

Adrian Warnock assesses the opportunities for using social media



CHRISTIAN MEDICS IN A DIGITAL WORLD

key points

- This is an age of unprecedented technological and social change.
- It presents Christians with enormous opportunities to share the gospel, but there are traps for the unwary.
- The Bible has an abundance of wisdom on how to approach the task.

My grandfather is in his nineties. He is old enough to remember a horse and cart delivering his milk. During his lifetime, here is just a sample of the technological advances he has seen:

- Widespread car use
- The Jet Airliner
- TV
- Video recorders
- Microwave ovens
- The Walkman
- MP3 players / iPods
- Mobile phones
- Computers
- Smartphones
- The Internet
- eShopping

There has never been a time in human history that has seen a more rapid change in our technological tools. If we can afford an airfare, we can all now move quickly around the world. For almost no cost we can communicate instantly with potentially millions or even billions of people. No wonder many Christians believe these advances were predicted in biblical prophecy with these words: 'Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase.'¹

The average medic today has no memory of *Index Medicus*. Those of us over 40 will remember the laborious task of going through each year's volume to find references to journal articles on the subject we were researching. Now we can just search an online PubMed resource, or even simply *Google Scholar*.

But perhaps the most remarkable advance in the history of human technology is the way social media can turn anyone into a one-person media organi-

sation. This ability truly is as revolutionary as the printing press. Arguably the Reformation would never have happened if someone hadn't published Luther's *95 Theses* and the books that spread the new Protestant theology.

There is no question that reputations can be made and lost online. An amateur sitting in their bedroom can appear to be as authoritative as a world expert. This is truly a double-edged sword as many medics will know all too well. Patients will often come to see their doctors with dangerous 'knowledge' about their condition gathered online. But how should we respond to social media as Christian medics? Popular Christian preacher and author, John Piper states two common responses. One says:

These media tend to shorten attention spans, weaken discursive reasoning, lure people away from Scripture and prayer, disembodify relationships, feed the fires of narcissism, cater to the craving for attention, fill the world with drivel, shrink the soul's capacity for greatness, and make us second-handers who comment on life when we ought to be living it. So boycott them and write books (not blogs) about the problem.

Many people choose to reject any involvement in the online conversation because of those reasons. But Piper himself continues to explain a different perspective:

The other response says: Yes, there is truth in all of that, but instead of boycotting, try to fill these media with as much provocative, reasonable, Bible-saturated,

*prayerful, relational, Christ-exalting, truth-driven, serious, creative pointers to true greatness as you can.*²

There is no doubt that the Internet, and social media in particular can be a massive time waster, rivalled only by TV. It allows pornography into our homes, a massive subject I won't address here. Nor will I explore the reasons why Facebook is apparently mentioned in a third of all British divorce cases.³ Even simply browsing Facebook or Twitter, or googling can have addictive tendencies, as we spend hours looking for those little rewards of finding an interesting tweet, blog post, or Facebook share. It's wise to switch off the phone screen and perhaps listen to an audio book before trying to sleep. On the more positive side, we have better access to Christian resources than at any time in the last 2,000 years. We have a fantastic opportunity to study God's Word even in a snatched lunch break. And yet, perhaps because of the limitless potential for distraction, we are the most biblically illiterate generation for centuries.

The Internet allows us to do both good and bad things more easily. I am sure that the apostle Paul's response would be simple, and encompassed by his motto, 'by all means I might save some.'⁴ So what principles can guide our online lives as Christian medics, and in particular our use of the Internet for evangelism?

1. Join the conversation

Whilst many of us are very busy, if we choose never to engage online we miss an opportunity to strengthen our relationships, particularly with those who live miles away from us, and to influence people positively for Jesus.

2. Understand the online world we are entering

People are much more honest and open online than they are face to face. If you are used only to having deep and open conversations with people who are also Christians, be prepared for a shock when you begin to engage online. You will find remarkable hostility towards Christianity is very common.

3. Write in a way that is understandable to readers

Too often we have a 'Christian Mind' that we only exercise on a Sunday and when we are with our Christian friends. We talk in a language that we all understand, and make assumptions in what we say. When we go online it is vital to remember that anyone can read what we write. So we should assume nothing, and explain everything we are trying to say.

4. Don't think anonymity will protect you

The GMC is very clear, 'If you identify yourself as a doctor in publicly accessible social media, you should also identify yourself by name' and warns that anonymity can often be breached.⁵ So always post under your own name.

5. Beware of how we come across to others

It is all too easy inadvertently to come across to

outsiders like superior 'know-it-alls' who reject those who are different from us. In contrast, we should consciously demonstrate that we are in fact broken learners who are on the same journey as others, who are not perfect but forgiven. It is incumbent on those who love the doctrines of grace to demonstrate grace, towards others, not condemnation and angry rejection.

6. Be bold AND winsome

There is a form of communication online that to quote Proverbs, 'invites a beating.' We can communicate truth clearly, but graciously. We must demonstrate that we actually care about the lost and want them to be saved. This will be shown by how we draw people into what we are saying rather than aggressively condemn others.

7. Learn to really listen

All too often we see conversations about our faith as an opportunity for a data dump where we share our opinions with others and then depart. That is sometimes called 'hit and run' evangelism. But we should aim as much to understand what others believe, as to share what we believe.

8. Don't say too much

Proverbs warns us, 'When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.'⁶ We need to be careful not to share excessively. Before you publish that post ask yourself, is it really necessary and helpful for me to write this?

9. Don't say too little

We must remember that words have great potential for good, and so do not be too shy to write. 'Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad.'⁷ 'To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!'⁸

10. Don't feed the trolls

Proverbs has a name for trolls: 'fools'. One of the biggest challenges of our online lives is knowing when to challenge something someone else says, and when to ignore it. There are two conflicting pieces of advice shared in Proverbs.⁹ We have to learn the wisdom of when to apply each:

*Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.*¹⁰ *Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.*¹¹

Jesus is calling each of us to play our part in the re-evangelisation of this nation, and indeed the world. For some of us that will include speaking out online. However it is important that this is carried out with respect for our readers especially those who may disagree.

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Article based on a talk at the CMF Student Conference, February 2016. The audio and PowerPoint can be accessed here: bit.ly/1mJA5M6

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