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Twitter at the Hands of the Church

SOILE KARJALAINEN & RAIJA HALONEN

Abstract This qualitative study analysed how the Church utilised Twitter. The empirical material consisted of 937 individual tweets published in early 2017 and classified into three categories: tweets published by the Church, tweets published by other organisations and tweets published by individual persons. The latter two groups were re-tweeted by the Church reasoning their role as empirical research material. At the time of the study, the most topical issues were asylum seekers, equal-marriage laws and human rights. Qualitative content analysis was performed following a step-by-step approach. Networking was identified as the strategy for utilising social media. The results also showed that the way the Church acted in social media was interactive. The Church tweeted openly and encouraged people to join discussions.

Keywords: • Twitter • the Church • Public organisation • Religious • Content analysis • Social media •

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1 Introduction

The current study analysed how a public organisation utilised social media as a tool. The study was conducted as a case study in the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church (hereinafter the Church). The social media studied was limited to Twitter, and the empirical research material consisted of tweets made over January–April 2017 from the Twitter account owned by the Church and managed by the Church Council.

Social media has become an essential part of everyday of people, and it is integrated into daily life. The popularity of social media is increasing, and many enterprises have adopted social media among their practices to contact people regardless of place or time. Recently, public organisations have significantly increased their use of social media, being more achievable than before (Mergel, 2013; Simon, Goldberg & Adini, 2015). Also journalists report about incidents via Twitter, increasing openness, and share content produced by actors other than themselves (Vis, 2013).

Many public organisations, actively use Twitter (Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012), and one of them is the Church. Like any public service provider (see Serrat, 2017), also the Church has faced the need to more flexibly utilise media to enable inclusive, participative, and responsive communication. So far, however, Twitter-related studies have not focused on churches, although Cheong (2014) analysed tweets by one pastor. The Church wanted to reach people, so it was activated in the same forum where people are. The Church had accounts in Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter. However, despite the active use of social media and especially the use of Twitter in the hands of the Church, the way how Twitter was used had not been analysed so far.

This study focused on the research question: How does the Church utilise the microblog service Twitter in interactions with its members? The research question was investigated in a case study with inductive content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013). A framework with seven steps (Mayring, 2014) was applied. The study was mainly qualitative (Kaplan & Maxwell, 2005) in nature, with some numerical facts included to add value to the interpretations.

According to the analysis, the Church utilised Twitter to spread Christianity and mostly tweeted about religious topics but also about refugees, equal marriage and human rights. The language used showed that the Church could express its views in humorous ways and sought to spur active interactions.

2 Literature Review

Social media can be defined as a group of Internet-based applications that are built on Web 2.0 and that enable users to produce and share content. In general, social media enables reaching many people in real time (Serrat, 2017).

For governments, social media offers possibilities to capture messages and opinions from citizens and use that information to build processes, increase openness and develop solutions for governmental problems (Mergel, 2013). Companies need to make intentional decisions to adopt social media, build social communities and gain skills to learn from the content produced by customers (Culnan, McHugh & Zubillaga, 2010). Companies can learn which of their registered users follow other registered users, thus building networks that organisations can use (Debreceeny, 2015).

Due to its non-anonymous nature social media appeals more people with extraversion and openness to experiences than introverts (Correa, Hinsley & De Zuniga, 2010). Most often reasons for social media usage are related to having fun and providing updates of it, or content-specific and information seeking (Luchman, Bergstrom & Krulikowski, 2014). Social media also enables forming common understanding with stakeholders and offers an important link between government and citizens (Mergel, 2013).

One of the most popular social networking sites is Facebook, which has more than 1.15 billion monthly active users (Debreceeny, 2015). Among the other social media sites (e.g. Sixdegrees, Hi5, MySpace, YouTube and Flickr), Twitter, founded in 2006, has grown rapidly in recent years, and its popularity is expected to continue to grow in the future (Gerstein, 2011). Twitter allows 140-character messages to be sent to and seen by people not known to the sender (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). Twitter users can make status updates, have conversations and share news and knowledge. Twitter can be valuable for both leisure and professional pursuits, such as sharing sources and coordinate

projects (Lux Wigand, 2010; van Dijck, 2011). Twitter has developed the use of hashtags (#) to inform other users about the content of messages (Naaman, Becker & Gravano, 2011).

Twitter serves as a formal communication channel for various authorities, including government agencies (Mergel, 2013). Twitter has a growing role at the governmental level and has introduced a new way to have discussions with stakeholders (van Dijk, 2011). Twitter use even proved to be crucial in the United States presidential campaign in 2016 (Enli, 2017). Government Public Relations can benefit from the low-cost nature of Twitter and reach large audience if the citizens engage in dialogue with information, questions and ideas as encouraged by the officials (Farhatiningsih & Salamah, 2018).

Enterprises utilise Twitter primarily to inform and promote their relationships and advertising activities (Waters, Burnett, Lamm & Lucas, 2009). Public organisations similarly use Twitter for information sharing, a type of communication that emphasises publishing facts (Waters & Williams, 2011). Twitter acts as a marketing tool, enables amateurism, challenges professionalisation and serves as a tool to set new agendas for institutions and other actors that tweet (Enli, 2017). Institutions with open Twitter accounts actively use the site to share information and facts publicly and quickly in real time and to increase confidence in their administration and operations (Waters & Williams, 2011).

Twitter also enables two-way interactions that offer new possibilities for businesses' social-media use (Briones, Kuch, Liu & Jin, 2011). Twitter-based internal communication opens an informal way to disseminate and discuss topics that would not necessarily be raised in traditional channels. Twitter improves collaboration in work environments by making information sharing easier and faster and increasing the community spirit among colleagues. (Zhao & Rosson, 2009).

The integration of social media tools into citizens' everyday life has enabled utilisation of social media during crises. Especially during catastrophes, social media plays a significant role as other communication systems, such as phone lines, can become overloaded. Twitter can be used to share information about

personal circumstances and coordinate assistance, first aid and evacuations. (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Ludwig, Reuter & Pipek, 2015).

Although Twitter has grown into a leading media tool in organising political campaigns (Enli, 2017), its role in communication between organisations and stakeholders has not yet been established (Lovejoy et al., 2012). Furthermore, many organisations have not developed guidelines or strategies for social media use. Only 20% of Australian organisations and 23% of European organisations have created overall social media strategies, and organisations often have insufficient skills to utilise social media. (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012).

In all, Twitter seems to be used to serve in versatile purposes related to such as adding communication among different crowds, advertising and marketing, sharing governmental information, influencing public opinion and pushing political or administrative goals forward.

However, Church as the tweeter has not gained much attention, with the exception of a single priest in a large church as the tweeter (Cheong, 2014), and new empirical findings were expected to increase knowledge about Twitter in the hands of a significant religious organisation.

3 Empirical Context

The Evangelical Lutheran Church (the Church) is the largest religious community in Finland. In 2017, the Church had about four million individual members, amounting to 71.9% of citizens. Founded in 1809, the Church has a tradition of established practices. The Church was separated from the state in 1870, when significant responsibilities for education, healthcare and care for the poor were also transferred to municipalities. The Church's central administration body is the Church Council.

At the time of the study, the Church had adopted use of social media and frequently updated its social media accounts. The online Church offered ongoing services and hours of prayer, and praying online. The Church also had Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube accounts and encouraged its parishes to build their own social media accounts and to be visible also in internet. In addition,

there were several prominent persons in the Church who made their contributions via their private social media accounts.

At the time of the study, the Church's Facebook site had 54,874 'likers' and 51,780 'followers'. The Church published one to three postings daily and shared posts by its partners and other individuals. On YouTube, the Church published several video shots weekly. One of its newest online products was 'One-Minute Devotions' on diverse topics, and some of these video shots had gained thousands of views. The Church's social media sites were managed by a special team of persons hired for that. The team included priests, diaconal workers, youth workers and informatics.

4 Research Approach

The research was conducted as a qualitative case study that investigated the phenomenon in its real-life context – discussion forum of the Church outlined by four months (see Yin, 2003). Qualitative research methods are mostly inductive in nature and are used to collect data from observations, interviews and documents (Kaplan & Maxwell, 2005). Using a case study is reasonable when the goal is to add understanding about a phenomenon that earlier has received little, if any, scientific interest (Gable, 1994). A case study approach can be applied both for a qualitative and a quantitative study, and it allows simple and complicated research settings (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Qualitative data analysis is about understanding and interpreting qualitative research material such as especially text (Lacity & Janson, 1994).

The empirical research material consisted of tweets published over January–April 2017. The research material was analysed with the help of a content analysis, which aims to find conclusion from the data analysed (see Krippendorff, 2013). Content analysis consists of conventional, directive and summative approaches (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), and the categories formed should be exclusive to ensure that all the content fits into only one category (Krippendorff, 2013).

In this study, the tweets were analysed carefully in seven steps: formulating a concrete research question, linking the research question to theory, deciding the research design, defining the material and the sampling strategy, selecting the data collection and analysis methods, processing the study, presenting the results and

discussing the quality of the study (see Mayring, 2014). The concrete research question of ‘How does the Church utilise the microblog service Twitter in interactions with its members?’ was answered through formulating two sub-questions: What does the Church tweet about? How can its tweets be categorised?

5 Empirical analysis of the Twitter tweets of the Church

The empirical research material consisting of 937 individual tweets from the Twitter account of the Church were downloaded. This amount included also tweets originally created by the Church and re-tweeted by individual parishes and vice versa.

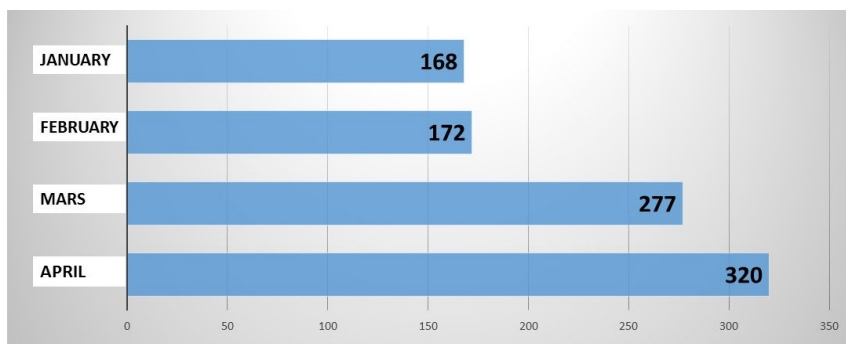


Figure 1: Number of tweets per month.

The study period started on the beginning of the year, not tied with any religious calendar. Figure 1 reveals that during January the number of tweets was the smallest (168), increasing towards the end of the study period.

Preliminary categories were formed based on a review of the tweets, and after thorough familiarisation with the material, they were then refined into eight categories: religious, marketing, declaration, information, answer, aid-and-mission, sharing news and other tweet. Every tweet published during January–April was placed in one category. The religious tweets were separated at the beginning of the analysis, and all tweets that in some way emphasised religion, for example, through Bible verses, prayers and religious-themed pictures were included in that category.



Figure 2: Religious tweet.

Figure 2 gives an example of a tweet classified as ‘religious’. The tweet was originally sent by a parish and then re-tweeted by the Church. At the time, ice hockey was a hot topic in the town. The tweet includes a modified quotation (“Thy will be done on ice as it is heaven”) of the Lord’s Prayer but also references topical issues and displays the Church’s humorous style of religious allusions in its tweets. At the time of study, this tweet had been liked by 186 users and re-tweeted 76 times.

‘Marketing’ category and ‘informing’ category were separate, although it was challenging to determine to which category some tweets belonged. ‘Marketing’ category included all the tweets that advertised different events, camps, or radio and television programs of the Church. ‘Information’ category consisted of tweets that were purely factual or informative in nature. Such tweets included information about negotiation of cooperation procedure in the Church, office premises, and other factual tweets. For example, one tweet pushed for more energy efficiency in the offices, and another tweet informed about the General Synod’s discussion on caring for the terminally ill.

As another example of classification, one priest responsible for work with deaf parishioners tweeted to advertise her reception hours on Skype, which was classified as ‘marketing’. In several other tweets, she advertised YouTube videos of sermons, psalms and prayers in sign language. Another tweet advertising a mass was sent by a bishop who welcomed a popular band to the city but informed that he cannot attend the rock concert because he was proclaiming “*Christ is risen!*” with the congregation attending the service. His tweet had received 61 likes and was re-tweeted 12 times at the time of the study.

‘Declarations’ consisted of tweets discussing topical national and global issues, such as asylum seekers, marriage, unemployment and equality. In addition, topics related to euthanasia, human rights, human trafficking, climate change and future bishop elections raised discussion. As well, tweets advertising events where negative decisions for asylum seekers were read aloud were classified as ‘declarations’. One tweet announced that Jesus was a refugee in reference to Trump’s refugee policy. Despite the mention of Jesus, the tweet was classified as declarative based on its message.

The ‘answer’ category included all tweets responding to questions posed to the Church. Some questions were provocative, such as *‘When will you ask for forgiveness for pressuring the Sami people to change their official nationality from the right stakeholders?’*. The Church answered, *‘What do you mean?’*, and the tweeter replied, *‘The church forced the Lappish people to change their language from the devil’s language to the majority’s language. Nobody has apologised for this’*. The conversation on this sensitive, delicate discussion had not been continued in the tweets at the time of the study. However, most questions were related to religious concepts, holy days and the Church’s views on issues and events. In general, tweets classified as ‘answers’ addressed a wide range of topics, such as statistics, parishioners’ attendance and taxes paid by the Church. In total, 105 tweets were classified as ‘answers’ in the study.

The ‘aid-and-mission’ category consisted of 15 tweets related to relief work performed by the Church nationally and internationally. The ‘sharing-news’ category had only seven tweets. The ‘other’ category included 47 tweets that did not belong in any other named category. The largest category was ‘religious’, with its 238 tweets, accounting for one fourth of the tweets. The second-largest category was ‘marketing’, with 229 tweets, also nearly a quarter of all.

There were also dialogues that consisted of several tweets. For instance, a tweeter asked if the next version of the Bible would include hashtags. The tweeter received an answer directly quoting the Bible (*Matthew 23:5: They do all their deeds to be seen by others*). This dialogue was classified as ‘religious’ due to the biblical quotation. The discussion in Twitter was active as there were always people at work in the social media team to monitor the tweets.

The analysis also explored what the Church intended to communicate when re-tweeting. The research material included 558 tweets (59.5%) published by the Church, 214 tweets (22.8%) by individual persons and 165 tweets (17.6%) by other organisations. The individual tweeters, particularly their Twitter accounts and the details of their posts, were analysed carefully. The analysis revealed that some non-Church employees tweeted, but many were priests, youth workers and other Church employees. Only one, with four tweets at the time of the study, was identified as a spokesperson. The organisations were classified as religious and non-religious organisations.

Due to the limited number of characters (140), the tweets often included pictures, especially for informational campaigns. For instance, the ‘101 reasons to belong to the Church’ campaign featured 101 pictures. The Church also used tweets to apologise for failed communication efforts. At the time of the study, the Church had run an unsuccessful advertisement related to a nation-level meeting. The advertisement featured a young woman in underwear (Fig. 3) and was widely seen on big billboards along the roads and on the walls of large buildings.



Figure 3: Failed advertisement

The Church tweeted: *'We failed. Choosing that picture was completely unsuccessful. We apologise for that, and we will remove the picture from that advertising campaign'*. The Church thus asked for forgiveness from people in general, not only those who might have been offended. Although the archbishop tried to cool the atmosphere after the communication fault, the discussion on the controversy continued and was also raised in the print media.

The four months studied (January–April) included Easter, the Church's oldest and most important feast, which was evident in the empirical material. Most tweets were published in April (320 tweets), while in January, only 168 tweets were published.

Overall, the analysis of 937 tweets from the Church's Twitter account shows that most tweets (238, 25.4%) were religious in nature. The second-largest category was marketing (229, 24.4%). The tweets classified as declarations (177,

18.9%) addressed topics such as marriage, refugees, human rights and racism. Informing was the fourth-largest category, with 119 (12.7%) tweets. The answers category included 105 (11.2%) tweets, the aid-and-mission category 15 tweets (1.6%), and, finally, the sharing-news category seven (0.75%) tweets.

6 Discussion

The current study analysed how the Church as a public organisation utilises Twitter. The research data was collected from the Twitter account of the Church, and all tweets (937) during January - April in 2017 were included. The tweets were analysed in seven steps and were carefully read one at a time in a chronological order, starting from January 2017.

In general, social media and online tools are valued and discussed in several countries, and among private and public organisations. Twitter is an open forum where members can easily comment and share opinions. As a cross-platform application, Twitter enables marketing, promotion, discussion and other types of communication. Twitter offers a new way to communicate, and at the same time it enables and supports parties to build relationships, to be present together, discussion, reporting news, information sharing and coordinating projects (Lux Wigand, 2010). The research material revealed that communication, discussion and social presence were visible in the tweets. The Church participated in several discussions with its followers, and occasionally the discussions seemed sensitive and personal. The Church's followers adopted this new tool to communicate with it, and the Church could communicate in real time as it continuously monitored its account and swiftly posted responses.

The Church had deployed an innovative tactic by utilising Twitter and engaging interactively with followers (see Culnan et al., 2010). The analysis revealed that having a person monitoring the Church's tweets added interaction between the Church and its members. For the Church, active communication with its followers was valuable. The numbers of 'likes' in the tweets revealed that the Church had succeeded with many of its tweets (see Fig. 2).

Management commitment is important when adopting social media (Mergel, 2013). The leading persons such as bishops and other higher officers had active roles in tweeting. The person (usually a priest) in charge of monitoring the tweets

answered questions, described and explained terms and concepts related to the Church's calendar, and re-tweeted posts and statements written by other people.

The Church had three goals: to promote openness, participation and collaboration. Similarly, the challenges of Serrat (2017) were realised in the topics of emerging global issues and rising citizen expectations. The tweets were open in nature, and discussion was going on about sensitive and challenging topics such as refugees, immigration, racism and unique marriage law. The tweets encouraged discussion and interaction and included declarations made without additional passion or antagonism. Politics were raised, particularly in relation to topical subjects such as bishop elections and subjects in the General Synod. The Church encouraged discussions by tweeting thoughts and offering new topics for tweets. Participation was promoted, for instance, through tweets inviting people to attend events and vote in elections.

The analysis of the research material lead to identify eight categories of tweets: religious, marketing, declaration, information, answer, aid-and-mission, sharing news and other. The categories were defined paying attention to their exclusive nature (see Krippendorff, 2013), and no changes were made during the analysis.

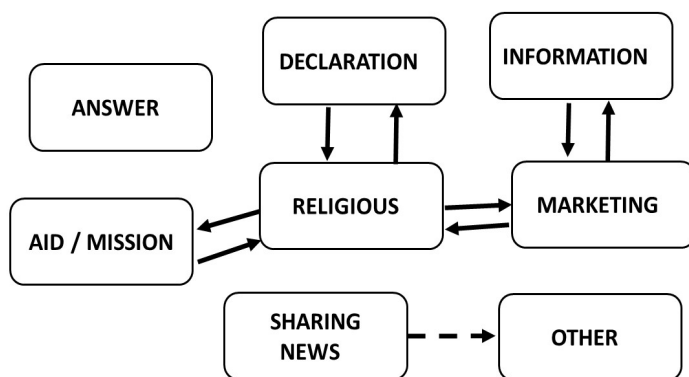


Figure 4: Proposed categories and their relations

Figure 4 illustrates the relationships among the categories. The arrows depict the challenges to decide which category a tweet was to be classified in. Some tweets required more analysis and consideration than others. The 'religious' category

appeared to be a category that was a near category to more than the others. As seen in Figure 4, the ‘answer’ category was not related to any other as its tweets were identified explicitly as answers. Another observation was related to the ‘sharing news’ and ‘other’ categories, which were related only to each other. However, ‘sharing news’ had a low number of tweets (seven), and it could be included in the ‘other’ category.

Overall, one can assume that religious topics form the core of communication in the Church. This could be seen in the research material as well, as most of the tweets were classified as ‘religious’. The second-largest category, ‘marketing’, included mostly advertising messages about events and happenings in the Church. Besides pure religious topics, also other topics were widely seen in the tweets, as immigration and human rights were visible in the research material as well. The Church, therefore, appeared to be an active part of the society and wants to participate in contemporary discussions.

7 Conclusion

This study focused on the topics the Church tweeted about and the ways in which it utilised Twitter. The subject was fresh and topical as, at the time of the study, there was little no prior knowledge about the use of Twitter. A qualitative study (Kaplan & Maxwell, 2005) was an appropriate choice in this case. This study did not open the strategy related to utilising social media, and it would be interesting to know how the strategy was formed and whether it was planned or ad hoc. More knowledge about the role of social media in communication by large organisations such as churches and cities is needed.

Of the Church’s 937 tweets over January–April 2017, most were ‘religious’ in nature, accounting for 25.4% (238) of the sample of tweets. The next-largest category of ‘marketing’ had almost as many tweets (229, 24.4%). The third-largest category of ‘declarations’ had 177 tweets, while the ‘informing’ category had 119 tweets. In addition, 105 tweets were classified as ‘answers’, 15 as ‘aid-and-mission’, and seven as ‘sharing news’.

The study was first of its kind about utilising Twitter in the Church in Finland. The literature review did not find much relevant knowledge from scientific studies on Twitter use in other countries with similar environments. This scant knowledge suggests that the findings presented in the paper will also have interest for international audiences. The current study was limited to tweets from the Church's account, and future studies will be extended to include other public agencies. Moreover, extending the study to churches in other countries could add new knowledge about new ways to use Twitter, particularly at the hands of religious organisations.

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