

Study says religion blogs offer cross-fertilization: Self-reflective and collaborative

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Blogs are a growing but still relatively underutilized influence on today's religious discourse, according to a study of the religious blogosphere by the Social Science Research Council.

"Blogs have given occasion to a whole new set of conversations about religion in public life. They represent a tremendous opportunity for publication, discussion, cross-fertilization and critique of a kind never seen before," the authors conclude.

"In principle, at least, the Internet offers an opportunity to break down old barriers and engender new communities. While the promise is vast, the actuality is only what those taking part happen to make of it."

The study, published on an SSRC blog titled "The Immanent Frame," surveyed nearly 100 of the most influential blogs that contribute to discussions about religion in the public sphere. The report was primarily researched and written by Nathan Schneider for the Brooklyn-based council.

While no blogs ranked in the highest echelons of readership and influence in the blogosphere as a whole, the authors say religion blogs are a force that apparently is here to stay.

"Only a decade since the rise of the first user-friendly blog platforms, the blogosphere has become one of the eminent spaces for serious public discourse in the online world," the study says. "They thrive on quick opinions, a minute-to-minute news cycle and public exchanges with one another."

As in news and politics, the use of blogs has exploded in the realm of religious life. Religious leaders, communities and individuals use blogs to share in sights and build networks. Starting with BeliefNet in 1999, several religion blogs focus on politics,

inspiration, entertainment and culture.

Conservative blogs like GetReligion provide critiques of religion coverage in the mainstream press, while political blogs like Talk to Action helped galvanize a new “progressive” religious left leading up to the 2008 elections.

Because of their ease of use, blogs have shaped public discourse in society as a whole and on religious questions in particular, the study says.

In organizations like the mainline Protestant denominations, blogging has created space for voices that push back against prevailing trends. Recognizing the possibility of such a shift in Catholicism, the authors say the Vatican has held high-level discussions about issuing guidelines for Catholic bloggers.

As religion coverage at many national and regional media organizations has been cut back due to budget constraints, journalists increasingly look to Internet sources to fill the void. In that context, the authors of the study warn that traditional lines drawn by the mainstream media between even-handed journalism and editorializing have yet to be clearly defined in the blogosphere.

Asked about their reasons for blogging in the first place, most of those surveyed said they weren't seeking fame or fortune but simply saw a need. Some, like religion reporters and academicians, were not originally interested in blogging but were forced to adopt the tool and eventually learned to enjoy it.

The low cost and ease of use of blogging software enables those so inclined to get involved in blogging on a whim. Those with institutional affiliations tend to rely on support staff for technical help not available to those who go it alone.

After getting started, the authors say, any blogger has to find a source of motivation to keep posting day after day. Usually, what keeps them going is the blog's community and personal drive.

The authors say the purpose of the study is to “foster a more self-reflective, collaborative, and mutually aware religion blogosphere. Ideally, this report will spark discussion among religion bloggers that will take their work further, while also inviting new voices from outside existing networks to join in and take part,” the report says. *-Bob Allen, Associated Baptist Press*