

Online Religious Advertising: Repackaging Youth Culture through Symbolic Exchange

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Summary:

This paper explores the changing nature of Christian denominational discourse in an Australian context as informed by Internet technologies. It takes as its case study three Internet sites developed and published for the promotion of three separate Christian youth festivals held in Australia between July 2008 and January 2009, undertaking a discursive analysis of their structures, content and design to examine how Internet and institutional religion interact in delivering a Christian message to Australian young people. The analysis will show that, despite the diverse theological positions, convention goals and approaches to the Internet, all three sites are surprisingly similar in form, while the content stays true to denominational tradition.

The study raises questions about the intersection of technology, culture and religion, that I intend to posit in the presentation. In particular, I would like to raise how the contours of Christian diversity in Australia are being redrawn, so that membership to a particular denomination, institution or group can no longer define what kind of Christian any Australian is.

Keywords: Internet, denominationalism, youth, culture, Australia

Internet promotion

While computer-mediated communication technologies had been in use by some businesses, academic and government organisations in Australia since the 1980s, the Internet as we know it now was not available to the household until the acquisition of business-usage rights by the then largest Australian telecommunications company, Telstra, in 1995. From then until the late 1990s, commercial ISPs numbering around 600 independent businesses were offering the Internet into Australian homes, to the extent that by the end of 1998, 1.3 million households were online. (Clarke, 2004)

By 2004, 95 per cent of Australian homes with parents and young people considered the Internet a normal household expense, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, a major Australian daily paper (Barker, 2004), and the Australian Bureau of Statistics recorded that 84 per cent of all Australians aged 18-24 used the Internet (ABS, 2004).

It is little surprise then, that the Internet forms an important part of the advertising and promotion strategy of Australian organisations. While not necessarily the most effective medium for advertising, in comparison to television, radio, newspapers and magazines, the Internet has become an important complement to these media for a number of reasons. Any interest in a product or service aroused by a television, radio or print advertisement can be maintained by directing the audience to a web site for further information. An Internet domain is a permanent advertising space, usually cheaper to maintain than other advertising sources, for a business who sell more than one product or service, and can help build brand loyalty. On the other side of the coin, interactive functions, such as online surveys and polls, registration facilities, online competitions (plus other more invasive and nefarious data-mining strategies) enable organisations to gain information about their market that will better inform their range of products and services, and other advertising strategies.

Church organisations find in the Internet an effective medium for promotion of events, such as youth festivals, reaching out to an audience beyond their congregations, and maintaining interest through interactivity and news feeding.

An Australian Christian story

The Christian churches have sat in an uneasy place in Australian society, ever since Europeans arrived to the continent in the eighteenth century. It took many years, and much pressure from immigrants, for British churches to consider the communities of convicts, emancipists and free settlers as mission fields (Beward, 1988: 1). Rather than conscientious opposition that grew in North American societies, it was apathy that halted the establishment of a national Church in the colonies.

The same apathy allowed for the growth of religious diversity and the development of a unique religious character for the land that would be a nation. Colonial governments supported the importation of both Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy and professionals to build charities for migrants and freed convicts, the majority of whom were Irish Catholics (Beward, 1988: 11, 13). The copper and gold boom of the mid 1800s attracted both miners and evangelists who gained followers more by their practical piety than formal theological education. It was in this period that Methodist and Baptist churches grew rapidly, by the deployment of lay preachers (Beward, 1988: 28). Finke and Stark notice a similar expansion in the history of the United States' expansion. In the absence of an established national church, as in Europe, religious diversity thrived and the growth of denominational communities were fuelled by a process akin to market forces: those that grew were those that could provide religious products that the wider community would be attracted to consume (Finke and Stark, 2005: 15-20).

Even this early in the history of White Australia, common sense pointed to an ecumenical Christian presence, if at least a common Protestantism. Anglicans, Presbyterians and Wesleyans shared resources to build churches in marginal areas, including the support of clergy (Beward, 1988: 23-24). This common sense survived into the next century, where a federated Australia saw the union of all Lutheran churches (previously divided by ethnic origins), a Baptist Union, and an Australian Anglican General Synod (Beward, 1988: 66). Even Methodism, Congregationalism, and most Presbyterian communities were lost to a Uniting Church in Australia.

It is argued that this ecumenical sensibility fuelled the separation of church from state in the nation's development. For example, a passion for justice united

Christians to the campaign of state-funded education in the second half of the nineteenth century, that led to the dissolution of most Protestant schools. It could have ended all sectarianism, but it paved the way for a Roman Catholic system that aimed for a religious alternative to secularist education, and then new Protestant schools that aimed for prestige and refinement (Breward, 1988: 32-33). The same passion in Christian community service led to the ideal that the professional skill is more important than the religious affiliation of service agencies' staff, and would eventually mean the independence of many from their Christian roots (Breward, 1988: 86-87). Examples include the Brotherhood of St Lawrence, Mission Australia and the Australian Workers Union. Even organisations that carry a denominational label, such as Anglicare and UnitingCare, ensure the culture of the workplace remains primarily secular, even where chaplains are employed.

Against the historical backdrop of consensual secularism and latent ecumenism, the mid 1900s saw a convergence of various global social and political factors that led to a watershed in Australian religious history, among the effects of which the Australian emerging church now sees itself. These include, but are not exhausted by, the Billy Graham crusades, the Second Vatican Council, the arrival of television, the Asian Wars, the World Council of Churches, the Death of God, and communism.

Evangelical crusades and revivals have been with Australians since before the Gold Rush. They focussed on simple pragmatic doctrines balanced by a fervour for community harmony and service. Evangelists were often gifted with more charisma than formal education, and understood the plight of their congregations. Billy Graham entered Australia with the same properties, but his style led to a new flavour of Evangelicalism that will be the key characteristic for Evangelicalism in that century and the next. Graham's works had earned him many devotees in North America, and arrived down under with a large capital outlay to produce large musical and dramatic events in our capital cities, that drew unusually large crowds (Breward, 1988: 77). With Graham came the idea that the spectacle is as important as the message.

Graham's crusade, like other evangelistic pursuits to follow, was worded in the language of new media of the period, television. Schofield Clark (2003: 30) notes the four main tenets of Evangelicalism are:

1. That humans are in need of salvation
2. That Christians are charged with bringing others to the faith
3. That the Bible is free of errors and must be understood literally, and
4. The Rapture will mark the end of days, vindicating the plight of believers.

As television became the dominant form of mass media in Western culture, the late twentieth century saw both religious and secular polities increasingly submissive to its discursive structure. Television was, as it still is, a medium packed with stories of good versus evil, where even journalism shows contain a narrative and ritual structure that is filled with drama. The Evangelical Gospel found a comfortable place among the messages beamed into homes of this period.

Australian broadcasting regulations of the 1960s onwards allowed a space for religious programming, even if it were just among the screening of commercials. Mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches lacked a voice of authority for the new media environment, and struggled with how to approach it ethically and structurally. The Christian Television Association was developed to deal with these issues on the behalf of the major denominations, and became a well-known Christian presence in Australian television, until regulations were relaxed in the 1990s, making Christian broadcasts more expensive, having to compete for air-time in the same way as other community and commercial organisations. Now the newly named Christian Television Australia focuses its resources on a digital channel, with rarely run special programmes on free-to-air.

It seems now that the once-small Evangelical Christian voice is the great winner in Australian broadcasting deregulation. Its energies are not wasted by the strict authority regimes and ethical debates that confronted the mainstream churches (Lehikoinen, 2003: 165-166). American televangelism, such as the ministries of Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Marilyn Hickey and Benny Hinn, had enough resources to buy air time on Australian television. Their common message was the Bible is given directly by God and so must be read with a literal eye, that prayer brings rewards to the true believer, who is persecuted by a secular world unprotected from Satan's influence, and is called to bring moral regeneration until the end of days, which are

imminent. Though a very marginal Christian worldview, the rituals contained within the television programming, together with the ritual acts adopted by its consumers, helped legitimate the religious identity of viewers as part of a global movement. (Alexander, 1994: 3-5).

Evangelical Christianity has, since Billy Graham, been seen as a rapidly growing movement with a strong successful voice in Australian society, to the shame of Catholicism and mainstream Protestantism. Television has helped, not just by carrying the message, but by reinforcing the shape of the Australian religious milieu as a market, where religious identity is built by consumption, and where the success of an organisation is dependent, albeit somewhat, on the marketability of its products. This is indeed the basis of criticism of Australia's "megachurches", such as Hillsong in Sydney and Adelaide's Paradise Church, labelled by some in the emerging church movement as more akin to businesses than religious communities.

Television is not the only transforming force of changes in Australia's Christian landscape in the mid and late twentieth century. While ecumenical activities engaged dialogue between established denominations with increasing fervour, political debates asked Christians to take sides, producing divides within denominational structures. Whatever differences divided Christians into Catholics and Protestants would become less important than those that defined a "left-wing" and a "right-wing", or a Liberal versus a Conservative Christian.

The Second Vatican Council spanned three years and involved two Popes, ending in 1965. It changed the face of the Roman Catholic Church, opening its doors to alternative methods of theological inquiry, greater freedoms of expression for congregational brothers and sisters, and interest in inter-denominational and inter-faith dialogue. In response to its global power, Catholics in Australia found a seat in the Australian Council of Churches (now known as the National Council of Church in Australia) and involvement in joint theological training organisations, such as the United Faculty of Theology and the Melbourne College of Divinity. Economic prosperity, social mobility, free education and urban sprawl since the 1950s closed distances between Catholics and Protestants in both geography and class. Pure

Catholic families were growing at a slower rate, inter-denominational marriages were becoming normal. (Breward, 1993: 67)

But one Papal Encyclical would cause a disagreement among Catholics, creating a divide that is not yet resolved. *Humanae Vitae*, subtitled "On The Regulation Of Birth" was written by Pope Paul VI and released in 1968, reaffirming traditional teaching and unequivocally condemning contraception and abortion. Many Catholics began to question the infallibility of the Papacy, and clergy met those confessing to the sin of using contraception with acknowledgment that it was a matter of personal conscience (Breward, 1988: 73).

In Australia as in other parts of the world, political movements evoked responses by Christians that separated them from others. They would include the anti-war movement and feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, environmentalism and the gay and lesbian rights movement of the 1980s and 1990s. Wuthnow (1989: 32-34) describes the distinction between pro and con among believers as arising out of a perceived gap between political values and behaviour. The Liberals attacked the behaviour of government while the Conservatives critiqued values. Conservatives wanted out of political involvement, focussing more on changing personal beliefs, while Liberals saw this was not enough for the Church's witness to the world.

Generations in this half of the century had grown more educated than those before, and had allowed themselves to question the authority of their denominational patriarchs. Not surprising then, that 1963 saw the peak of participation in traditional religious communities in Australia. The Death of God movement of the 1960s, informed by the works of Barth and Bonhoeffer, led in part by the 1963 publication of *Honest to God*, written by John Robinson, then Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, criticised contemporary Christian theology and claimed that while traditional images of God were absent in the secular world, a sense of the sacred can no longer be found among the cloisters of the Church (Altizer and Hamilton, 1966: 28-36, 39). Instead, the Christian way of life should be found by leaving the church and into secular life. Radical liberal groups, including the Australian Student Christian Movement, claimed the failure of Australia's mainline churches to listen to and speak to the world (Breward, 1993: 169).

While Liberal Christians laid their attacks on the Church for distancing itself from society, in later decades radical Conservatives set their aim for governments. Organisations such as Catch the Fire Ministries and the Australian Prayer Networks did well to catch the attention of state and federal politicians in their claims for a presence of Christian spirit and fervour in the running of the country. Some Christians organised themselves into political parties, calling for Australia's moral and spiritual renewal, and a return to "family values". Such parties include Family First and the Christian Democratic Party. Due partly to the strong presence of Evangelical churches in mainstream media, prominent politicians have found in them a support for a conservative agenda, not least the country's previous Prime Minister, the Hon John Howard, and Treasurer, the Hon Peter Costello. Mainstream news media has responded to politicians' interest in these groups, to turn their own attention to religious debates happening in denominations and the impact on Australian life. The place of religion in political life, especially in the face of a growing Muslim immigrant and refugee population, and terrorism post-9/11, is a popular article for consideration by any radio or television news program.

It is growing apparent that Australians define the Christian identity less by their involvement in a denomination and more by their stance on a variety of political, religious and social issues, like abortion, sexual morality, the ordination of women and homosexuals, stem-cell research and our responsibility to the environment. People draw from a large market of sources for resources to form religious identity, outside their local religious community and its parent denominational authority. These views are still dividing people within traditional institutional structures and encouraging alliances among previously separated groups.

The Roman Catholic church sits as the largest Christian denomination in Australia, accounting for half of church attendants in 2001, according to the National Church Life Survey. They are followed by the Anglicans and the Uniting Church. Yet these denominations also represent the shrinking mainstream church in Australia. The Catholics saw a 13% decrease in participation between 1996 and 2001, while Uniting Church numbers dropped by 11%. The Anglican Church lost two percent of its overall population in this period, though it is believed that while the Sydney Archdiocese saw "significant" growth, the rest of Australia suffered more than 10%

loss of membership. It is too soon to say that Christianity is dying in this country however. The same survey sees rapid growth in Pentecostal churches, by 20% for the Apostolic churches and Assemblies of God, and by 42% in the Christian City Churches. (Bellamy and Castle, 2004: 5-8)

It seems, however, that not even Pentecostal churches can retain young people (i.e. those aged 15-24). The National Church Life Survey records that Pentecostal churches could only retain 5.5% of its young people between 1991 and 2001, while 15 % of all its members moved from this family of denominations to other Christian communities. Mainstream Protestant churches were equally unable to keep its young, retaining only 4% in the five years to 2001. (Sterland, Powell et al., 2006: 10-12)

The question

While more than half of young Australians say they believe in God, there is generally a low interest in religious participation, and hold strong beliefs in the freedom of religious expression and moral relativism (Mason, Singleton et al., 2007). Given that young people spend at least forty hours weekly engaged in mass media (Brooks, 2007: 23), denominational authorities have much to compete with in teaching their young how to grow in Christian life.

The question I would like to present for exploration is, then, twofold. To what extent are traditional denominational discourses surviving in a contemporary Internet environment? Is there a textual and symbolic exchange between Christian discourses and other discourses operating online that attract and engage young people's interaction?

Approaching these questions, I will use as case studies the Internet sites associated with three Australian Christian youth festivals: the National Christian Youth Convention (<http://ncyc.org.au/>), organised by the Uniting Church, to be held in January 2009, the World Day of Youth (<http://www.wyd2008.org/>), organised by the Catholic Church and held in July 2008, and the Hillsong United Youth Conference (<http://www2.hillsong.com/hillsongunitedyouthconference/>), held also in July 2008

and organised by Hillsong, a congregation of the Assemblies of God (aka Australian Christian Churches).

The method

A discursive method of analysis will be employed to approach the question. This method is informed by the work of Paul Gee who defines discourse as “ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (Gee, 2005: 21).

Moreover, I am informed by the model of multimodal analysis developed by Kress and van Leeuwen, who assert that discourses are present not just in text, but in design, production and distribution (2001: 4-8, 42-43). According to their model, it is important to acknowledge that discourses lie in:

- The lines of authority and communication between site creators and the people, communities and institutions on whose behalf they speak
- The placement of word, image, sound and other forms of text on each web page, and the structure of pages within each site
- The technology itself, and perceptions of its usage and values imposed on it by both producers and consumers.

For the sake of conciseness, this study will be primarily concerned with text and its placement in the design of the web pages being considered. Four types of religious discourse will be studied:

- Discourses of *proclamation*: statements and other text intended to connect the reader to religious belief or doctrine
- Discourses of *identity*: statements and other text intended to connect the reader to a group identity, such as a denomination or movement
- Discourses of *participation*: statements and other text intended to connect the reader to other readers, or event organisers

- Discourses of *activation*: statements and other text intended to connect the reader to a sense of Christian purpose or religious life.

The survey

All three sites, from here on referred to as the NCYC site, the Hillsong site and the WYD site, for brevity, use Content Management System programming to effect a site design. CMS make site creation easier for producers, who can make simple changes to text without having to reload the site's entire data, provide uniformity across all pages within a site, and offer site readers/users simple navigation tools. The use of CMS also make each site's display fairly similar to each other. All sites have a picture or animated header (banner), and either a topbar or sidebar containing navigation links to each page within the site.

The banners of the Hillsong and WYD sites contain streams of images. On the Hillsong banner pictures of young people having fun and listening to music, or dancing in a concert audience are juxtaposed with images of poverty and loneliness in foreign deserts or urban landscapes. The words of Mark 16:15, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" appear in the centre of these images, with "into all the world" specifically highlighted. On the WYD site banner, the words of Acts 1:8, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses", sit above images of Sydney's skyline juxtaposed with images of young people conversing, laughing, dancing and carrying flags of various nations.

The only image in the NCYC site's banner is a Uniting Church logo. Words scattered over the banner (such as "greatness", "seeds", "interpretation" and "disciples") are, however, composed as graffiti on a wall, or scribbles on a chalkboard. The idea is, I believe, to construct a sense of under-culture, or subculture, as if the words are "dirty".

Pictorial images are sparse in the body of the NCYC site's content. Text relating to all four discourses are apparent throughout the site's pages. Consider these discourses of proclamation:

NCYC09 is the time and place where delegates converge as the beloved of God from all places to hear the Good News of hope, peace and justice.¹

Overall the key ideas that shape the theology within the Biblical texts for NCYC09 are about identity and radical discipleship. Radical discipleship is a perspective or approach to Christian spirituality that sees Jesus as the “root” for Christian life and utilises him as the key to biblical interpretation. Participation in the Good News and salvation brings both personal and social change.²

Of participation:

Delegates come together for a week to discover, celebrate and deepen the faith and unity we have in Jesus Christ. We converge to live as an intentional Christian community for a week, we have the opportunity to converge with the Good News in our everyday lives and with our home faith communities, and ultimately we will each converge with God.³

And of activation:

NCYC is more than just a week away in January. Delegates return to homes, congregations and schools hyped, inspired and challenged from what they’ve experienced – motivated to carry out God’s will in the church and wider community.⁴

Discourses of activation appear to be lacking in printed word form in the WYD site.

Proclamation discourse exists in some places, for example:

The logo distils the essence of the theme for WYD08 and highlights the promise made by Jesus to set fire upon the Earth by the power of the Holy Spirit which inspires the pilgrims who come to Australia, to believe and witness to Him.⁵

¹ From <http://ncyc.org.au/about-ncyc/converge-the-theme/>

² From <http://ncyc.org.au/about-ncyc/converge-the-theme/>

³ From <http://ncyc.org.au/about-ncyc/converge-the-theme/>

⁴ From <http://ncyc.org.au/about-ncyc/>

⁵ From http://www.wyd2008.org/index.php/en/about_wyd08

However, discourses of identity are ubiquitous in this site. Readers are connected to a sense of belonging to a global Catholic Church, by reference to Pope and his clergy, both in word and in image. It is interesting to see photographs of conference staff dressed in official clerical clothing along images of young people in casual dress.

Identity discourse in the Hillsong site is more sparse, and centred on the history of the Hillsong Conference project:

As a passionate force of young people, we embarked on the journey of JAM United a decade ago. Such humble beginnings these were [...] Yet over the years, the uncontainable faith continued to grow and together we have crossed uncharted territory as thousands of lives have been changed. Today we stand, toes wriggling with excitement at the edge of a new chapter. Cos, just like God renamed his people to fit a new season, JAM United has just gone to a whole new level, now to be known as the Hillsong United Conference!!⁶

Rather than a connection to a global community, the Hillsong site attracts readers to a sense of belonging to a local organisational story. Likewise, the NCYC site contains identity discourse that is more historical than geographic, yet extends the tradition beyond the bounds of the organisation itself, to a wider Christian history:

Radical discipleship has similarities with liberation theology and the Anabaptist tradition, all expecting personal and social transformation as the Kingdom of God is realised in the here and now. Popular figures associated with the movement include Ched Myers, John Smith, Athol Gill, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dave Andrews, John Hirt, Merrill Kitchen, Robert McAfee Brown, Jeanette Mathews, Thorwald Lorenzen, Tim Costello, Ross Langmead, Ashley Barker, and our own John Uren.⁷

As mentioned before, the NCYC site has little image beyond the Uniting Church logo, image and sounds exist in YouTube^(TM) videos, mp3-file podcasts and blogs that are embedded in the site. These embedded objects tell stories of the event's

⁶ From <http://www2.hillsong.com/hillsongunitedyouthconference/home.html>

⁷ From <http://ncyc.org.au/about-ncyc/converge-the-theme/>

preparation, personal stories told by organisers, and invitations for comment and submission of users' own content. Such embedded objects also are found in the Hillsong site, those they are mainly sermons by guest speakers and music clips of the event's bands, intended to inspire audiences through activation discourses to respond in their daily life outside the event.

The NCYC site has official pages on social networking sites like Facebook^(TM) and flickr^(TM), and encourages users to visit these pages and contribute. The WYD site also promotes a social networking site, called xt3, created specifically for participants of the WYD event.

Findings

Considering a survey of the structure, banner titles, printed word and visual text, embedded objects and links to external Internet sites, certain findings may be proposed.

In all sites, religious text is framed by texts present in popular culture. Images of young people playing music, dancing in concert audiences, walking on the beach, laughing and having fun are set against church logos, biblical verses and photographs of clergy. The body text is casual, fraught with slang, and set against backdrops such as television screens and graffiti walls.

Yet each site emphasises a particular type of religious discourse. The NCYC site favours participation discourse, calling users to connect with other participants and even its organisers, to create a community of people with a common story. For the WYD site, the emphasis is on identity discourse, calling people from around the world to be unified under a common symbol. Activation discourse is favoured in the Hillsong site, calling users to join in a common message and take it out to their own worlds.

These discourses are more evident in audiovisual text embedded in the sites pages, and to a lesser extent in the links to external sites, than in the printed word. They are present in the juxtaposition with images of popular culture, framed by an overall image of youthfulness, giving value to the world and way of life of young people.

Considerations regarding the intersection of Australian Christianity, youth culture and the Internet

In 2005, Australian church organisations pooled finances together and employed an advertising agency to create a series of radio and television commercials, plus a website that offered information about the communities and its people. The advertising campaign was titled “Jesus – all about life” and featured young adults, parents and older people expressing their interest in the person of Jesus Christ. Every television and radio advertisement intentionally omitted any reference to the churches involved, and even Christianity itself. For the first time in Australian media, Christians refused to portray themselves in their religious promotion. Only in the website was there a small reference to Australian Christian churches, and only links to their own denominational website and contact information.

The ad campaign showed a realisation that Australians were, by-and-large, indifferent to Christian identity and community, though had some interest in faith and spirituality.

The WYD site has pictures of the Pope and his clergy, and the NCYC site has a Uniting Church logo on each page, yet denominational demarcations are by no other means made explicit in these sites. None of these sites promote, or even offer for consideration, to belonging to a particular denomination.

Yet the traditions of each denomination are found in the type of religious discourse emphasised in each site. The formation of a Christian message for the medium is founded to some extent on a denominational history, though only the characteristics of that history and integrity are open to the site’s readers and users.

Just like the “Jesus – all about life” ad campaign, these sites represent an endeavour to capture the audience of Internet communities with certain characteristics, people who are interested in faith with a certain bent, purpose or claim, rather than a denominational label. These sites, like the events they promote, recognise the Australian religious community is not defined by denominational or institutional membership or participation. They show us, however, that the Australian Christian landscape is still rich in diversity, and seeking new ways to talk about themselves.

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