

RESEARCHING INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL IDENTITY AMONG RELIGIOUS BLOGS

DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES, CONSTRUCTING SAMPLES, DEALING WITH HUMAN SUBJECT ISSUES

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I am currently conducting doctoral-level research on a growing trend towards structural change in Australian Protestant churches, known as “the emerging church movement”. In particular, I’m studying how bloggers have become the face of the movement, and are shaping the way the movement sees its past, present and future. As such my research involves seeking how these bloggers use the technology to construct online identities, and how they use the technology to form an emerging church blogging community. The purposes of this paper are to highlight some of the challenges and questions I’ve met in the first half of the research project, and to present a model for undertaking discursive analysis of identity development in blogging.

WHAT IS THE EMERGING CHURCH?

“Emerging church” is a term borrowed from the title of a book written by Bruce Larson and Ralph Osborne and published in 1970, which addresses some of the failings of the modern church to evangelise in a changing urban world (Larson and Osborne, 1970: 594). Expressions of the emerging church can be seen in almost every Protestant denominational system in the English-speaking world. In Australia, communities that would describe themselves as “emerging” are present mainly within Anglican, Baptist, Churches of Christ and Uniting Church (former Methodist and Presbyterian) denominations.

The emerging church may be described simply as a development from, or reaction to, traditional or modern expressions of Protestant Christian community, that recognises and values Christianity’s marginalisation in a pluralist late modernity. It explores new models of worship, spirituality, organisation and mission, embracing contemporary technological methods while honouring and seeking a return to ancient faith expressions. It has ethical and theological objections to “mega-church” models of contemporary evangelicalism, which is seen as corrupted by consumerist culture and its values that are antithetical to the Gospel. The label “emerging” may be substituted with “postmodern” or “missional” (Driscoll, 2006: 88).

Lacking a structure comparable to traditional denominations, including a common doctrine, financial resources, clerical support and systems of authority, emerging church communities, or members therein, have found computer-mediated communication the most efficient method of connecting with other groups and individuals, and finding a place within the global emerging church community. Blogs have become both the most numerous and the most prominent source of information and locus of interaction on the emerging church phenomenon. Thus bloggers are becoming the “gatekeepers” of the movement; gifted with the power and responsibility to present the emerging church community as it exists beyond the local congregation. How bloggers negotiate and distribute these powers and responsibilities is an issue of concern for the wider research project.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The two main questions in my endeavour are:

How are blogging technology and its usage enabling bloggers to construct personal and community identities for the emerging church movement? and

How are bloggers shaping how the emerging church movement in Australia sees its past, present and future?

Behind these questions lies a desire to discover how religious communication online interacts with offline religious practice to inform bloggers in their individual religious pursuits, and how bloggers use a global medium to discern or construct a regional expression of the movement from a particularly Australian religious history and sociology. Thus I believe that a discursive analysis of interpersonal communication through blogs would be more effective in studying the construction of religious identity in the blogosphere, rather than merely an analysis of religious content on web sites, or a network analysis of connections between bloggers. That is, I am concerned with how an emerging church blogging culture is constructed, that frames and governs, as well as enables, religious communication and identity construction, and how this interacts with the experience of emerging church religion and culture offline in Australia.

For the purposes of analysis data from the sites of thirty bloggers are collected in three separate time periods, being 1 July – 31 October 2006, 1 February – 31 May 2007, and 1 November 2007 – 31 January 2008. The reason for the discontinuous time periods is twofold. Firstly, it is known that bloggers may have periods of hiatus, or choose to delete their sites, so the data collection periods allow for a different sample of blog sites. Secondly, it is assumed that particular topics of discussion occur in blog sites over Christmas and Easter periods, that I would like to capture in the research. In addition, data from the comment/discussion threads following blog posts are collected for a maximum of 28 days from the post's date. While the comments of all readers are noted, greater attention is given to the comments of members of the sample, both in their interaction with readers on their own sites, and their interactions on other sites in the sample.

CONSTRUCTING THE SAMPLE

In the months leading up to the first sample period, a list of Australian emerging church blogs was compiled through:

1. Technorati rankings by “authority” of the “emerging church” tag,
2. del.icio.us search of the “emerging church”, “postmodern Christianity” and “emergent church” tags, and
3. monitoring comments on posts on the sites found through the above two searches.

Three issues for consideration arose regarding the identification of sites for inclusion in the study sample. Firstly, given that the emerging church label is a topic of much contentious debate in the blogosphere, searches based on Technorati and del.icio.us tags has proven neither accurate nor exhaustive. Some see the term as connected to the new religious organisation, Emergent, from which they wish to distance themselves. Others see the label as an inaccurate description of their ecclesiology and theology, and prefer the term “missional church”. Others still blog about personal spiritual practice and/or local communal life, in which the term “emerging” is ignored or dismissed, though they involve themselves in conversations about the movement with other bloggers, to the extent they are viewed by others as another emerging church blog. Thus there are Australian blogs worthy of inclusion in the study sample that would not be identified in these searches. On the other side of coin is the fact that blogs that are mostly disinterested or antagonistic towards the emerging church movement also appear on these lists.

Secondly, the term “Australian” required consideration. Two blogs were found authored by Americans living in Australia, and one blog authored by an Australian living in Hong Kong was also noted. Given their readership of other Australian blogs, and the involvement of other Australians in discussions on their sites, I decided to include them in my sample.

The third issue involves the allocation of “authority” of search engines such as Technorati and the exclusion of women bloggers. In April 2006, only one female Australian blogger appeared in first hundred blogs listed under the “emerging church” tag in the Technorati search site, though one blog authored by a husband and wife team was also listed.¹ This is

¹ <http://www.technorati.com/blogs/tag/emerging+church>, accessed 15 April 2006.

compared to 26 Australian blog sites overall, and only 6 blogs authored by women. At the same time, a considerably larger number of women who owned blog sites were discovered through comments on male-authored emerging church blogs (where readers of these blogs insert a link to their own site in their comment to the post), over fifteen. There are a number of suppositions why women are underrepresented in the Technorati lists by authority. One is that these women bloggers tend not to proclaim their site as an emerging church site, for the reasons listed above.

Another is well-explained by the 2004 report by Herring, Kouper et al., titled “Women and Children Last”. In their study of web logs they found that the difference in number between blogs authored by males and by females was relatively small. However, when they divided the study between *types* of blogs, the results were quite different. The types they identified were filter blogs (blogs that locate and review other web sites), knowledge blogs (or k-logs: blogs focussing on alerting audiences to new information in a variety of topics and fields, mainly technology), online journals (where authors reflect on daily life) and blogs that fit in more than one of the previous categories. Their study showed that the first two types of blogs were significantly more likely to be authored by men than women, and that the opposite is true for the third type (Herring, Kouper et al., 2004). I have found that this trend is true for emerging church blogs, where women-authored blogs are, generally, more likely to be reflection on personal spiritual beliefs and practices, while male-authored blogs tend to include reflections, opinions and arguments on regional and global issues experienced by the Christian church and the emerging church movement therein. Male-authored blogs, therefore, are more likely to be referenced by other bloggers in their reflections and arguments, and so are more likely to receive “authority rankings” by search engines like Technorati.

It may also be an indicator of the privileged place of men in religious discourse in Australian Christianity, so I’ve found it important to include in the study sample blogs with low Technorati rankings, including blogs by women, in order to better reflect the range of emerging church bloggers in the country. To this end, the means by which I have identified bloggers’ sites for inclusion into the study sample are as follows:

1. Describes itself as exploring the emerging church, emergent church, postmodern church (or church/faith in postmodernity) or missional church.
2. OR Uses one of these descriptions in a Technorati tag.
3. AND Makes comments on a number of other such blogs.
4. OR Has listed such blogs in its published blog roll.
5. AND Is Australian.

Where information is accessible, blogs have come from a fair spread of locations within Australia, and from a range of denominations (that is, blogs of emerging church authors from a range of denominational origins).

DESIGNING A METHODOLOGY FOR DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS IN BLOGS

THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

Underlining my research is the belief that the construction of religious identity is a reflexive process, dependent on the conditions that make for social interaction. I believe a discursive analysis of blog posts is therefore important for considering how bloggers understand, appropriate and play with an “emerging church” identity, and how the blogosphere creates the conditions for that social interaction.

Bucholtz and Hall offer a helpful set of principles for the study of identity through discursive analysis. Two of these have been important for my research. One is labelled the *indexicality* principle. By this the authors mean how utterances within a discourse contain “(a) overt mention of identity categories and labels; (b) implicatures and presuppositions regarding one’s own or others’ identity position; (c) displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as Interactional footings and participant roles; and (d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 594).” My study of emerging church bloggers shows a discursive process of such “indexicality” is explicitly made. How one understand and identify with such terms and categories as

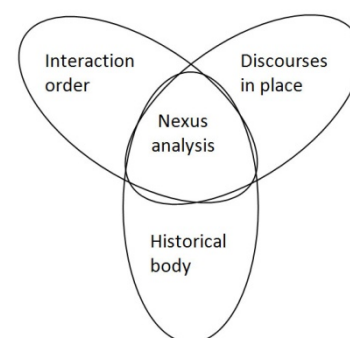
“emerging”, “postmodern”, “modernist”, “traditional”, “contemporary”, “missional” and even “religious” is an important task of those who enter the emerging church blogosphere, either as author or reader.

The other is the *relationality* principle, in which identities “are intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations” between truth and fallacy, similarity and difference, and authority and illegitimacy (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 598). These are processes also found in explicit terms in blog posts and discussions, around key themes of theology, the authority of scripture, the roles and authority of clergy, the role of the church in social service and justice, and the church’s mission to evangelism.

Thus I’ve found it useful to create a taxonomy of blog posts and discussions based on the following themes of religious discourse: theology; mission and evangelism; faith practices; Christian social commentary (including a faith-led response to political, environmental and social issues); church structure and authority; and the authority of scripture. I expect that discerning how bloggers consider what are “emerging church” beliefs or values in these themes, and how they relate to each other’s personal beliefs and values, would help me uncover how bloggers discursively construct their own religious identity, and communally discern an “emerging church” identity in social interaction in the blogosphere.

SITES OF INTERACTION IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

In their book, *Nexus Analysis*, Scollon and Wong Scollon note that social action occurs at the intersection of three factors: the interaction order, the discourses in place, and the historical bodies of the participants involved. The interaction order describes the structure of relationships between participants and the environment in which the interaction takes place (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004: 21). Discourses change with the interaction order: a conversation between a teacher and a student will differ greatly outside a lecture theatre from inside it, because they are positioned in different places with different distances between them, the teacher will assume a greater position of authority and high attention inside the theatre, the student will be seated among other students, the conversation will be more controlled, etc. The interaction order describes these settings as they would impact the discourses taking place. The historical body describes the set of assumptions, skills, values, beliefs and motivations that each participant brings to the setting of the social interaction (25). An example of this would be the desire for retention or promotion within the institution that drives the teacher to deliver a quality performance in the lecture theatre, while some students’ attention is dependent on their as yet unfulfilled desire to choose an appropriate major in the degree course. The discourses in place include the discussions made central and explicit in a social encounter, but also include the text on a variety of objects from graffiti on walls to labels on clothing, and even the clothing itself can be considered discourse (135).



For Scollon and Wong Scollon, then, an effective discourse analysis in the emerging church blogosphere involves an understanding of the interaction order that is, on one hand, created by the blogging technology and, on the other hand, framed by the beliefs and assumptions about the blogosphere by those who participate in it, and the desires and motivations of those participants formed by their religious experiences (their historical body). Therefore a taxonomy of blog posts and discussions is insufficient for a complete understanding of the discursive construction of religious identity in blogging. I also would need to consider the following:

1. *Bloggers’ approach to the technology, the blogosphere and cyberspace.* For example, does the emerging church blogosphere privilege those with more technical savvy than others? How free are bloggers to spend time in cyberspace while at work or study? Are bloggers bound by other lifestyle choices and responsibilities that impact on their time online? Do emerging church bloggers see time spent in cyberspace as time spent in ministry? Is going into cyberspace a discrete step anymore, or is it always present around them? Is cyberspace viewed as a place to go to, or something to go *through* to somewhere else? What does their involvement in religion offline tell them about what cyberspace is and how to use it?
2. *Bloggers’ understanding of their audience.* While bloggers have tools at their disposal to gain an understanding of where and when their site is being viewed, not to mention information freely given by readers in comment threads,

do bloggers know and speak to an audience that is invisible online? Is there an imagined audience that the blogger speaks to, beyond those visible to him or her? What relationship does the blogger intend to develop with his/her audience (minister, friend, expert, comic, devil's advocate)? How do the blogger's religious values inform this relationship, and how they act with their audience, including the moderation of comments in discussions between readers?

3. *Bloggers' apprehension of the emerging church blogosphere.* With what intention do bloggers enter the blogosphere: to meet friends, to compile a personal journal, to create a space for a select group of people (e.g. an online continuation of an offline community or conversation), to engage in cross-blog debates and discussions? How do these intentions change? How do bloggers perceive the authority of Technorati and other such rankings?
4. *How the blogosphere itself frames interactions and discourses.* How are bloggers' uses of RSS readers enabling and preventing participation in other blog discussions? As comment threads are "chain-and-wheel" type discussions, to what extent are emerging church bloggers expected to involve themselves and moderate discussions. What types of discourses favoured in emerging church blogs, like, say, sermons, academic-style essays, journalistic-style reports, personal reflections?

While some of this information may be provided online, made explicit in posts, or in information placed on the sites header or sidebars, or in account information at Blogger or Technorati, other information can only be found by other means. Thus I have engaged bloggers in private interviews to find out about their blogging habits, the reasons for starting a blog, the places, times and technologies used to blog, their understanding of their audience, and their impressions about the emerging church blogosphere.

DEALING WITH HUMAN SUBJECT ISSUES AND "GOING NATIVE" – RESEARCHER AS BLOGGER

Inviting bloggers to participate in human research interviews necessarily means that, while I may "lurk" on their sites, I am not unknown to them. The impact of my presence as researcher is evident: participants reflect on their interviews on their blogs, and even have "put words in my mouth" regarding how a "lurker" may view their site.

A couple of days ago I sat down and had an interview with Paul for some research he is doing into online interaction in the emerging church area. BTW was he right to be worried that linking to him would lead to mad signposters taking issue with his every opinion?²

In the initial stages of my research I was concerned at how my "visibility" to bloggers may impact on what was discussed on blog sites. Yet many blogs already contain reflections on the author's own blogging practices and motivations, so I have contented myself to the idea that my interviews provide an impetus for bloggers to publish reflections that they likely would have produced had I not been introduced to them.

I started my own blog in 2005 when I was a Masters student engaged in an unrelated research topic. I had developed a practice of blogging about my studies that carried into the PhD research. I have found that bloggers involved in my study maintain a high interest in my research, read my blog regularly, list the site on their blogrolls, and make references to it in blog posts. This has informed both my practice in blogging and in conducting interviews:

1. I alert potential interviewees to my blog site to inform them of my research, and alert them to the fact that I reflect on interviews (without disclosing identifying information) on my blog.

² Taken from <http://www.signposts.org.au/2007/03/19/so-you-want-to-argue/>, accessed 30 July 2007. "Signposters" refers to those who comment on the blog, named "signposts.org.au".

2. I alert interviewees to the notion that other bloggers are interested in my work, and thus may be able to identify them in any publication of my research by the fact they interact with their blog. To this end I offer the option for quotations to be attributed to them as blog authors (e.g. Paul Teusner, author of *fishers, surfers and casters*, said in his interview...). In this case the quotation is attributed only to the author's name as it is published on his or her site, and no personal or demographic information is attributed to them.
3. I have placed a comments policy on my blog, stating that I will request permission by email to use any discussion posted by readers as data.

To date all those interviewed have been more than happy with these practices, and have allowed quotations from their interviews to be attributed to them. Some who have read my comments policy have even stated that any discussion on my blogs is public work, and therefore not requiring permission by the comment's author. I see, however, there is a tension between participating in my research project fully and protecting privacy. Thus, wherever possible, I request permission to use data posted on my research site, so as to allow other bloggers to participate freely in my reflection of my own study. The effect is a blog becoming a place where not only I, but my research subjects, engage in the study of emerging church bloggers.

While the participation of research subjects in my reflection on studying them has been nothing but helpful so far, an important concern remains, regarding the researcher's own objectivity. Though I would not call myself an adherent to the emerging church movement, I have been listed on participants' sites as another emerging church blog. Thus there is the concern that ideological forces may come into play when I post a reflection on my research, that I may be expected to "speak for" the emerging church movement, or that it is assumed I share beliefs and values coherent with an emerging church identity (or what is believed to be an emerging church identity). Thus "to be in but not of" the blogosphere is a tension to be continually resolved. Indeed, to consider religious identity among bloggers calls me to be reflexive, both as a researcher and as a religious person who blogs. Just as I draw conclusions about other bloggers' religious identities, they do the same to me.

This paper has given light to methodological and practical concerns involved in engaging in research into blogging. As a postgraduate student I have not intended the paper to offer any answers, but merely show my stage in the journey, and what has led me to the place I am at now. It is my hope that the presentation of this paper is an opportunity for me to learn from other researchers in the field.

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