

# Challenges and opportunities in considering the internet as a 4<sup>th</sup> Space for ministry

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## Abstract

We may be familiar with the 3rd space ministry (a social space, such as coffee shops, pubs, clubs, gyms, shopping malls or community areas that have both private and public qualities for reaching a physical community) but technology gives us an unprecedented challenges and opportunities to reach those we may never see face-to-face. The Internet is a 4th space ministry where we will consider paradigms for ministry, communication, and discipleship.

## Introduction

Organic ministry, carried out in the natural course of living our lives, means intentional engagement with those whom God puts in our lives. This causes us to consider the challenges, opportunities, and means by which we can participate meaningfully in our lives and communities. The invention of the internet and its continual disruption and subsequent re-formation of human social behavior is worth exploration from a ministry lens. What ministry challenges and opportunities exist in the sphere of life lived on-line? Is the internet just another social space or are there aspects which make it different, and thus require a different ministry paradigm?

It is the contention of this paper that the online environment is distinct enough as a human social space that it requires a different ministry paradigm, and that other community ministry paradigms and techniques cannot be simply translated into the digital world. This is because people interact differently on the internet compared to other social interactions. The difference is significant enough that I believe it requires considering the online, digital world as a potential 4<sup>th</sup> Space, with its own unique ministry engagement paradigms.

## Brief review of social spaces

Identified and defined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg,<sup>1</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Space is the place where one lives and those with whom one makes a home. It is where we live with our families or roommates. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Space is where one works and spends most of their day. This is the office, corporation, or place where one goes to work and remains for a good portion of the day.<sup>2</sup>

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Space is offered at the final space completing one's life, and is where we live in our communities and neighborhoods. This divides the analysis of our lives into private, personal, and social spaces. The 3<sup>rd</sup> space is the sphere in which one engages in community and the social aspects of life. Jeffres et al. (2009)<sup>3</sup> originally identified 3<sup>rd</sup> spaces to include: coffee shops, markets, salons, shopping centers, community centers, bars, schools and institutions of higher education, theaters, churches, apartment buildings, concerts, and community events. Media, including billboards and online news, were considered to be 3<sup>rd</sup> Spaces, but this was in 2009 – before the 2.0 evolution of the web. So far, most conceptions of the internet as a virtual third space have focused on gaming communities and gathering places where one can be a “regular.” I believe this inadequately describes the types of social interactions on the internet, and thus inadequately inspires what ministry could and should look like in the online space.

## Considering the internet as a 4th space

The way in which we interact with the internet, and live our lives in both the physical and digital world does not adequately fit into any of the current ‘space’ categories. Instead, it crosses them all in a singular manner, creating an odd sphere of interaction that many of us never really leave.

We are on the internet at home, and it affects our interaction with family. We have a way of being emotionally present or connected to one another, I while simultaneously not being physically present with one another. The reverse is also true – we have a way of being physically present to one another while not being emotionally or cognitively present with each other. For example, family members often text each other while in the same house – even while in the same room.

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<sup>1</sup> Oldenburg, Ray (1991). *The Great Good Place*. New York: Marlowe & Company

<sup>2</sup> One must acknowledge the cross-over of these two spaces in those who work from home, whether as independent contractors, tele commuters, or any variety of endeavors.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffres, Leo W.; Bracken, Cheryl C.; Jian, Guowei; Casey, Mary F. (2009-10-13). "The Impact of Third Places on Community Quality of Life". *Applied Research in the Quality of Life*. **4** (4): 333–345

We are on the internet at work, mainly for work. Whether tele-commuting, or working from a more formal office location, much of what we do for work these days involves looking at a screen and interacting with people whom are not present in the same room with us.

Moreover, this behavior does not end when we come home. We remain connected to work, friends, family, and social spaces throughout the day, regardless of where our physical bodies are located.

In addition to the *when* of our online living is the *manner* in which we interact with the internet. For the most part, we are observers and voyeurs, consuming content in what we believe to be anonymous ways (although our anonymity online could not be further from the truth). The internet plays a major role in how we socialize, and yet most of it is low-interactive socialization.

There are also generational distinctions in our engagement with the internet. For digital natives (those born in the technological age who grew up with smart phones, iPads, and various screens at their disposal), there is no distinguishing between the 'digital reality' and the 'physical reality' – there is no digital dualism. The online reality is just another aspect of reality, similar to the difference between who we are with our friends versus who we are with our family.

The main reason for treating our online lives as a new space, a 4<sup>th</sup> space, is that it is a fundamentally different type of interaction. There is currently little face to face interaction online. There is low to no context for the people or situations with which one engages. There is low to no relationship with the people or entities with whom one interacts (and the perception of what a relationship constitutes is another interesting issue). Additionally, being on the internet can be an insular experience where you do not have to encounter those whom you don't like or do not/ would not like you. Paradoxically, is almost always siloed/compartimentalized experience where people are both 'social' and isolated in their bubble.

These characteristics stand in contrast to those of a 3<sup>rd</sup> space, where people interact with diverse crowds of people with whom one may have little in common. Third spaces are also physical spaces where one is required to interact, or at least be present with others who are not family or co-workers. The social contract with those encountered in 3<sup>rd</sup> spaces is much more complex and nuanced. One has less choice of the people encountered in 3<sup>rd</sup> spaces. We see and experience people who do not look like us, talk like us,

smell like us or think like us. It forces us to become aware of social issues that we might not otherwise encounter.

These factors create an interesting interaction with the social nature of our species. We were created to learn through various social mechanisms, such as mirror neurons, where we mirror and mimic the behavior of others at a neurological level as a means of learning new motor and social skills. We also are social-emotional creatures who have an inherent capacity for empathy and morality. Our neurological default mode, or what our brain is doing when it is doing 'nothing,' is interrelated with our empathy networks. This has significant implications for the relationship between internal reflection (or the lack of it) and understanding the future consequences of our actions. We will explore these ideas further as we discuss the challenges and opportunities of minister in the 4<sup>th</sup> space.

The main takeaway is that the 4<sup>th</sup> space, the online world, is significantly different enough that it requires a fundamentally different type of ministry strategy. We cannot use the same strategies we have for other ministry spaces and simply transfer them over. There are too many emerging differences.

## **Challenges and Opportunities**

Because of these fundamental differences between 3<sup>rd</sup> spaces and 4<sup>th</sup> spaces, there exist new challenges and opportunities for ministry in the online world.

## **Time**

One of the first worth considering is the vast amount of time people spend on the internet. One study showed that Americans spend as much as 10 hours a day looking at a screen (including the time to write this paper). Eight to twelve-year olds spend 6 hours in media<sup>4</sup> and teenagers spend 9 hours consuming media a day<sup>5</sup>. That means that teenagers essentially spend 1/3 of their life at school, less than 1/3 sleeping, and over 1/3 consuming media.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2015/11/03/teens-spend-nearly-nine-hours-every-day-consuming-media/?utm\\_term=.e32ee0cbe11d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2015/11/03/teens-spend-nearly-nine-hours-every-day-consuming-media/?utm_term=.e32ee0cbe11d)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

## Reflection

The second factor worth noting is the effect that high consumption of social media may have on human morality and empathy.

Canada seems to be leading the way in studying of the moral shallowing from social media use, with two recent studies that seem to correlate high social media consumption with a decrease in morality, or 'moral shallowing.' As reported in the Canadian National Post<sup>6</sup>:

Researchers at the University of Windsor asked undergraduate students to rank the importance of dozens of life goals. They found those who regularly texted or were constantly tethered to social media typically cared more about image ("I want to achieve the look I've always been after") and hedonism ("I want to have an exciting lifestyle") than about goals related to morality ("I want to live my life with genuine integrity"). They were also less likely to engage in self-reflection. It was published in the Journal Personality and Individual Differences<sup>7</sup>.

The second study, from the University of Winnipeg, also demonstrated that those "students who are heavy texters place less importance on moral aesthetic and spiritual goals and greater importance on wealth and image." <sup>8</sup>

"Those who texted more than 100 times a day were 30 per cent less likely to feel strongly that leading an ethical, principled life was important to them, in comparison to those who texted 50 times or less a day. Higher texting frequency was also consistently associated with higher levels of ethnic prejudice." <sup>9</sup>

Part of the struggle with the high engagement of social media use is the lack of reflection it allows. In the mind, one can be externally focused, or internally reflective, but not both at the same time. The internally reflective state is interrelated with a person's long-term memory, social-emotions such

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<sup>6</sup> <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/frequent-texting-and-rapid-fire-social-media-use-could-lead-to-moral-shalowness-study>

<sup>7</sup> Annisette, L., & Lafreniere, K. D. (in press). Social media, texting, and personality: A test of the shallowing hypothesis. *Personality and Individual Differences*.

<sup>8</sup> <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/frequent-texting-and-rapid-fire-social-media-use-could-lead-to-moral-shalowness-study>

<sup>9</sup> Trapnell, Paul, and Lisa Sinclair. 2012. "Texting Frequency and the Moral Shallowing Hypothesis." *13<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology*. San Diego, CA.

as empathy and compassion, as well as their ability to think about the future and consequences of their actions. While there is not a 'moral center' in the brain, these neurological functions are related to morality. This means that there are potentially significant consequences to consistent and persistent lack of internal reflection.

A couple examples of this include Canadian politics, in which a Gerald Butts, the principal secretary for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who tweeted, "People take Twitter too seriously. If it's changing the way you think, delete your account."<sup>10</sup> The problem with this statement is that either you are being affected and reflective regarding the media you engage with, or you are entrenching a habit of non-engagement and non-reflection, which amplifies the problem. Additionally, and importantly, the person is left uniformed and unaware of where a very large segment of society stands.

The second example comes from recent American politics where, by their own admission, internet trollers strongly influenced the presidential election. Trollers are those who comment and post on social media for the purposes of stirring up reactions. They post and repost incendiary comments in the hopes of creating strong emotional reactions in others. The comments in their posts do not necessarily reflect their own thinking or ideologies, rather trollers gain value by being an influencer, by how many likes, dislikes, reposts, and comments they get. Basically, it is about attention and not about substance. To that extent, the more inflammatory, the more incendiary the post, the more attention they get.

On the evening of the 2017 American Presidential inauguration was the DeploraBall, where those who trolled for President Trump gathered to celebrate him and their influence in public discourse. In an NPR interview,<sup>11</sup> one main troller was asked about the racially inflammatory comments people were posting on behalf of Trump. The interviewee thought the comments were funny because they were taboo. When asked if she (the troller) or anyone else ever talked about or thought about the consequences of such posts, she responded shyly, "No."

The point is that we are seeing the consequences of the lack of reflection and reduction in morality in heavy social media users. It is affecting our daily lives and national social contracts.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.financialpost.com/m/wp/executive/blog.html?b=news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/frequent-texting-and-rapid-fire-social-media-use-could-lead-to-moral-shalowness-study>

<sup>11</sup> Chance, Zoe. 2017. *Meme Come True*. Radio Play. Directed by Ira Glass. Produced by This American Life. National Public Radio.

## Radicalization

The third challenge worth considering is the inherent possibility, even *probability* of radicalization due to the lack of reflection. We are seeing radicalization across the political spectrum and even in the spiritual world.

To clarify, religious radicalization has a definition in sociological spheres. It is:

an individual or collective (group) process whereby, usually in a situation of political polarisation, *normal practices of dialogue, compromise and tolerance between political actors and groups with diverging interests are abandoned by one or both sides in a conflict dyad in favour of a growing commitment to engage in confrontational tactics of conflict-waging*. These can include either (i) the use of (non-violent) pressure and coercion, (ii) various forms of political violence other than terrorism or (iii) acts of violent extremism in the form of terrorism and war crimes....<sup>12</sup>  
(*emphasis mine*)

The ideology of radicalization to the point of extremism is also described:

Extremists strive to create a homogeneous society based on rigid, dogmatic ideological tenets; they seek to make society conformist by suppressing all opposition and subjugating minorities. That distinguishes them from mere radicals who accept diversity and believe in the power of reason rather than dogma. In the context of democratic societies, (violent) extremist groups, movements and parties tend to have a political programme that contains many of the following elements:

- Anti-constitutional, anti-democratic, anti-pluralist, authoritarian;
- Fanatical, intolerant, non-compromising, single-minded black-or-white thinkers;
- Rejecting the rule of law while adhering to an ends-justify-means philosophy;

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<sup>12</sup> Schmid, Dr. Alex P. 2013. *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*. ICCT Research Paper, Hague, Netherlands: International Center for Counter Terrorism, The Hague, pg 18.

- Aiming to realise their goals by any means, including, when the opportunity offers itself, the use of massive political violence against opponents.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of faith, as described by James Fowler in his seminal work on Faith Development Theory, spiritual radicalization is when the “the expectations and evaluations of others can become so compellingly internalized (and sacralized) that later autonomy of judgement and action can be jeopardized.”<sup>14</sup>

Social pressures for conformity, mixed with broad conceptual language for ideas which one does not truly understand has the potential to yield radicalization.<sup>15</sup> When we seek for people to become activist for concepts they have not walked the journey to understand, and their activism is not based out of love or solidarity with all humans, we are actually seeking something that is not healthy.

This means that when we teach on broad subjects without checking for understanding in the learners, pastors, lay leaders and congregation members, and combine that with social pressure for action “in the name of God,” we stand at the door step of radicalization. The turn we must make is in the hard work of putting faces on the concepts to humanize both the issues and our responses to them. Since we cannot cater to the natural process of face-to face communication that humanizes and empathizes, we must work extra hard at putting a face on Jesus and providing context.

People can have strong convictions, even see themselves as a radical for Jesus, but that journey must lead them towards greater solidarity with all humanity, a stronger presence of love in their lives and their communities, and cause them to look more like the Christ they claim to follow. Strong convictions that lead one to violence, whether of a physical, emotional, or psychological nature, is a manifestation of the issue we are facing. The prevalence of social shamming, verbal burning-at-the-stake of perceived heretics, and violence via blog and social media posts by Christians should be alarming to all of us.

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<sup>13</sup>Schmid, Dr. Alex P. 2013. *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*. ICCT Research Paper, Hague, Netherlands: International Center for Counter Terrorism, The Hague, page 9

<sup>14</sup>Fowler, J. W. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. New York: HarperCollins, page 173

<sup>15</sup> <http://100movements.com/why-take-the-long-view/>



It is important to remember that through technology, we can reach many more people and influence their thoughts, both for good and for bad. Our influence is multiplied out beyond our inherent understanding, so we must be circumspect in how we wield it.

## **Best practices - Bringing the Kingdom and Being Jesus on the Internet**

This creates the question of how we can avoid radicalization or shallow discipleship. While this is just the beginning of the discussion for the best techniques for 4-space ministry, I seek to offer some foundational paradigms.

### *Paradigm 1: Autobiographical memory*

There are two types of long term memory, Semantic and Episodic.<sup>16</sup> Semantic is your memory of facts and concepts, like the kind of information that helps you win you money on the TV show Jeopardy. Episodic memory consists of procedural memory (like how you brush your teeth or motor actions you can do without much attention) and autobiographical memory. Autobiographical memory is the memory of your story, the memory of your personal history. Autobiographical memory is also the long-term memory system interconnected with social-emotions such as empathy and compassion. Semantic memory, or our remembrance of facts, does not play a significant role in empathy, compassion, or human relationships. It is simply less connected to those areas in the brain.

Also, because it is the memory of your past, it is also the memory of your future. Autobiographical memory is the only memory system that can project into the future or answer the question, "what is the application of this to my life?" Semantic memory cannot do that – it is the wrong memory system.

While there is not enough space here for a thorough treatment of the differences in the memory systems and their implications, what is important to note is that in the 4<sup>th</sup> space, it is vital that learning is humanized and encoded in a person's autobiographical memory to the greatest degree possible.

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<sup>16</sup> Craik, F. I. M., and E. Tulving. 1975. "Depth of processing and retention of words in episodic memory." *Journal of Experimental Psychology-General* 268-294.

There are a few techniques that can be beneficial. First, testimony and personal stories are a means of activating autobiographical memory. When I hear your story, I remember my own and think about how they are both similar and different. A second powerful technique is helping people to *experience* the ideas and concepts. This can be done with interactive videos, good story-telling, virtual reality, reflective questions, and contextualized personal application.

To be clear, the worst thing one can do, in my opinion, is have decontextualized statements, tweets, posts, videos, and blogs that are overly simplistic, dehumanize, vilify, or offer final answers and applications. Learning is meant to be a journey and short-cutting the journey creates radicalized people, internet trolls, and those who are 'educated beyond their obedience.'<sup>17</sup>

### *Paradigm 2: It must be reflective*

As discussed above, one of the potential consequences of hyper social media use is the shallowing of morality and empathy in people. To offset this effect, discipleship and ministry in the 4<sup>th</sup> space needs to be overtly reflective. It needs to ask hard questions that cause people to stop, pause, think, wonder, pray, and seek the Lord. It needs to direct them back to their lives, communities, and consider those who will be impacted both directly and indirectly.

In 3<sup>rd</sup> spaces we see those who are not like us and have the potential to observe how things make them feel by seeing their faces and reactions. This does not exist in the 4<sup>th</sup> space, so we must clearly draw out empathy and other social-emotions. We must be uncompromising in requiring reflection. While it may seem less efficient or require time from both the instructor and the student, that is precisely the point. Unreflective actions and reactions have real consequences that one does not consider in the moment. They are usually negative, extreme, and can cause significant damage.

### *Paradigm 3: It must be interactive*

As discussed above, one feature of our natural learning processes is that of 'mirroring' what we see as a way of learning things we don't know. This aspect of human learning plays a significant role in 3<sup>rd</sup> spaces, and is even

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<sup>17</sup> Quote from Dallas Willard. For more on this, please see my article, "Why take the long road."

intentionally leveraged in ministry to our co-workers, neighbors, and those we interact with in the physical world. This feature (at least right now) is missing in the 4<sup>th</sup> space, and it must be compensated for. One prominent way to do this (at this time) is with video, especially interactive video. The more those to whom we minister can see our faces, and the more we see their face, the better. Video conferencing, discussion questions, and other features that help people interact in a face-to-face way should be leveraged as much as possible.

It is unlikely that the mean-spirited and dehumanizing things which are said on the internet would be spoken to a person's face. Face-to-face interaction also includes more of the non-verbal communication which constitutes a vast portion of our human understanding. Furthermore, having people interact with others in a way that requires them to take ownership for the thoughts they express helps facilitate authentic learning and discipleship. Interactive, face-to-face communication is what one should seek to integrate in to a 4<sup>th</sup> space ministry context.

What is great about the 4<sup>th</sup> space is that a person does not have to be physically next to someone in order to interact with them. This is not true of the 3<sup>rd</sup> space, where proximity determines most of our interaction. That means with the 4<sup>th</sup> space, we can strongly interact with those who are on the other side of the planet. Indeed, this is why those who have grown up with the internet often intuitively feel like global citizens.

## Conclusion

In summation, it is my contention that there is a fundamental difference in the means in which we socialize and interact on the internet and how we socialize in the physical world. There is a complete lack of context, perspective, and verification in our insular experiences in the internet. Additionally, the lack of face-to-face interaction, which can activate our brain's natural social-emotional processes, is significant enough to require its consideration as an additional 4<sup>th</sup> space. Because of these differences, we cannot simply apply 3<sup>rd</sup> space ministry techniques where we can model, mirror, or demonstrate the love of Jesus and know people will catch a glimpse of Him. Rather, we must stop, think, consider, pray, and always seek to be Jesus in the 4<sup>th</sup> space. We must seek to employ the hard work of growth and not the simplicity of merely inspiring people to action (which is the intent of radicalization.) Radicalization seeks to move the learner to action, but with distorted, shallow reflection. While the ways and means in

which we can do 4<sup>th</sup> space ministry are not thoroughly discussed here, the discussion should start with the three foundational paradigms of keeping the it interactive, reflective, and encoding the learning into autobiographical memory as much as possible.

### **About the Author**

Jessie Cruickshank is a demonstrated disciple-maker and facilitator of spiritual transformation. She is an ordained Foursquare minister and a nationally recognized leader in the fields of Experiential Education and Educational Neuroscience. She holds a Master's from Harvard in Mind, Brain, and Education. Jessie is passionate about creating organic systems that facilitate human and organizational development.