it, which is really hard. But I think it's a helpful thing to move forward with.

While she enjoys the accessibility for the most part, she doesn't think it is great for students. Many of Smith's students will sit on their phones if no one tells them not to. But she doesn't think they are doing it to be rude. Many teenagers simply do not know that people consider it rude to always be on the phone. Smith thinks that because they have grown up watching people everywhere constantly on their phones, kids think nothing of it. If mobile internet is negatively affecting youth because they spend too much time online, the adults in their life may be part of the problem. Smith was the first to mention that these new communication technologies are affecting kids because they are affecting adults. If the role model in a young person's life cannot put their phone

down, how is the youth supposed to? Smith has made a point in her ministry to incorporate the use of phones in a positive way.

As a youth minister I think it's my job to teach kids how to properly use it, (a smartphone), in that setting.

Later in the interview, Smith talked about her students attending a youth ministry event who were on their phones at one point to check a football score. Some of the other adults complained about the kids being rude, but Smith saw it in a positive way.

They were choosing to come even though their favorite football team was playing, so I'm not going to deny them the score of the football game, but I am still going to ask them to work.

In this way, mobile internet actually helped youth ministry. The students knew that they could access the information they needed because of their phones, so they attended the event. If they did not have the option to view the score, they may not have gone so that they could watch the game. According to Smith, the most important thing to do is to find ways to turn their attention back to what they are doing rather than get mad at them for using their phones. The transmitting of messages and sharing of information define the transmission view of communication, and Smith has learned how to embrace the mobile internet and adopt it into her ministry for its informational uses.

Accessibility is the key theme among the conversations with these youth ministry leaders. Mobile internet has grown in the last few years and can connect more people to the online world from more locations because of communication technologies such as smartphones, tablets, and wireless networks. For personal uses, all four subjects acknowledged that they think the mobile internet is a positive invention, particularly when it comes to information sharing. Yet the exposure to so much information and people has led to some negative effects on their ministry, at least from a transmission

standpoint. The ritual view of communication offers a different perspective on how mobile internet has affected teenagers and these ministry programs.

### *Mobile Internet: Ritual*

There is a lot of overlap when analyzing social media and mobile internet from a ritual standpoint. The social side of the mobile internet is all about connection.

Whether it is the actual connection of the user to the internet, or the connection that is formed within the online community, the participants have an abundance of it. There is too much connection for young people according to John Holloway.

The social side of things has had a real big impact on students where they are too connected to each other, basically all day, every day. And I don't think that's a healthy environment for them. I think everyone needs downtime.

When he was growing up, Holloway explained how you were one person in school, but then when you got home you could relax and have time to yourself. Now, because of phones and mobile internet, kids are almost always on. He says that this new culture has negatively impacted teenagers' ability to interact with each other and with adults.

Holloway's ministry is based on the leaders' personal relationships with the students, so building those relationships is made more difficult by the lack of social skills. He makes the argument that people try to use mobile internet to fulfill a certain human need.

We all crave community, we all crave belonging, we all crave relationships. But it's very difficult to feel or experience the love and care of a relationship which doesn't exist in communication technology. You lose a lot of emotions, a lot of non-verbal stuff.

People use communication technologies as replacements for relationships. Sherry Turkle discusses this same topic during her TED talk in 2012.

So for example, many people share with me this wish, that some day a more advanced version of Siri, the digital assistant on Apple's iPhone, will be more like a best friend, someone who will listen when others won't... That feeling that no one is listening to me is very important in our relationships with technology.

The wording that Turkle uses is very specific. She uses the term "relationships" to refer to how people view their devices sometimes (Turkle). One way to think about it is the device is like a middleman. The user has an interactive relationship with the device, which has an interaction with the internet and other devices, which can lead to interactive relationships between users. This is the foundation of the ritual view of mobile internet. There are communities and togetherness that result from individuals having more accessibility.

Trying to break kids away from constant contact with online communities is not easy for Sarah Hartford's student community.

It's hard to get them off their phones and they're shallowly, sort of connected to so many things and so many people that it's harder to connect with them on some levels. But if you use it well, then you can use it to your advantage, but if you're trying to have a conversation it can be difficult.

Hartford called the connections that students have over the internet widespread, but shallow. So while there are many available communities through the mobile internet, they are not necessarily close-knit. However, in terms of reaching more kids for her ministry, it is essential to adopt mobile internet into the program. Hartford admits that they have an online presence for their students to interact with, but it isn't very strong. It is typically used for transmission purposes such as announcements. Mobile internet

offers opportunities to reach out to kids and form relationships that can develop into more personal interactions.

Hartford mentioned that teenagers' relationships on the internet are wide but shallow. Chelsea O'Malley says that Young Life's mission, as well as youth ministry, is to do the exact opposite.

Club numbers have gone down a lot in the last few years. I think it's because we are trying to go deeper instead of wider and that's more of a challenge.

"Club" is the weekly event that Young Life holds, typically at a house within the school's community. O'Malley explained that they use "club" as a tool to meet more kids by asking the students that they know to invite their friends to a fun event. Her team of leaders utilizes mobile internet to send out invites to a large number of kids, but when they try to get to know kids on a personal level, they do it in small numbers.

Young Life's goals counteract the trend of shallow relationships that have resulted from the mobile internet. Turkle's book, *Alone, Together*, discusses how people can be connected to others via the internet but they are actually alone. O'Malley recalls hearing a story on National Public Radio about a table full of people in a coffeehouse, but all of them are looking at their phones instead of engaging their colleagues. This is a perfect example of Turkle's concept, where the individuals are connected to others through their phones, but they are alone in their physical space, even though there are others around them. As previously noted, O'Malley thinks that teenagers often use communication technology to escape from an over-structured lifestyle, and mobile internet is a factor in that as well. Young people feel safer online where they can control whom they interact with and what they say.

The overall pace of life and trends have increased in Sharon Smith's opinion, and if a youth ministry leader is not plugged in, they may miss out on a chance to engage with their students. She explained a story about a 40-year-old adult trying to get all of the high school students at an event to take selfies and post them. Smith, even at the age of 24, knows that her students and many other teenagers have already gotten over the idea of selfies being a trend.

I think that's the hard thing about technology because everything happens so quick that you're probably missing the next trend already... You can either miss it or be a part of it. If you miss it, you're not really missing anything, but you are missing out on a joke or trend.

Many of the trends that are popular with young people are viral videos that are shared. The mobile internet allows these videos to be viewed anywhere at anytime, therefore a large population will have seen the videos in a very short time span. Once everyone has seen it and it has been overused, it fades out of popularity as quickly as it appeared. Smith points out that being plugged in means an individual can keep up with the current trends and use them, either in youth ministry programming or on the mobile internet as a way to interact with youth.

A ritual view of the mobile internet emphasizes the community and togetherness that is created online when users are connected on their devices. For teenagers, these communities provide them with relationships that aren't always productive or reciprocated. As Turkle argues during her TED talk, the feeling that no one is listening can direct people online where they can express whatever they want and the online community becomes an automatic listener. This can negatively affect real-world relationships, which makes youth ministry leaders' jobs more complicated. Mobile internet may be ground-breaking when it comes to information sharing and a

transmission view of communication, but there are both pros and cons involved in the ritual definition of communication, especially in the lives of young people who have grown up in the digital age.

### *Conclusion*

Communication technologies have affected religion throughout history. The printing press was first used to print a bible by Johannes Gutenberg. Years later, the mass printing innovation helped kick-start the Protestant Reformation when Martin Luther wrote the 95 Theses, which affected the entire continent of Europe. Eventually, these European religions migrated to America and formed a nation that was built on religious diversity. Through the centuries, technology continued to advance and have an effect on religion, all while the landscape of religion itself was changing. Eventually, church attendance and the number of people affiliated with a religion began to decline in the United States. Progression towards a culture of acceptance and tolerance has affected schooling, with John Holloway acknowledging the “acceptance curriculum” that most students go through in schools today. Exhibiting religious values in state institutions is frowned upon, and with the government unable to unite church and state, religion in America looks completely different than it did in 1776 at the birth of the nation. Then comes social media and the mobile internet. Two technologies that change the world connect people across vast distances and create new opportunities for communication. Smartphones and other devices allow any individual to be instantly connected to the rest of the world at the push of a button or touchscreen. What are the specific changes that

have resulted from the rise of new media? Social media and mobile internet have significant impacts on teenagers in the United States.

What can be learned about the effects that new media have on teenagers by studying youth ministry? These programs develop a curriculum or mission based upon evangelical ideals of spreading the gospel to others. The way that they do this is by establishing personal connections with young people to earn their trust and provide them with a role model, and then introduce them to or teach them about the Christian faith. Due to the necessity for social connection, youth ministry is very vulnerable to the effects of new media when it comes to the youth of America. The consensus within the country is that generation z has less social skills as a whole than any other generation because they can escape into social media and the mobile internet. The ministry leaders interviewed for this study emphasized that teenagers indeed are struggling to build and maintain interpersonal relationships.

Chelsea O'Malley's analysis of the younger generation was a very interesting argument. She claimed that her ministry now has to do twice the work to accomplish their missions. The goal of Young Life leaders and staff is to introduce their students to the idea of having a relationship with Jesus Christ by showing them what one looks like. However, O'Malley states that because of social media and mobile internet, students must first be taught how to have a real relationship before they can be offered a relationship based on the Christian faith. While no other leaders specifically made this same point, the significance and weight of O'Malley's assessment cannot be understated. Generation z has grown up around mobile internet and social media, which creates online communities that are accessible at any time. Sharon Smith discussed how youth will

jump onto their phones to avoid personal interactions if they can. The target population of youth ministries is a connected and less sociable crowd, in addition to being at a tumultuous age in their lives. What can be done to counteract the negative effects that new media have had on teenagers?

Today's digital culture has created difficulties for youth ministry. However, none of the ministry leaders believed that these changes are insurmountable. John Holloway says that using technology in programming can keep his ministry current.

I go back and forth thinking "is the traditional youth ministry style of Sunday morning worship music, announcements, someone giving a talk...is that style even making an impact still?" Or are there better options using multimedia.

The way that the church has always done things isn't always the best way to continue reaching kids according to Holloway, and the new culture created by social media and mobile internet has opened up more opportunities for his ministry to evolve how it accomplishes its mission. Holloway and Hartford, who together run their church's youth ministry program, both agreed that they are not using communication technology to its fullest and that they could do more with it.

Another positive effect of new media that the ministry leaders mentioned is its accessibility. Meeting new kids is made easier with social media and mobile internet where students can join groups or have mutual friends that give leaders a platform to introduce themselves through. Sharon Smith uses new media to celebrate successful or fun events in her ministry, which causes her students' friends to see what happened and possibly go to the next event. Chelsea O'Malley has used mobile internet and social media to send messages to her kids to organize meet-ups or quick events. Getting the

attention of teenagers is not always easy for these individuals, but using new media puts them on the level of the youth they are trying to reach.

John Holloway took a moment to discuss a horrifying trend in today's society. Many young people that commit suicide or are suffering from undiagnosed mental issues are on social media and mobile internet.

These kids are dumping some crazy stuff online, all the time, for years. But if you're not plugged into that or no one's plugged into that in their life, they could be sitting their with people thinking "yeah he is quiet and seems closed off," but if you're not plugged in, you could be missing so many signs early on.

For youth ministry leaders, losing kids to tragedy is something they want to help prevent, and Holloway knows that parents can help with that by being aware of what their kids are posting online. For those youth that are suffering from these issues, social media and mobile internet provide them with an outlet that didn't exist decades ago. Research into this subject needs to be conducted in order to prevent future tragedies.

There are many takeaways from this study of new media and youth ministry. First off, that mobile internet and social media can be useful, not just for youth ministry, but also for any program that is involved in working with teenagers. According to the people interviewed, new media do negatively affect social skills, but that just makes the process of building a relationship take a little more work and time. The best way to counteract a lack of social skills is to not necessarily pull young people away from the technology and use negative reinforcement, but work with the kids on their level. In today's culture, that means participating in social media and mobile internet. All four of the subjects, at one point during their interviews, said that they wished they implemented new media into their program more often. Also, they all stated that using social media

and mobile internet more would be ideal, seeing as how their target population is using it extensively. Teenagers struggling with issues is not a new concept in America, and nobody understands this more than a youth ministry leader who interacts with them on a daily basis. Communication technologies have just added a new perspective for many of those same issues. Sharon Smith knows that things are different now than they used to be, but there is hope for the future because there are always new ways to implement changes in society into a ministry. Social media and mobile internet have given leaders opportunities to meet more kids and learn about them based on what those kids put online. Using new media in programming allows these leaders to keep up with a fast-paced culture. Where will the next big technological advancement come from? It doesn't matter, because for teenagers and these youth ministry leaders, it is all about adapting to change.

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