

Media dominance: Who controls the web?

by [Mark U. Edwards](#) in the [February 28, 2001](#) issue

In the early 16th century, Martin Luther, assisted by enterprising printers unhandicapped by copyright laws, swamped the market with five pamphlets for every one put out by his Catholic opponents. Other Protestant writers poured out their own flood of sermons, treatises, polemics and devotional writings. For more than three decades Protestants dominated the recently invented printing press. By the time the Catholic authorities found a way to use the new medium to their own advantage, the religious landscape of Europe had been utterly and irreversibly transformed.

In the late 20th century, evangelical Christians appear to account for more than 80 percent of the Christian presence on the World Wide Web. How long will this dominance persist, and what are its long-term implications? And how might we explain this imbalance in the use of a revolutionary new technology?

It is easy to surmise that the print medium better suited the Protestant than the Catholic message. Protestant emphasis on the word, and especially the word of scripture, lent itself to written argument. Catholicism, in contrast, was more visually and ritually oriented. Perhaps more to the point, much of the Western church's practice and ritual had developed over the centuries, only later receiving theological explanation. To defend theologically practices that had first arisen apart from strictly theological concerns was a difficult task unless one had recourse to the authority of tradition—something not allowed by Protestants, who insisted on "scripture alone." Thus their need for many pamphlets. Finally, the Catholics were defending an existing institution, warts and all, while at least in the early decades the Protestants were advocating an ideal. It took some time for them to build their own imperfect institutions and become vulnerable to Catholic criticism that reality differed significantly from the ideals they espoused. In the meanwhile, Catholics were at a severe disadvantage.

While helpful, these observations take us only so far. They may explain why it was difficult for the Catholics to defend against Protestant attack. They do not explain why the Catholics were so tardy in using the press to creatively further their own ends.

At this juncture we must look at motivation. Before the Reformation got under way, Catholic authorities had used the press to do more efficiently what they already had been doing with manuscripts for centuries: multiplying documents needed by priests and the hierarchy in the normal performance of their duties. With the Reformation, they saw the press more as a problem than an opportunity, a problem most effectively solved by censorship and repression. With the complacency of an establishment, Catholic authorities did not believe that the Roman church should have to explain its beliefs to its own faithful, much less proselytize among those who had fallen away.

In contrast, the Protestants, bubbling over with missionary zeal, wanted to convert readers and hearers to their new understanding of the gospel. They saw the press as a God-given means to a crucial end: a dramatic reform of the church. They were zealous proselytizers. Catholics long had no response except that of rebuttal and repression. It took them more than three decades to realize that the printing press had opened up a new world that required the Roman church to attend to its own flock in new, unprecedented ways.

What does this suggest for the early 21st century? A plausible case can be made that the technology of the Net, the Web and television is more compatible with evangelical than with mainline understandings of theology and worship. The Good News may be mediated by technology, and individuals can come to faith apart from other believers (but not, most would agree, apart from the Holy Spirit). But with its breakdown of traditional propinquity in space, time and vivid relationships, the virtual world of the Web raises perplexing questions for denominations that understand themselves in terms of physical presence, whether in corporate worship or in the use of the sacraments. More of the mainline churchpeople than evangelicals are likely to have theological problems with the virtualities of Web-mediated religion.

But then as now, the key difference lies not in theology—or at least not directly in theology—and not in technology per se, but in motivation. Today's evangelicals, like 16th-century Protestants, seek to proselytize and convert in ways that today's mainline largely does not. At the same time the 16th-century example suggests that

the mainline would be ill-advised to allow evangelicals to monopolize the educational potential of the Net and the Web. Like the 16th-century Catholics and the printing press, today's mainline needs to assess the positive educational potential of the Internet and Web and put it to use for its own faithful. And who knows, with the right approach, they may find themselves landing a secular surfer or two.