

The Persona of the Pastor on Social Media

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In this paper, I will be examining the question of how a minister should present himself or herself on social media. Ideally, my thoughts will contribute to a broader discussion on pastoral ministry and digital media, but—full disclosure—pastoral theology is not my strong suit. I shall instead be attending to the conduct, behavior, attitude and other issues of character that attend pastoral ministry. I shall attend these using tools from social theory, a move I understand is a bit unorthodox, but I hope this illuminates some concerns in this area of inquiry.

I. Front and Back Stages

The first time I saw a priest *not* wearing his collar was my first day on campus as a new freshman. I arrived at my dorm and met the “rector,” who had been introduced to me in emails as “Father Tom.” I was quite surprised to see him, at 9 or so in the evening, wearing sweat pants and a t-shirt. It was a moment akin to the first time I saw an elementary school teacher in the supermarket or heard a classmate not-accidentally referring to a teacher as “mom.” In retrospect, there was nothing *that* unusual about it; after all, priests probably get uncomfortable wearing stiff black clericals all day, just as teachers probably have to feed themselves and probably have children as well. But at the moment, it was something I was not expecting.

The American sociologist Erving Goffman would likely refer to this as the disillusionment of the audience. As is probably painfully obvious to you all here, at this point in my life, my experience of priests had been in mostly formalized settings—I was, after all, a Utahn who had gone to public school his whole life! Now, sometimes the audience is

disenchanted entirely by accident, as in the climactic scene in *Mrs. Doubtfire* when Robin Williams's character is unable to maintain the Mrs. Doubtfire character when meeting his boss and his family for two separate dinners at the same place. This can cause "loss of face" for the person whose persona is shattered. In this particular case, however, Fr. Tom was entirely not at fault—it was simply my own ignorance that led to this disillusionment. To take but another example, Heidegger alludes to pilgrims scandalized at finding Heraclitus crouched down next to a fireplace to warm himself rather than occupying a more "dignified" position.

Goffman describes his social theory as "dramaturgical" in style. For Goffman, all social interaction reduces to playing parts before certain audiences. The part one plays depends on the audience, and if one wishes to maintain her role, she must do a sufficient job in "playing" the part (here one detects an allusion to Sartre's notion of "playing at" being a waiter). Both the performer and the audience must cooperate for a successful social interaction; the audience must believe the performer and the performer must also be believable. If the performer fails in her performance, or the audience somehow gains information that destroys the "face" of the performer, the social interaction leads to a social gaffe, or worse yet, a breakdown of expected social roles. In other words, as I sit before you, I play the part of a student of theology and digital technologies who is presenting some research I have carried out on the topic. If I play my part well, you, the audience, will buy into my performance and may say such things as "interesting talk," "I enjoyed listening to it," and the like. If I play my part badly, you may ignore me entirely, shout epithets at me, or blacklist me from future Theocoms (assuming I do badly, I hope you opt for the first).

Goffman notes that social interaction often requires people to play multiple parts on multiple stages. We play one role before a certain audience, but before a different audience, we

may be expected to play an entirely different role. He refers to this as “audience segregation” and the social performer often has to negotiate means by which she can keep disparate audiences separate. This is not a matter of disingenuous behavior—it is merely the way we operate! Before you all, I hope to play the role of a fellow-scholar, one who is interested in talking about and researching similar topics. Before my students at Holy Names, I have to play the role of an authority figure—mostly because they fail to respect me based on any merits I may have aside from that. Before my wife, I have to play the role of loving husband. In some cases, the collapse of stage setting is not disastrous, but in others, it can be. If I gossip with my students about other faculty the way I gossip with my wife, I could very quickly find myself in the midst of disciplinary action. The deacon at my church saw me a few months ago with a few friends having some drinks at a bar and wisely decided it was not the proper stage for conversing with me. Goffman even gives the amusing anecdote of a “tough guy” sailor who, on shore leave at home, asked his mother to “pass the fucking butter” (15).

Maintaining one’s position in society requires her to play her role convincingly enough before others. Frank Abignale, as dramatized in the film *Catch Me if You Can* succeeded in fraudulently passing himself off as a pilot, a doctor and a lawyer because he did a sufficient job of playing the role. But playing the role does not simply mean as I step in front of you you *assume* I am who I say I am—we often use props and team cooperation to achieve our goals. Successful role performance includes team collaboration, as two professors are expected to demonstrate “collegiality” before students, even if they are in great disagreement. Furthermore, we use props, including artifacts like licenses and diplomas to verify our authority or tools and instruments which make us look official. Some claim driving a white pickup truck, wearing a hard hat, carrying a clipboard and walking as if you know what you’re doing is the key to getting

into otherwise restricted areas—role performance plus prop usage. In Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, this was the intended function of the “Dauphin” and the “Duke” working together: one person’s authority is doubtful, but a second witness lends credibility to the situation. This is not to say that all roles we play are fraudulent, but rather that they require the audience around us to believe we are who we say we are. When a visiting priest processes into the sanctuary, his vestments, which are props, his performance of the mass and the support of any and all nearby ministers, including altar servers, music leaders, lectors, eucharistic ministers or deacons or fellow priests all lend credibility that the priest is, in fact, a priest and not an impostor. Should, for example, the priest show up without an alb, or the music minister refuse to play the processional hymn, or he fails to use any of the expected calls or salutations, the congregation would have reason to view him with suspicion.

Finally, an important aspect of role performance is the “backstage.” The backstage plays an important role. There, the actors determine how best to perform their roles for the audience. Necessary adjustments to the “script” are made and team members who do not play their role well are counseled and bargained with. The front stage may also be maligned by the backstage in what Goffman calls “stage talk,” and the backstage may be literally separated from the front stage. Goffman gives the example of a kitchen in a restaurant with waiters, chefs, hosts and other service workers preparing the proper “show” for the diners (and possibly maligning them, like those snobs at table 3 who put in a tricky order but won’t pay a dime more than 15% tip!). Presently I am involved in union negotiations at the university where I teach; both sides of the table engage in a great deal of “backstage” work, including discussing who will talk, what attitudes we assume, what we think about the other side, and who is to be considered a “team member” and who not. In a church setting, the backstage can be found in a sacristy and in all of

the “behind-the-scenes” actions of coordinating lectors, cantors, sacristans, Eucharistic ministers and others. On a larger scale, this include ecumenical councils, USCCB conferences, and other such meetings where policy, attitudes and positions are established before bringing things public.

The take away from Goffman’s work is essentially that every social interaction ought to be thought of in terms of performance, and we are constantly playing roles before audiences. The role we play and the audience before whom we play the role affect how our performance is evaluated and our role is trusted. We typically go throughout our lives and before different audiences without thinking too much about this unless a faux pas is committed. The minister who comes to church drunk, the “tough guy” who cries when a little girl loses her cat, or the “proper lady” who experiences inopportune flatulence all commit faux pas—the image their audience held of them is shattered, although in many cases it may be repaired by bringing the new audience “backstage” as it were. We are able to maintain our positions and our roles by virtue of “sticking to the script” and ensuring that our audience accepts our performance. If I stop “playing” the husband to my wife, or, worse still, if I begin playing husband to another woman! then her confidence in my role is lost and I no longer maintain the role. If I fail to maintain my performance as a teacher, perhaps by swearing out a student or demonstrating incompetency in my lecturing or grading abilities, I lose my position as a teacher. If team members I am researching with “switch sides” on me, I may lose credibility as a researcher and become a pariah. This may be overly reductionist, but one can see much of our interaction requires portraying and responding to pre-established and mutually understood roles.

We can see the implications of this theory for pastoral ministry quite well. The priest who rushes through confessions, who fumbles over the prayers of the mass, who spaces out during a visit, or even simply takes on the wrong “persona” in a pastoral setting—the business

leader, the comedian, the elitist—will fail in his task as a pastor because those coming to him for ministry will lose confidence in his performance. To give an extreme example, the overall failure of the Catholic hierarchy in the sexual abuse crisis led to “scandal” in the literal sense. The backstage work of shuffling around predatory priests and maintaining an air of silence, when it was revealed to the front stage, brought about an extreme loss of face for Church authority. Many Catholics, especially those of weaker faith, lost faith in the church because the shepherds committed a major faux pas, both those who were guilty of sexually abusing congregants and those who covered the problem up. To this day, the persona of the priest has lost credibility among certain segments of the population. Any priest who has been subject to derision connected to the scandal understands poignantly how the persona of the priest affects pastoral ministry. The task of pastoral ministry becomes markedly more difficult, if not impossible, due to loss of confidence in the role.

II. Personae and Internet Media

Goffman wrote sixty years ago—well before the advent of “Web 2.0” and social media sites. Nonetheless, his ideas, especially the notions of dramaturgical presence, have seeped into contemporary social scientific discussions of social networking sites. Four authors in particular show the significance of his thought for social media, and I shall be attending to some ideas found in one each of their books. The four I look at are Sherry Turkle’s *Alone Together*; Carrie James’s *Disconnected*; Nancy Baym’s *Personal Connections in a Digital Age* and Jose van Dijck’s *The Culture of Connectivity*. The first two authors write as psychologists concerned about how social media constrain individual identity, and the last two write as sociologists interested in how social media open or close opportunities for social expression.

Sherry Turkle focuses on identity formation as one challenge of the Internet. Following the insights of Erik Erikson, she contends that identity formation in adolescents requires role experimentation (260). In the world of Web 2.0, people are expected to represent themselves on the Internet “as they are,” that is, in an “authentic” manner. For youth who do not know yet who they will be, however, this is a challenge. Some of the youth Turkle describes “try out” new styles of presenting themselves online—should they be “flirty” or “witty?” (192) Will the “flirtatious” attitude go across well with their friends, and will it “feel right” to them? Should they “like” the Harry Potter franchise on Facebook, or will that make them seem less “sexy” to their peers? (273) What comments should they make; should they use proper grammar or not; what pictures should they post; whom do they tag in their statuses, etc? All of these questions have their “real world” analogies: what do I say to my peers, what style of language should I use (slang, or proper language?), how do I physically portray myself, with whom do I associate? Online, however, many of these “try-outs” cannot be reneged—they live on digitally even if the author of the post has moved on “in real life.” Moreover, while youth, just like any other person, have complicated lives, the multiple facets of their character may not be easy (or socially possible!) to represent through conventional social media. The star athlete who likes chess cannot join the school chess club Facebook site unless he is willing to play the performance of a chess nerd in front of his football teammates. Some may try out “false identities” on social media, befriending strangers and describing their lives in fictitious manner, but in so doing, they also are restricted in their activities (can I be “me” when I’m someone else?). One option may be to assume different aspects of their personalities through different social media, but then they must retain a highly fragmented social media presence. Otherwise, they simply have to maintain careful role performance online. Youth therefore face two important challenges in their identity

formation: first, they have a hard time deciding what persona to convey on the Internet, and second, they have the added difficulty of figuring out how to “be true” to multiple aspects of their lives with different audiences. “What” they are supposed to be is dependent on the acceptance of the audience who observes their performance, namely their fellow youth.

Carrie James focuses on moral development as a second problem with the Internet. As children grow, they make mistakes, and part of moral formation is learning from those mistakes and growing past them. She notes, “At one point or another, most of us have made a poor decision, disrespected another person, or said things we’ve regretted. For those of us who grew up before the digital revolution, those missteps are likely forgotten—or exist only in our fuzzy memories or in the memories of direct witnesses. Today it’s a whole different ball game. The potential exists for our mistakes to live on, and even outlive us, casting an eternal shadow over our reputations.” (27-28). Teenagers make mistakes, and, assuming the mistake is not of a dire nature (e.g. cases like the Steubenville rape case), there ought to be room for a person to grow past them. This is, after all, a major part of Christian ethics—though we are sinners, we work with God’s transformative grace to change our lives for the better. As Aristotle himself astutely observed 2400 years ago, character formation is a crucial part of ethical conduct, and is best addressed in one’s youth. But how can the teen move on, change her ways, grow past her faults or become a more mature person when the evidence of her sin remains visible for all to see? Is there any real growth as a person if one’s sin remains visible to all? Must we all wear scarlet letters proclaiming our sin to the world? Or must we, like Augustine, write a public *Confessio* recanting our past life and affirming our true conversion?

James takes this insight further and adopts the dramaturgical language of Goffman, noting that a related issue is the aspects of our lives that are presented on the Internet. Privacy

concerns fall both on what information is readily available online, what information others share about me online, and how the audience participates, whether it is through passive acceptance of what I present or through actively trying to find information about me (what Goffman calls being a “spotter”). Since social interaction entails division of performances, how do we separate Levi the son, Levi the husband, Levi the teacher, Levi the student, Levi the Catholic, Levi the citizen from each other? Where does privacy fit into the equation, and how do I maintain proper audience segregation? Will my “team members” play along without me explicitly demanding them, to or do I need to ask them to “untag me” from a potentially face-losing misstep? What role do the audiences play as well? As an example, a friend of mine visiting from DC wanted to go to the Castro (the gay district) in SF. As a friend and partial tour guide, I took him there. He tagged me in his check-in at a bakery we stopped at. Now, I did nothing immoral in this scenario—I had a piece of cake with a friend, nothing more—but to the wrong audience, being in the Castro could be scandalous. In this case, I have to worry about my own online image, as well as my friend’s inclusion of me in his “performance,” and whether I risk offending my close friend by asking not to be tagged or risk offending others by being visible in this case. Thus, James presents the difficult cases of how to overcome social missteps, how to maintain backstage presence, how to segregate audiences, and, importantly, how to be a cooperative audience member in her writing.

Nancy K Baym is interested in how digital media have become extensions of our normal social connections. She observes that much of the fear surrounding new technologies is simply a new version of an old worry, but does mention that aspects such as interactivity, the temporal structure of communication, and the reach of new media represent dramatic changes over older forms of communication media. Of note for us today, she discusses the fact that communication

with others often entails numerous verbal and non-verbal cues. In face-to-face communication, for example, things like tone of voice, pitch and volume convey a certain amount of information, but so too does “body language,” including proximity, facial expression, hand gestures and even posture (103). Thus, if I assume an oppositional posture and an apathetic expression and state with a sarcastic tone of voice, “I’m very interested in what you have to say,” I express an entirely different idea from assuming a posture toward you, looking you in the eye and with a sincere tone of voice saying, “I’m very interested in what you have to say.” When we switch from digital to non-digital communications, the form of verbal and non-verbal cues become very important. Baym says “Cues given off become highly informative in sparse cue situations.” (119) This means not only are spelling errors, grammatical language, and personal aggrandizement or effacement read as indicative of who the speaker is, but that even sparseness of communication or breadth say something. I am probably unsuccessful as a social media persona because I hate the 140 character format of Twitter and tend to write overly long Facebook posts, while my friends who have 40 or so comments typically begin with a witticism and a short comment. This comic from PhD comics demonstrates the agony many a student will feel in ensuring that they give off the right cues to their professors (who sit as social superiors) as well as the lack of care of cues given off by the professors themselves (ironically itself a social cue of practiced indifference to the student). The “content” of a communication, in terms of the pure information, is dependent not only on the language that is used, but also the persona of the person conveying it, the manner in which it is conveyed, the tone, the medium, and the audience who is privy to it.

Jose van Dijck, using the tools of ANT and political economy, examines the ways that particular social media platforms shape our presentation of ourselves. She examines the

technology itself, the ownership, its governance (or lack thereof), the users and their usage, the content of the medium and the business models (28) to understand how the various parties connected to a social medium shape and are shaped by it. Facebook, for example, has developed an business model-turned-ethos of “sharing”—sharing not only your personal thoughts, pictures, and stories, but also sharing your personal data with advertisers and big data corporations. Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO has developed this as a total business model and the mantra for the company. Facebook has also developed and adapted numerous algorithms such as the Newsfeed, People You May Know suggestions, Like buttons and cookies to maintain our attention and encourage us to share more information. Invitations to “say what’s on your mind,” “tag a friend,” or “accept a friend request” solicit our attention and ask us to behave in certain ways. At times, users have pushed back: while complaints have often arisen with new format changes, the incorporation of “Beacon” (like the “Like” button, but more explicit about sharing your personal info) was met with incredible hostility, resulting in the company retracting it (48). The character of Facebook, including the users, what they share, how it is presented to them and others, and what happens monetarily with this information, is a process of constant reshaping as developers propose new ideas and user bases shift their focus and their demographics. Ten years ago, it was largely a site devoted to college students and their social life. Later, it opened to other demographics, who may have shared personal information and used it as a way of keeping up with distant friends. Today, Facebook is largely an article sharing site, where the content presented through the Newsfeed is so well curated that it is often difficult to discern at first glance what was shared by a friend and what is a targeted advertisement. What to share, whom it is shared with, and why it is shared are increasingly being influenced by Facebook programmers. The stage, the performers, the teams, the props and even the audience are constantly in flux.

Of course, if one is concerned about how these media are limiting or shaping our presentation of selves, she can just opt-out, right? Van Dijck points out that the way major social media companies, such as Facebook, Youtube, Google, Twitter and others have cornered the market and extended their reach to other, non “socializing” aspects (such as marketing or politics), their ubiquity among our friends and peers, and their power in lobbying legislatures (so that really “being off the grid” is much more difficult than getting on the grid) make it hard for a person to opt out. Social, legal and institutional pressures encourage us to remain on these media and use them in particular ways. I, for example, don’t have Instagram, or SnapChat, barely use my Twitter handle and post to Facebook much less frequently than I did five or seven years ago (though I often “lurk”). A result of this, however, is that I often feel isolated from my friends; I hear fewer things about their lives personally as they “forget” about me through lack of exposure. I’m also likely to miss out on important opportunities that may be advertised through these media, or it may be hard for me to access certain information if an organization primarily announces it through Twitter or the like. The person who is actually “off” of Facebook is likely to lose a great deal in their social experience—these technologies have become “normalized” into our lives the way that cars or tvs have, but with greater consequences to our social lives (although, if you didn’t see the latest episode of Game of Thrones, you may lose the ability to carry on conversations at the office as well). When you try to act on another stage, or when you try to play a disparate role from the one the setting has circumscribed for you, other actors will resist. You lose your possibility of social interaction if you are not present on the front stage with other actors, but it’s also increasingly difficult to play the game if you do not like the script!

These four authors then present us with conclusions about online role performance that we ought to be keenly aware of. When we present ourselves online, we are playing

roles—adopting personae for the audience with whom we communicate. We can negotiate some of whom our audience is through careful cultivation of our online identity and the media through which we act, but our performance will be checked by audiences who behave in bad faith, outside observers who catch our performances, and programmed algorithms that filter our expression to different audiences. Maintaining the identity we wish to keep becomes a difficult task of “character preservation” and curation. We also have to understand and anticipate the ways that communication takes on different nuances in different media, the different characters and settings of these different stages and how and whom we operate based on these things. Presentation of the self through social media becomes a team effort, and one must be aware that as much or more effort is needed in presenting the various aspects of our “selves” to different audiences as we need offline. Social media, therefore, represent a new frontier and a new “stage” for persona expression.

III. The persona of the pastor on social media

The preceding was an attempt to demonstrate that the notion of online persona is prevalent among social researchers. Baym and van Dijck make explicit reference to Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis, and James and Turkle, while not making direct reference, still maintain some of the dramaturgical language. All would agree that we should pay careful attention to the personae we portray on social media and the way we express ourselves to the audiences connected to us. Different sites will facilitate different personae or different aspects of our personality differently than others; some promote brevity, while others encourage verbosity. Some have a leftist character while others veer more conservative. Some, like Last.fm or Academia.edu are centered toward one aspect of the users’ personalities, while others are more

general. Each social media site functions as a stage or setting, complete with its own available props, team members and audience who privy to the poster's performance.

The pastor as I have suggested already, has a particular persona he ought to foster *as* pastor. The character of this persona will have, of course, a fair degree of leeway for personal flair and style, but only within certain bounds. No one pastor must be like another, but all should express a certain "pastor-ness" in their online behavior. One of the most important considerations the pastor should be aware of is the risk of scandal—does the portrayal of his persona online lead faithful Christians to lose faith? This does not require the pastor to engage in actual sin—as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10, there is no sin in eating meat sacrificed to idols, but we should avoid it if it affects other believers' conscience—but it does require circumspection. Some comments, expressions of taste, or other communications may be out of the bounds of good taste for a spiritual leader. Other concerns of the pastor could be related to ministry to his congregation or evangelization to non-believers as well.

With these concerns laid out, and mindful of the dramaturgical nature of social interaction, I offer three guiding questions for the pastoral use of social media: what is the nature or "setting" of the medium? what is the character of the medium? and what is the persona of the person posting?

First, what is the nature of the medium? If Marshall McLuhan was correct, then "the medium really is the message." The means by which information is conveyed delimits and shapes the message that is communicated. Breaking off a relationship by text message, for example, is considered extra insulting because of the trivial nature of text message communication—Baym notes that face-to-face is still considered the most intimate form of communication with talking on the telephone less intimate, and online chatting less still (50).

Thus, one should ask “is the medium a broadcasting platform, or is it conducive to more closed discussions? Does one communicate through short messages, longer texts? Is it primarily textual, auditory or pictographic?” Some media, like Twitter or Youtube, are intended to be broadcast to as large an audience as possible. Others, such as Facebook or Tumblr, offer more variety in choosing the audience. Others still, such as SnapChat and messaging services, including Facebook’s messenger, instant messengers or Korea’s KakaoTalk, are intended for much more private communication. We know, for better and for worse, that Twitter offers a platform whereby one can share a message with the world. This can be good for sending out brief messages affirming the Gospel message, or for embarrassing yourself and your nation in a highly public manner. An archival medium such as Facebook is not conducive for changing one’s mind or retracting a statement, while more temporary media such as Snapchat can be. Photographic media like Vine or Instagram can convey non-verbal messages, while others like Yik-Yak are entirely textual.

Two “obstacles” of sorts must first be noted with the nature of media and their influence on pastoral ministry. The first is a problem explained in part by Hubert Dreyfus fifteen years ago: our lives are embodied lives and phenomenologically, we are embodied beings, but Internet communication obviates this. Not only are we unable to convey many non-verbal cues, but certain types of ministry are prescribed. It would be hard to have a real “ministry of presence” without being present to one of the faithful. How does one reassure the Other with their bodily co-presence when there is none? The perspectives of phenomenologists including Dreyfus, Gabriel Marcel and Maurice Merleau-Ponty remind us that an important part of our lives, a part that is not least of all inscribed in pastoral settings, is being bodily present. Moreover, certain functions within the role of the pastor seem to require corporeality. Confession, spiritual

direction and, most importantly, Eucharist all seem to demand corporeal expression rather than online mediation. The second obstacle is the democratic nature of the Internet. Mass media tend to be broadcast media—they are one-way forms of communication. Social media, on the other hand, are communicative insofar as people are able to respond. This is a great benefit in some situations, but any theologian or pastor who has found herself arguing with an “armchair warrior” about dogma or biblical interpretation on Facebook will recognize that democracy without preference for authority presents new challenges. We may note with some seriousness that at the moment, many virtually-eradicated preventable diseases are returning because the authority of the NIH has been undermined by bad science articles spread through democratic media. It will be hard for a pastor to maintain an authoritative air on such media, which may undermine his ability to properly minister. The two obstacles of incorporeality and social media democracy do not forbid the possibility of social media pastoral ministry, but they do entail limits on what all can be done ministerially.

On this question, it is important to consider what a pastor looks like in each medium. Twitter only allows brief messages, beatitudinal messages, as it were (#BlessedArethePoor). Broadcast ministry is therefore possible, but only in highly condensed format; there can be no sermons, no exhortations, and certainly no theological treatises. On this front, Twitter may be better for pastoral work than pure theology. Facebook may allow more personal communication, though the Newsfeed function makes “inside jokes” or “backstage talk” a danger. In such media, the audience may include anybody you know, but it may also include absolute strangers and even those who wish harm on you. Personal messages should therefore not be sensitive messages. Messenger services allow for personal ministry, but tend to be very intimate on that front, limiting outreach. Forum media or limited group media may be good for group ministry,

or community building, but are increasingly marginal. If one wishes for an analogy to “the real world,” one might think of how different settings affect ministry: being the sandwich board-wearing street preacher at Sather Gate is a very different style of ministry from meeting a group of students in the campus ministry center. The style of ministry, the words chosen, the detail or openness of the pastor depends very much on how public, how permanent and what format communication occurs in each medium.

Second, what is the character of the medium? In “non-social” media, character has been an oft-cited concern for years now in the US. CNN, Fox, MSNBC, Associated Press, NPR, Breitbart, the Blaze, Vox, TYT and other organizations have a definite “character,” most often reduced to political leanings. Of course, a more careful analysis will reveal the character is a bit more complex than that; NPR, for example, is more “intellectual” or “high brow” in nature, Fox is more sensationalist in tone, and MSNBC is often conflictual in its presentation. A pastor knows, therefore, that if he is invited onto the Oprah Winfrey show, he will have to present himself differently than if he is invited onto the Bill O’Reilly show (apologies for outdated references—this is what happens when you don’t have television).

Social media likewise can have a “character” to them, shaped, as van Dijck has alluded, by users, content, owners and business models. Today, one can see this moreso on some sites than others. Last.fm has the character of music lovers. Academia.edu has the character of self-promoting academics. LinkedIn has the character of self-promoting entrepreneurs and business persons. Tumblr is known for its political leftism, 4chan for its reactionism, Reddit for its masculine conservatism, and Pinterest for its home-style charm. Early Facebook was college students only, and the “character” was often college social life—inside jokes, romantic interchanges between co-eds, pictures of parties, invitations to parties, statuses about parties,

backstage chat about professors (who were not on Fb), coordination of social plans, etc. In this context, ministry would be quite difficult. What college student, turning to “the Facebook” (as it was known) would welcome a message about Jesus’s love for him when she was just looking to tease her friend about how much of a fool he made himself the night before? This, of course, is not really what the Facebook of today is; today’s Facebook is a source for news, political opinion, sharing family events and other such things. We should therefore first ask if the character or ethos of the medium is well-suited for ministry and evangelization. Sites that encourage genuine interhuman interaction (if there be any) would be fertile places for ministry, while places that promote narcissistic navel-gazing (of which there are many) would not be. Moreover, the character of the users on the site and the purpose for which they use the site should also be noted; people who use 4chan to troll each other are unlikely to take seriously ministerial efforts. Tumblr users may be more sensitive to important issues, but often have a distrust for organized religion. Reddit has a reputation for proud anti-theism—evangelization may be ripe for the setting, but highly unwelcomed!

Let me add one further complication before moving on. At this point, it would seem that the more “pedestrian” social media such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook would be the most ideal place for pastoral presence. It should be remembered ultimately, however, that “Facebook” is not a place—it is a business. Facebook exists to carry out Milton Freedman’s slogan of “maximizing shareholder value.” To that end, everything that is shared or viewed is done in the context of commoditization. There is no “free” sharing. This is true also for any major multi-million dollar or billion dollar social media platform; all is done for the sake of profit. If you are not paying directly for use of the service, then you can be certain that the information you are providing is being used for commercial purposes. Thus, any pastoral work carried out in such a

context will necessarily be done within the confines of late-stage capitalistic systems. The character of the setting, a commercial setting of data mining, cannot be formally separated from the content of ministry carried out therein. The message with more “likes” will always win out over the unpopular, but important, message. I make no claims as to how that shapes the Gospel message, but it should be noted. If we need an analogy from “the real world,” in this case we ask if we’re carrying out ministry in a raucous frat house, a bustling stock exchange, or a college chapel. We may note that it is not *impossible* to minister in difficult situations—Paul, after all, preached at the Areopagus—but that the manner in which we minister will be affected.

Finally, and perhaps most important, what is the persona of the person who is using the social media, i.e., is the pastor being a pastor? If we reflect on the experiences of adolescents James and Turkle interviewed, we recall that many of them felt anxious about having to “always be on.” If we list our names on Facebook with a “Rev, Br, or Sis” preceding or an “SJ, OP, OFM, CSC” following, do we represent well our positions as religious persons? The public, including the faithful, has a certain image of what a pastor should look like. A person who is boastful, sarcastic, overly political, or bellicose likely does not fit the “persona” of pastor very well. Likewise, a person who posts or shares about heavy metal concerts, trips to the bar, lavish vacations probably does not either. A friend of my wife knows a pastor who often “likes” provocative pictures of scantily clad young women on Fb. Some pastors I know spend all day posting politically-motivated articles on Fb or arguing against ideological opponents. Joel Osteen has gained an infamous reputation for his self-promoting use of Twitter and other social media. Is this “pastoral”?

Here, of course, comes the greatest difficulty. The longer I spend in and around seminaries, the more I understand that priests are not perfect, and that, even if they were, they

would not fit my own image of perfection. Pastors have friends, hobbies, musical tastes, movie interests, political ideologies, disagreements with others, and various “tastes” including art, food and drink and music that some may deem “distasteful.” These are all important components of a well-rounded and balanced life, and a pastor who lacked these things would be worse because he could not understand “the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” of his flock. And here we return to my experience as a college freshman: the priest sans collar is still a priest, just in a more obviously human form. The challenge on social media, however, is a challenge of whether the priest is “wearing his collar” or not. Political opinions, verbal chastisements, sarcastic comments, flirtatious interactions, airing of grievances, gossip, offensive jests and other such expressions are clear faux pas for a person portraying the persona of the pastor. If this is a worry for some pastors, they ought to exercise caution as aforementioned in deciding which social media to use and for what purposes. Perhaps they maintain a Facebook account for keeping up with family and friends with high privacy settings while maintaining a twitter and Youtube account for public ministry, and a Facebook page for his parish for communication with his flock. Perhaps they utilize pseudonyms. Perhaps they have accounts on less “personal” social media like Tumblr, Reddit and Imgur. Most certainly, they will need to pre-determine, perhaps with other pastors, the ‘rules’ of their performance on social media. A visiting priest shared his own experience of a visitor coming to the rectory on his day off, asking, “Is there a priest home?” In his “civvies,” the priest responded, “Does it *look* like there’s a priest home?” from which the man decided to leave. Certainly, this is not an example we wish to emulate, but the point is helpful: just as the priest knows “collar on” requires different role expression, so too should social media profiles for pastors express the same circumspection and self-awareness. Not everyone who sees your post on Facebook will know you “were only joking.”

IV: The Show Must Go On!

It is at this point that I must stop myself. I am not an expert on pastoral theology (that was my lowest grade at BC), but I do have experience in ministry. I cannot say what the best expressions will be for ministry—the form of the medium will shape that as much as anything—but I can note that non-verbal cues will be important. I cannot say whether group ministry or personal ministry will be best on social media—though again, I will note it likely depends on the form of the medium. What I can say, however, is that the role the pastor plays, the stage he plays it on, and the character of the setting will determine a lot about how the ministry can be done and how it will be received. Facebook is not a good place for hearing confessions. Twitter is probably bad for delivering homilies. Youtube will not be a good place for group bible study. The pastor who evangelizes through 4Chan, who provides “digital absolution” on Tumblr or who holds mass on Facebook Live risks losing face in making dramaturgical missteps. The pastor who acts “un-pastorly” on a medium that “doesn’t forget” also commits social faux pas. But the pastor who uses media as the media are designed with careful role performance and attention to the audience and setting will have learned what is an important task for the future of the church, namely how to be pastoral on social media.