

Social Networks

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It goes without saying that online social networks represent a major force in technology, industry, and society. Undoubtedly, you've asked the question "What does this mean for my church?" I doubt there's a single answer to that question, not only across different churches, but even within a single ministry.

What is an Online Social Network?

Everyone knows Facebook. Some love it, some hate it, but everyone has at least some idea of what Facebook is all about. Facebook has become the "face" of online social networks, so let's start by understanding Facebook.

The company's own profile says that Facebook is about "Giving people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. 'Like' us to stay updated on new products, announcements and stories." The profile also provides this company overview: "Millions of people use Facebook everyday to keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos, and learn more about the people they meet."

Millions is an understatement. [According to the company](#), there are currently over 800 million active users, with more than half logging in on any given day.

Among other things, Facebook gave new meaning to the terms "Like" and "Friend." I once overheard a young man say with great sincerity and pride "I have over a hundred friends on Facebook, and I even know some of them." So, Facebook can help people meet new people. Similarly, Facebook users can indicate they "Like" a picture, a link, a quote, a comment, or, more relevantly, a company or organization. By doing so, they are providing affirmation to others and rec-

ommending that their friends check it out. This helps people discover new things and perhaps find a new favorite restaurant, store, or, yes, church.

But Facebook isn't the only social network. Others you've probably heard of include LinkedIn and MySpace. There are probably thousands of social networks that you haven't heard of – either because they primarily operate in other geographies (e.g. renren in China – with over 30 million active users) or they focus on niches (e.g. epernicus for research scientists – with over 20,000 users).

Wikipedia defines a social network as "an online service, platform, or site that focuses on building and reflecting of social networks or social relations among people, who, for example, share interests and/or activities. A social network service essentially consists of a representation of each user (often a profile), his/her social links, and a variety of additional services. Most social network services are web based and provide means for users to interact over the Internet, such as e-mail and instant messaging."

What are the Dangers of Social Networks?

Normally, I address the "Power" side of the equation first, but I struggled with doing so without first addressing the dangers.

Facebook is in the news this month for fairly

significant changes they are making to their service and especially the user interface. This isn't an unusual situation. Facebook is an entrepreneurial company that moves with great agility, constantly seeking to improve the experience for users, the value they provide, and the profitability of their business. Given the number of users they have, every change they introduce results in a lot of people (even if it's a tiny percentage of all of their users) that complain. However, few quit using the service. In general, as Christians, we shouldn't be too worried about whether people like the way the homepage is laid out or how to navigate the site.

There are some areas for concern though – notably around privacy and content.

Some of the news this month is quite disturbing. Facebook wants to become integrated into how you live and then sharing your life with the world. Part of their major announcement last month was a collection of [“Read. Watch. Listen.”](#) apps. These apps automatically share with others (without asking you) what you're reading, what you're watching, and what you're listening to. Although, currently, this is limited to what you do through Facebook apps, as “Like” widgets have proliferated throughout the web, Facebook has visibility to much of what you do even though you think you're operating independently of Facebook. They could choose to start sharing [every web page you visit](#), even with complete strangers who have subscribed to your feed. This is scary.

Even worse is that you can't opt out. Even [logging out of Facebook](#) doesn't break their connection to you. This blog post provides lots of technical details, as well as making the point that, if you check Facebook on a public computer (e.g. at the library), the actions of the next person to use that computer will be associated with you. Yes, scary.

As we operate in the “world” – we must recognize that secular social networks assume that we're living in a post-privacy world. Last year, Helen A. S. Popkin wrote a good summary of the situation at msnbc.com. She included a couple of quotes to give a sense of this new world:

- Sun CEO Scott McNealy from 1999: “You have zero privacy anyway. Get over it.”
- Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg from 2010: “People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people. That social norm is just something that's evolved over time.”

As I mentioned above, in addition to privacy, we must also consider the issue of content. I won't belabor this point, but just recognize that most social networks are designed to expose you to things you otherwise wouldn't expose yourself to. We often see content that is shared by friends of our friends, and I think many secular networks would like to help you “broaden your horizons” even further.

Where is the Benefit of Social Networks for Christian ministries?

That's not to say social networks don't provide benefits for churches and other Christian ministries. There are very real benefits to members in their ability to stay connected with each other throughout the week. Thanks to social networks, I've been able to pray for fellow church members as they face different challenges or pursue new opportunities. I've been more up-to-speed on what's happening in their lives than I'd ever get from a 5 minute conversation after worship.

There are also very practical potential benefits in communicating from the church to members – event invitations can be sent, accepted, and updated through social networks. Information about ministries can be disseminated. Photos from church events can be shared.

However, in all of this, either individuals sharing with each other, or the church sharing with members, we must keep in mind that there is no privacy in the secular online world. Others will know about your events – when and where they are. Others will see your photos. Others will hear your prayer requests. Yes, most social networks allow you to define who these things can be shared with, but most secular networks are constantly changing the rules and processes for protecting this privacy, so you're best off assuming that people will see your content that you didn't intend as the audience.

Social networks, especially the big ones, are also valuable places to advertise your ministry.

Are there Christian alternatives?

If secular social networks are so dangerous, has anyone created a Christian alternative that is safe?

The answer, of course, is yes. In fact, there are many. Since, no matter how hard I try, I undoubtedly will leave out your favorite, I'm only going to discuss two.

The first is a general model – private church social

networks enabled by ChMS providers such as Faith-Highway (their 360Central solution) and Church Community Builder. These social networks provide all the privacy you want while still making it easy for members to stay connected with each other; for home fellowship groups, youth groups, and other ministries to share information; to schedule volunteers; and for the church to share general information with the congregation.

The biggest challenge with these private networks is getting the members to engage. As you know, getting folks to come to a church website isn't easy. Even with the increased relevance of these social network tools, there may not be enough of a draw for members to get in the habit of logging in every day.

The second example is Hschooler.net. As I've [described before](#), a few years ago I envisioned the opportunity to create an online social network for Christian families, especially those that homeschool. Over the past couple of years, a group of homeschooled teens have been building, operating, and growing the network. They've broadened the scope to be for all Christian families, and last month, [we introduced](#) the capability for Christian organizations to create a private social network within Hschooler.net.

We believe this approach provides many of the benefits of a private church network while creating more of a draw by also enabling members to participate in the broader Christian social network. Since the issues with privacy and content are greatly reduced, we even welcome kids to participate (we give [parents complete control](#) over what their kids can do and with whom). Hschooler.net is nowhere near as large as Facebook, so the attraction to members is less. We also do not offer as much advertising (only a few text ads that are only visible to parents), so you likely will

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still want to maintain a presence on Facebook, but we believe that certain conversations should be within a private network – whether through your ChMS provider, or an option like Hschooler.

It is my hope and prayer that these articles on the power and danger of technology will encourage you in your daily walk with Christ. Whether it is the printing press, radio, television, personal computers, the Internet, mobility, Wi-Fi, or social networks, new technologies continue to advance our ability to know God and to serve Him, wherever we go.

Russ McGuire is an executive for a Fortune 100 company and the founder/co-founder of three technology start-ups. His latest entrepreneurial venture is Hschooler.net (<http://hschooler.net>), a social network for Christian families (especially homeschoolers) which is being built and run by six homeschooled students under Russ' direction.