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DIGITAL SOCIAL SPACE? INTERPRETING DIGITAL ACTION AND BEHAVIOR FOR  
TODAY'S CHURCHES

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# **Digital Social Space? Interpreting Digital Action and Behavior for Today's Churches**

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## Abstract

The Internet has changed the ways human beings connect and understand one another. Through the use of social media, people find themselves immersed in a digital environment consisting of various practices and behaviors. As Christianity continues to negotiate the often tricky relationship it has with digital experience, what philosophical and methodological stance should theology take towards the Internet? This paper argues that Henri Lefebvre's concept of social space provides a helpful avenue to engage contemporary digital interactivity and experience. Social space is the lived expression of exchanged between subjects who both live in and comprise it. As such, churches should recognize the Internet's social spatiality. The Internet is no longer something one only uses as a tool; instead it has become woven into the very fabric of contemporary life. A total reorientation towards the Internet, by churches and theologians, is necessary in order to connect to contemporary culture and religion.

The Internet has changed the ways human beings communicate, connect, and share experiences with one another. No longer does one have to intentionally connect to the Internet, instead the majority of users<sup>1</sup> remain continually connected through smartphones and tablets. This continual connection and interaction has immersed contemporary society into a vast digital environment, consisting of various practices and behaviors. These practices may consist of status updates and tweets to the sharing of pictures and video with friends, family, and even complete strangers. Life has become a public act, where what is meaningful is shared and what is shared is meaningful. The Internet is no longer something one only uses as a tool; instead it has become woven into the daily fabric of contemporary life. It has now a part of the day-to-day experience of life.

As Christianity continues to negotiate the often-tricky relationship it has with digital experience, what philosophical and methodological stance should theology take towards the Internet? What new approaches are necessary in order to understand digital life and culture? These questions are important for churches, where the digital experience may consist of only a

webpage or Facebook profile. A new philosophical approach, which views the Internet as a practiced social space, can provide a way for theologians and churches to understand, and participate in digital social space.

The World Wide Web turned twenty five in March, and to mark the anniversary the Pew Research Center conducted a new national survey to study the impact of the Internet on American culture. Overwhelming the study showed that Americans viewed the Internet as an essentially good thing both personally and for society. The study found that 90 percent of Americans believed that the Internet was good for them personally, while a strong 76 percent believed that it was good for society.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the study showed that not only are the vast majority of Americans using the Internet, most of them considered it essential and hard to give up. The Internet easily won out over television, email, and landline telephones.<sup>3</sup>

The way individuals connect also matters as well. Computer, cell and smart phone use all increased<sup>4</sup>, but most importantly, the growth in mobile Internet use exploded. Pew found that 58 percent of American adults owned a smartphone,<sup>5</sup> and mobile Internet use had big gains over the last ten years.<sup>6</sup> Yet, in the near future, use of the Internet will move far beyond traditional devices, such as “wearables” and the “Internet of things.” Wearable objects like smart watches will keep one always connected,<sup>7</sup> as will everyday household appliances such as refrigerators and microwaves.<sup>8</sup>

It will be much harder to separate oneself away from the Internet and the digital experience. More and more individual and social experiences are shared, chronicled, and debated through digital interaction. Thus, more attention is needed on how individuals and groups, like churches, can respond to this growing arena of social interaction.

Henri Lefebvre's concept of social space provides a helpful way to engage contemporary digital interactivity and experience. According to Lefebvre, space is a social product made up of the subjects and the social exchanges that occur between subjects. It is based on the idea that human beings, being social creatures, are primarily producers who produce and create their own life and world. History and society are thus the products of human beings, encompassing a multitude of works such as art, culture, religion, politics, etc.<sup>9</sup>

So is social space produced? Yes and no according to Lefebvre. While it is produced, it is not just a thing or a product among others, rather it is the origin and source of production. It comprises the wide range of interrelationships, sequence of events, and outcomes that make up normal everyday human activity and experience.<sup>10</sup> Social space is thus both the producer and the produced. Lefebvre describes it as “a *product* to be used, to be consumed, it is also a means of production; networks of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy fashion space and are determined by it.”<sup>11</sup> Social space resists being labeled as a thing or object with a clear set of boundaries or parameters. Thus while social space may have a particular history or origin, it is not strictly bound by it. Through social space new activities, interactions, and modes of operation are both possible and prohibited.<sup>12</sup>

Social space is the result of accumulated actions and behaviors by a community or group. It also makes possible new actions and behaviors. Lefebvre uses the example of a city, which is not a thing but rather a collection of things or structures, communities, and relationships. The city is comprised of past events and exchanges, yet it is never determined so far as to eliminate new exchanges and development altogether. The social space, much like a city, is a diverse exchange of relations, “which facilitate the exchange of material things and information.”<sup>13</sup> Ultimately social space is the space of interaction and relationship. Therefore this idea resists

objectifying space as a thing, tool, or object. This is precisely because social space is never produced like a thing, nor is it solely limited to the collection of objects that comprise it.<sup>14</sup> As such it is never a neutral frame or container, Lefebvre argues, “Designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it. Space is a social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism.”<sup>15</sup>

It would be neglectful, according to Lefebvre, to examine space without orienting oneself to the social relationships that comprise it. It is like looking at the house, rather than the family, in order to understand what makes a home. In much the same way, the Internet is a social space that goes beyond the servers, wires, and devices that comprise it. Consequently understanding the Internet as lived social space requires a total reorientation in the way technology is typically approached. It means moving away from static concepts that only view the Internet as a thing to be consumed or tool to be used, and instead seeing it as a social space that is part of ordinary life.

It may be helpful to describe the Internet as polyvalent, made up of a series of social spaces that interact and interpenetrate one another. One could perhaps think of the example of a map. Often several maps are needed in order to describe an area. These maps can range from ones that describe transportation and distance, to others that give points of interest, historical landmarks, and scenic routes. No single map can give the whole picture; rather they all overlay and interpenetrate one another.<sup>16</sup> Understanding thus comes from seeing how all the spaces, like the scenic route and the highway, interact with one another.

How might one go about putting together these various Internet maps? Theologians and churches must recognize the Internet’s social spatiality. The Internet is no longer used solely as a tool; instead it has become woven into the very fabric of contemporary life. It is a series of interconnecting and encompassing social spaces of various likes, shares, blogs, and tweets that

comprise the digital experience. It is a social space of relationship, a space to be used yet produced by human interaction.

Unfortunately this is not how churches view the Internet. Many churches still hold the antiquated view that the Internet is a source to provide one way communication and information, much like the yellow pages, rather than being a way for individuals to share and communicate. A 2011 LifeWay research study<sup>17</sup> of 1,003 Protestant churches found that 78 percent had websites, yet less than half had interactive features such as prayer requests and registration for activities. Almost half of the churches surveyed updated their websites only once a month or less.<sup>18</sup> In addition, overall technology use is uneven at best. The same study found that 40 percent of churches did not use any social networking.<sup>19</sup>

Churches are treating the Internet like what Marc Auge calls a “non-place.” A non-place, he describes, is transitory places that bring together large groups of people in a disconnected and un-relational way. It is a space, Auge states, “which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity.”<sup>20</sup> It is the place of supermarkets, highways, and airports. These are places that are used as a means to an end. Non-places are frequented often, but their value is found in the services they provide, such as transport or food. Though mass groups of people are together, they are only connected indirectly by way of shared purpose.<sup>21</sup> Non-places emphasize solitude and conformity, where time is continually lived in the present. Neither history nor experience matters in non-place, Auge argues, “as if space had been trapped by time, as if there were no history other than the last forty-eight hours of news.”<sup>22</sup>

Yet this is not the complex and ever growing narrative of global and local experiences that are Internet social spaces. Posts, tweets, and pictures are developing into a complex human narrative. It is a story that is continually being written by users all across the globe. It is what

Michel de Certeau calls a spatial story. Space is comprised and fueled by stories, through which place is converted into lived space. Stories are creative acts that organize and establish the relationships, bringing together the narratives of individuals and communities and founding space. According to de Certeau, “*space* is a practiced place.”<sup>23</sup> Much the same way city places, like streets and city squares, are transformed by its inhabitants; space is made possible by the practices and narratives of participants. In the sharing of stories, space “constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places.”<sup>24</sup> It is not hard to think of the ways Internet participants bring to life the places of servers, networks, and websites by converting them into the practiced places of blogs, likes, tweets, and shared videos.

Stories organize space and mark out its boundaries. Space is comprised of an improvised tapestry of narratives, story fragments, and histories that map the cultural field. De Certeau describes this as “creating a theater of actions,”<sup>25</sup> through which stories found actions. Stories organize and create fields of behavior, paving the way for future social practices.<sup>26</sup> Internet spaces are no different. Viral videos, tweets, hashtags, pictures, and even “selfies” all present a spatial story tapestry that influences social practices. Though these spaces are constantly changing, stories connect all these experiences, and lay the foundation for future modes of expression. Spaces are continually made possible by these new practiced places.

Yet what makes a place real? Are cities, streets, and other places real without the diversity of human perspectives and stories that inhabit and define them? Jean Baudrillard argues that society has entered into the realm of referentials, or a system of signs, which take the place of the real.<sup>27</sup> It is the era of the *simulacra*, where copies without a relation to reality replace the real.<sup>28</sup> The distinctions between medium and message begin to blur, so that the medium becomes the message.<sup>29</sup> The Internet ceases to be a medium for a message and instead becomes the

message. Perhaps Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites are nothing more than the expression of a growing social phenomenon? That is need for individuals and groups to create new spaces of connection and expression. As such the greatest error would be to treat the Internet as a monolithic thing or medium that people just use. This misses the participants who inhabit these spaces, and as a result it abstracts their experiences and makes space into a philosophical absolute.<sup>30</sup> It avoids the stories that found and make space possible in the first place.

Ultimately, the ability to write and discuss on these new social spaces is challenging at best. In trying to understand social space, Lefebvre remarks, “Interpretation comes later, almost as an afterthought.”<sup>31</sup> As an ever changing practiced place, the interpretation of space never seems able to catch up. Thus understanding is never going to be effective from top down approaches that focus solely on large sites such as Facebook and Twitter. In January 2014, market researcher iStrategy reported that over 3 million teens have already left Facebook since 2011.<sup>32</sup> The mediums for Internet social spaces are already changing as participants move to a host of other new smaller social media startups such as Snapchat and Vine.<sup>33</sup> As such churches are already behind the times even if they have a Facebook page or website.

Thus new approaches are needed, that both theologians and churches can use to enter into these Internet social spaces. Practical theologians should be facilitating new ways of understanding Internet spaces and all the social spaces that make up contemporary society. The world is now more infinitely complex than David Tracy’s three publics of society, academy, and the church.<sup>34</sup> What one finds instead is an interconnect network of spaces rather than the uniformed publics that Tracy describes. Lefebvre uses the analogy of hydrodynamics. Great movements of spaces collide and interfere, while small movements interpenetrate with others.<sup>35</sup>



The major task for theologians moving forward is finding meaning between all these various movements. Achieving a fuller understanding of Internet social spaces is but one step towards a better engagement with contemporary society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, “The Web at 25,” last modified February 27, 2014, [http://www.pewInternet.org/files/2014/02/PIP\\_25th-anniversary-of-the-Web\\_0227141.pdf](http://www.pewInternet.org/files/2014/02/PIP_25th-anniversary-of-the-Web_0227141.pdf), 9-19. The overwhelming majority of Americans are now connected. Smart phone use has had tremendous growth. Smartphone ownership is not at 58 percent. Having a computer is no longer necessary for connecting to the internet. Users are always connected through their smartphones and tablets. Thus connecting is no longer a conscious act.

<sup>2</sup> Pew, “The Web at 25,” 5.

<sup>3</sup> Pew, “The Web at 25,” 6.

<sup>4</sup> Pew, “The Web at 25,” 11-16.

<sup>5</sup> Pew, “The Web at 25,” 15.

<sup>6</sup> Pew, “The Web at 25,” 19.

<sup>7</sup> Heather Kelly, “Smartphones Are Fading, Wearables Are Next,” *CNN Money*, last modified March 19, 2014, <http://money.cnn.com/2014/03/19/technology/mobile/wearable-devices/>.

<sup>8</sup> Andy Hobsbawn, “The Internet of Things: What Role Will Humans Play?,” *The Guardian*, last modified February 6, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/media-network/media-network-blog/2014/feb/06/Internet-of-things-humans-smart>.

<sup>9</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 68.

<sup>10</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 73.

<sup>11</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 85.

<sup>12</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 77.

<sup>14</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 85.

<sup>15</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 94.

<sup>16</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 86.

<sup>17</sup> David Roachon, “Churches Divide on Web Use,” *LifeWay*, Last modified January 21, 2011, <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-Churches-divided-web-use>.

<sup>18</sup> Roachon, “Churches Divide on Web Use,”

<sup>19</sup> David Roachon, “Research: Churches Increase Efforts in Social Media, Facebook,” *LifeWay*, Last modified January 21, 2011, <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-Churches-Increasingly-Fans-Facebook-Social-Media>.

<sup>20</sup> Marc Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 1995), 77-78.

<sup>21</sup> Marc Auge, *Non-Places*, 94.

<sup>22</sup> Marc Auge, *Non-Places*, 104.

<sup>23</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 117.

<sup>24</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 118.

<sup>25</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 123.

<sup>26</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 125.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 93.

<sup>31</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 143.

<sup>32</sup> D.J. Saul, “3 Million Teens Leave Facebook in 3 Years: The 2014 Facebook Demographic Report,” *iStrategylabs*, Last modified January 15, 2014, <http://istategylabs.com/2014/01/3-million-teens-leave-facebook-in-3-years-the-2014-facebook-demographic-report/>.

<sup>33</sup> Doug Gross, “Social Media Users Migrating to Smaller Circles,” *CNNTech*, Last modified March 25, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/25/tech/social-media/smaller-social-networks/>.

<sup>34</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 6.

<sup>35</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 86.