

How should we respond to new media?

**Can we begin to incorporate the best practices of decency and truth in our new media? Can we become more adept at incorporating social media into our larger plan as we hold propaganda machines accountable?**

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I was a pastor of a small congregation in Rhode Island, when I felt this strange calling. I sensed that somehow my ministry would extend beyond the walls of my particular congregation. I couldn't imagine how that could happen.

Then I began a blog. It was a strange time for the medium. It was new and untrusted, but I blogged everyday, setting aside three hours in the wee morning. It became my unpaid part-time job. My older, established colleagues would relentlessly deride the new medium, and I would come home from a conference or a meeting, licking my wounds after being publicly ridiculed by someone I deeply respected. But it was a calling, and we all know that when something takes root in the core of your being, you have to keep doing it, even when it makes no sense in terms of dignity or income.

Since there are very few media outlets for progressive Christians and the traditional outlets seemed very resistant to new voices, I kept working in any way that I could—podcasts, blogs, and guest blogging. Then my book came out and I could move into more traditional media. And when it was published, it did well because of the blog, not in spite of it.

It used to be that a serious writer was expected to publish in traditional media. Blogs, Twitter, and Facebook were looked down upon because it was giving away free content. New media was seen as a threat to all the good and important gatekeepers of society.

But sometime around 2008, with the downturn in economy and publishing, publishers changed their strategy. **Traditional publishing began to understand the importance of social media, and incorporated it into their larger plan.** Now, it's expected that authors have platform *before* we get published. In other words, print publishers look for people who are adept with new media before signing them on to traditional media.

I tell you all of this to point out my personal location. I wouldn't have a career if it was not for social media. I fully understand that. But there are larger lessons here.

Recently, I wrote about the [importance of Institutions](#)—news, publishing, and church—because I believe that institutions can be vital to accountability, particularly when it comes to protecting our democracy and civil rights.

In parallel discussions, with the election of Donald Trump, I'm reading a lot about how the rise of social media has distorted our sense of reality. People question our reliance on new media for our news and long for the days when we had one news source. The *New York Times* editorial board asks, "[Without a Walter Cronkite to guide them, how can Americans find the path back to a culture of commonly](#)

[accepted facts, the building blocks of democracy?"](#) I admit, I did snort at that particular question, but overall the critique is important and we must have a vigorous conversation.

Yet, even as we question, we cannot frame the debate as old media versus new media. We cannot turn our backs on new forms of media. When new churches start, they rely almost completely on social media to get the word out. Which tells me that social media is one of our most effective means of spreading the good news in a new generation. (Outside of personal invitations, but those invitations are often done on social media.)

There is another reason that we cannot turn our backs on social media. People have used social media to raise our consciousness. Not everyone has read Michelle Alexander or Tah-Nehisi Coates, but many have seen #blacklivesmatter. We have watched as a new Civil Rights Era has demanded that we look at our systemic racism—the war on drugs, police brutality, mass incarceration, and gerrymandering. We cannot ignore the videos, taken on our ubiquitous phones, and uploaded for the world to see. Yes, new media has blurred the lines of reality and entertainment. It has allowed lies to spread. **And it has given voice to the voiceless.**

Social media did not invent lying. Throughout history, pamphlets, posters, advertising, radio, and television have all been used to spread propaganda. We did not stop using the mediums. Instead, we learned how to be smarter, how to regulate the messengers and hold them accountable.

As a society and in our churches, we can learn from the lessons of publishing. This is not a matter of old media versus new media. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram aren't going away any time soon. And, with all of the government's outlets, Donald Trump is about to take on a massive media operation. We need to stay engaged. We need our institutions and churches to hold our government accountable. Can we begin to uphold the best practices of decency and truth in our new media? Can we become more adept at incorporating social media into our larger plan as we hold propaganda machines to the fire?