

Beyond Twitter: The Vatican's other communications revolution

by [David Gibson](#)

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Benedict XVI launched his own Twitter feed this week (Dec. 3) to worldwide media coverage – it's hard to resist the story of an octogenarian pontiff mixing it up with the digerati – and to considerable acclaim from church insiders.

The praise was understandable. After the spate of missteps that have come to define Benedict's nearly eight-year papacy, it seemed that the Vatican might finally be able to get a jump on the 24/7 news cycle rather than always playing defense.

But the focus on the pope's personal entry into social media (the Vatican has a general Twitter feed and Facebook page) is really a subplot to a larger, behind-the-scenes effort by the Roman curia to overhaul the Vatican's notoriously byzantine communications apparatus and head off problems that can't be glossed over by even the most appealing papal tweets.

That restructuring began in earnest this year following incessant criticism – many from Vatican allies – that Rome's hapless messaging was accelerating controversies instead of defusing them.

From Benedict's citation of an inflammatory passage on Islam's Prophet Muhammad in a 2006 speech to his rehabilitation of a Holocaust-denying bishop in 2009, the pope had become known for creating gaffes rather than preaching the gospel. Behind Vatican walls the frustration was building.

The push for a communications reboot was given fresh urgency last January, following the infamous "Vatileaks" case in which papal valet Paolo Gabriele – who was convicted in October – secretly passed thousands of sensitive internal memos to the Italian media that portrayed the Vatican as a den of poisonous intrigue.

So how is the overhaul going now that things are settling down?

"It's a work in progress," said Greg Burke, the Fox News reporter who the Vatican hired last summer in an unusually high-profile move. "I'm just aiming for baby steps at this point, trying to get things moving in the right direction. And I think they are."

Vatican officials say Burke's hiring – he is a member of the influential and media-savvy Opus Dei order and he works in the office of the secretary of state, the Vatican's West Wing – is one of the biggest of the baby steps. It has been followed by a number of other actions designed to make the Holy See's communications a priority rather than an afterthought.

For example, the Vatican has started using mock press conferences to prepare for tough questions from the media, and made some of its younger, mid-level officials more available to journalists. Even though they may deliver only background briefings, these officials tend to relate to reporters better than high-ranking cardinals for whom the media is a necessary evil and fax machines a novelty. (Thirty-something curial officials like to joke that the Vatican's motto should be "Yesterday's technology tomorrow.")

Senior Vatican officials have also begun weekly meetings to discuss communications strategy – for example, how and when to make announcements so that they have the greatest impact. And of course there is the new outreach via social media and other forms of digital communications.

Even the Vatican's semiofficial daily, L'Osservatore Romano, is shedding its image as the ecclesiastical version of Pravda and producing surprisingly provocative articles on pop culture and politics.

While these tactics may be old hat to most corporations and even many government bodies, they are often new-fangled concepts to the Vatican.

They have already paid dividends: Last summer as the Vatican Bank – for decades a source of some of the Vatican's biggest scandals – prepared for a crucial test in its drive to adopt international financial standards for transparency, bank officials opened the mysterious redoubt to journalists who were able to tour the facility and question top officials.

"We want to lift the 'veil of secrecy' hanging around the institute and show that our effort for transparency is real," Paolo Cipriani, director general of the Vatican Bank, told reporters. That sort of talk is revolutionary in Vatican terms.

But serious hurdles remain because the Vatican can still be a medieval court with the mentality of an Italian village. Each curial department, or "dicastery," tends to view itself as an autonomous guild whose leaders figure they know what is best for their shop. Long-standing interdepartmental rivalries have resisted previous efforts to coordinate publicity for the greater good.

Even the Vatican's communications structure illustrates the problem: apart from L'Osservatore Romano and an Internet news site, the Vatican has its own radio station and television studio along with a pontifical office for "social communications" that is supposed to address important media issues while also coordinating coverage of the pope by secular television outlets.

And there is the Vatican's press office, which deals with print media and is headed by a Jesuit priest, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, who is the official Vatican spokesman.

These half-dozen offices are independent of each other, and like it that way. Lombardi, meanwhile, insists that he does not speak for Benedict. "The pope is able to express himself without me," he says. That's a shift from the previous pontificate and one that has raised questions about how informed Lombardi is and how much credit reporters can give his pronouncements.

Moreover, Lombardi now has Burke working with him, a situation that raised as many questions as it answered.

"I think we are in an experimental stage," the genial Lombardi, wearing a wry grin, told reporters in September when asked how the new communications arrangement was going.

There are mundane issues that need attention as well. The Vatican's official website was launched in the 1990s, and looks it. And the press office still closes by 3 p.m. most days - a schedule that frustrates the media and Jack Valero, a member of Opus Dei and a highly regarded communications consultant for various church agencies.

"If you are in New York you are waking up just as the Vatican is closing down," said Valero, who thinks the Vatican should have a spokesperson on call around the clock.

Change never comes easily to the Catholic Church, of course, and there are no infallible media strategies. Even the American bishops, who are considered on the church's cutting edge when it comes to adopting modern ways, are struggling to

overcome a run of bad publicity and are in the midst of revamping their communications operations.

Events can also thwart the best of intentions.

For instance, the Vatican faced its own Benghazi controversy in September because, much like the Obama administration, it responded to the unrest in Egypt and Libya with successive, somewhat confusing statements that at first deplored the anti-Islamic video that sparked the Cairo riots and then later denounced the violence that left the U.S. ambassador to Libya and three others dead.

Conservatives ripped the Holy See just as they blasted the White House, and that left Vatican officials fuming over what they perceived as unfair criticisms.

Then there was the reaction last month to the pope's new book – a smart yet accessible discussion of the infancy of Jesus, the third in Benedict's well-received trilogy on the historical Jesus, and wisely timed for a pre-Christmas release. But some media outlets and a few believers were aghast at what they saw as the "killjoy" pope heedlessly debunking cherished Christmas traditions – another PR headache over what should have been an easy feel-good story for Benedict.

Lombardi says that the communications overhaul will continue. "I think we have to grow," he said. He added that the addition of Burke to the mix can only help the process.

Burke made a rare public appearance this week for the announcement of the pope's new Twitter feed – tweets will begin Dec. 12 – and in an earlier interview he sounded cautiously optimistic that the effort would begin to change Rome's historic suspicion for the media.

"Anyone with extensive dealings in the Vatican knows that things take time here," Burke said. "I'm learning quite a bit, but I think my superiors are as well."

"The church is not a political party, and we don't do things just to get good PR," he added. "But when a decision is taken, we have to have communications in mind. What's the message we're going to be sending? It's interesting to get people thinking this way."