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VIRTUAL UNKNOWNNS

A Q&A WITH AUTHOR JOANNE MCNEIL



AS THE CHURCH MOVES MANY OF ITS FUNCTIONS ONTO SOCIAL MEDIA, WHAT KINDS OF FEEDS MIGHT FEED US?

If you surveyed parishes in the Anglican Church of Canada in 2019, you would have seen a wide variety of social media involvement from church to church. Many parishes had Facebook pages, though many did not. Few would have been involved in regular livestreaming, and fewer still would have encouraged the community to gather solely in a digital arena.

But it's 2020 now, and the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed explosive growth in digital ministry across the church. This new era, of course, is founded upon a number of long-held assumptions about how and whether to build an online community—what works, what doesn't, what pulls people in and what drives them away. How can church leaders know if their assumptions are right—and up to date?

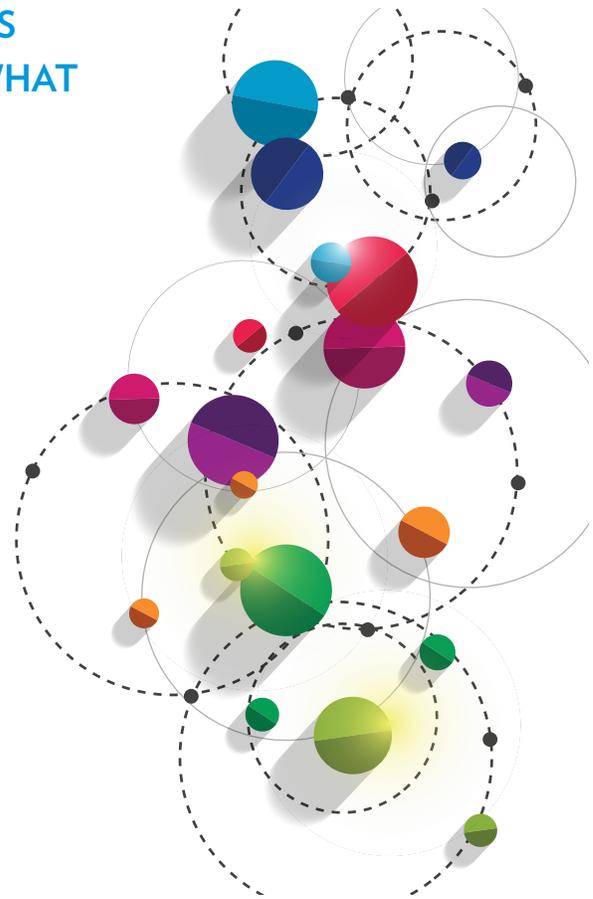
To get a clearer picture of this complex landscape, *Epiphanies* spoke with Joanne McNeil, author of the book *Lurking: How a Person Became a User*. Part personal history, part sociological observation, *Lurking* digs into the early days of the internet and traces the trajectory of people's biggest concerns with online life: searching, safety, privacy, identity, community, anonymity and visibility.

McNeil talked with *Epiphanies* about anonymity on the internet, alternatives to platforms like Facebook, and how to create a healthy community online.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How did you get started writing about the internet and technology?

You know, it was a long process. There were a number of factors that went into it, but one of the immediate factors was that I had a blog, and I was really active on early social media. So a lot of my posting on message boards and even in chat rooms, that got me in the habit of writing. Somewhere along the line I realized, OK, these emails that I'm spending so much time on, or these posts on message boards, are not bad. So maybe I could try writing essays and things like that. And because I was

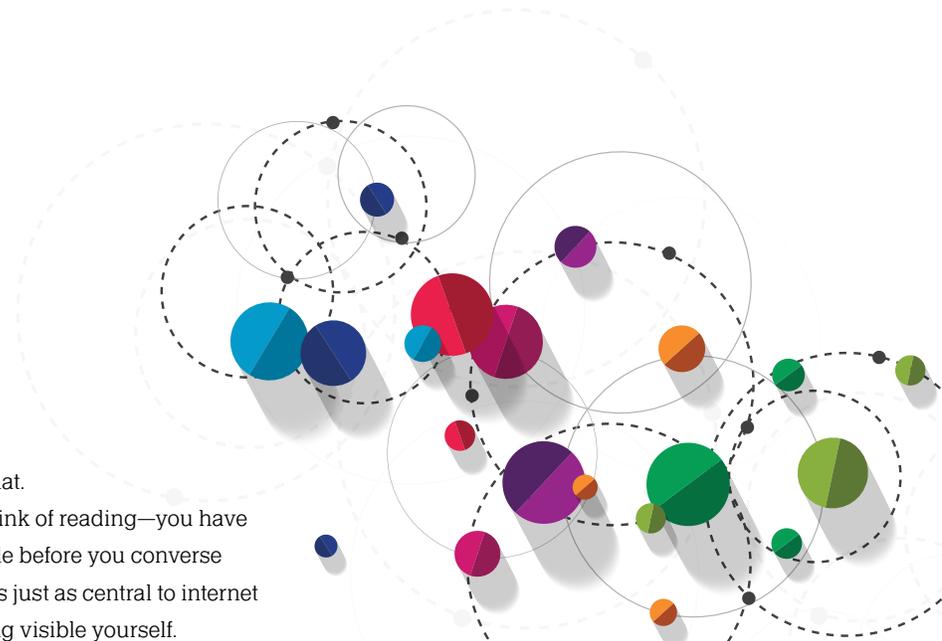


already using technology to write, it made sense that I would write about technology.

I wasn't somebody who grew up thinking, *Oh, I'm going to be a writer*. I liked to write, but I just didn't think I'd have a chance to. But when I started getting attention for things I put on my blog, and how casual that was, that's where my ambition shaped.

I wanted to start by asking you about the concept of lurking, since that's the title of your book. It seems like in the book you don't label it as a positive or a negative thing—it's just a type of internet phenomenon.

I think of it as listening on the internet. Listening isn't always eavesdropping—listening can just be listening. But there is also a sense of the user's invisibility, too, where no one can see you lurking. But it's also not the same as surveilling someone, it's not the same as doing something improper—because we have words, like



surveillance or stalking, for that.

Lurking also makes me think of reading—you have this opportunity to read people before you converse with them. So I think of that as just as central to internet experience as posting or being visible yourself. Especially with all these platforms these days where people have a lot of public feeds, Twitter feeds, you can scroll down and get a sense of who someone is.

I wanted people to kind of embrace that habit. Especially since, even from the early days, people were really sweet about the concept of lurking. On early platforms, you'd see people joke about "the lurkers." They loved it because you've got an audience, you've got people who are paying attention because they care.

In the book, you talk a lot about the idea of anonymity—how things were more anonymous on the early internet, yet now on Facebook and other social media platforms, it's almost hard to be anonymous. Has that changed what it means to lurk or is it still a big part of the internet?

It has changed a little bit, [but] there are still places where you can be anonymous or semi-anonymous. I think of Reddit—basically, it's one of the largest platforms out there, but I would say that a substantial portion of their users are anonymous. Consequently, the material that's shared on Reddit tends to be a little bit more about private matters. It's not that the platform is above harassment, that's definitely not the case—I'm not saying go to Reddit and have this really warm experience. But one of the subreddits [an individual forum on Reddit] that's getting a lot of attention these days is the one about unemployment, because these days the United States' [system] is so difficult to navigate, and people don't necessarily want to share on Twitter that they're on unemployment, because it's kind of embarrassing.

And so you have all these anonymous users coming together, strategizing together, using various techniques and making sure—because they're in need and they don't know how else to, they can't get through to an operator necessarily. I mean, having spaces like that is—it's not necessarily the ideal. The ideal would be a fully functioning unemployment system. But in the absence of that, having something like this subreddit is really important and useful.

So there is a need for anonymous spaces, as well.

Yeah. Having the opportunity for communities, especially for the stuff that might be embarrassing or that you don't want to share with people like coworkers. That's what's still around, and the thing that I hope people realize who are maybe a little bit younger or newer to the internet, the online communities from the beginning had more of that element—you could show up and reinvent yourself, or, you know, just have a sense of sharing things and not changing people's image of who you are.

Again, there are people who did not use that [anonymity] for very friendly reasons; they did not use that for reasons like strategizing around getting help in need. But it offers a chance to experiment, and I hoped in the book that I could show the wide range of opportunities that are presented.

I think some platforms seem to take anonymity away as a way to try and curb harassment, but it seems to me with what you're saying that that doesn't necessarily help—or maybe just that there are useful things to being anonymous.

Basically around 2010 or so, Facebook would just reiterate, “We don't have harassment on our platform because people use real names.” They didn't even go the extra step of creating real safe spaces, because they felt that they had this magic bullet in the real names.

Nowadays we can see that's how a lot of misinformation is spread. Certainly harassment happens there. The problem isn't necessarily that people are their real identity or not; it's a lot more complex than just how you reveal yourself online. Because certainly people are revealing themselves with their real names when they advocate conspiracies, for instance. So it's much more complicated than a matter of just anonymity or invisibility or being yourself online or having a fake identity.

That ties in with something else I wanted to ask you about. I think you mention in the book, the media coverage at the time when Facebook and other social media platforms

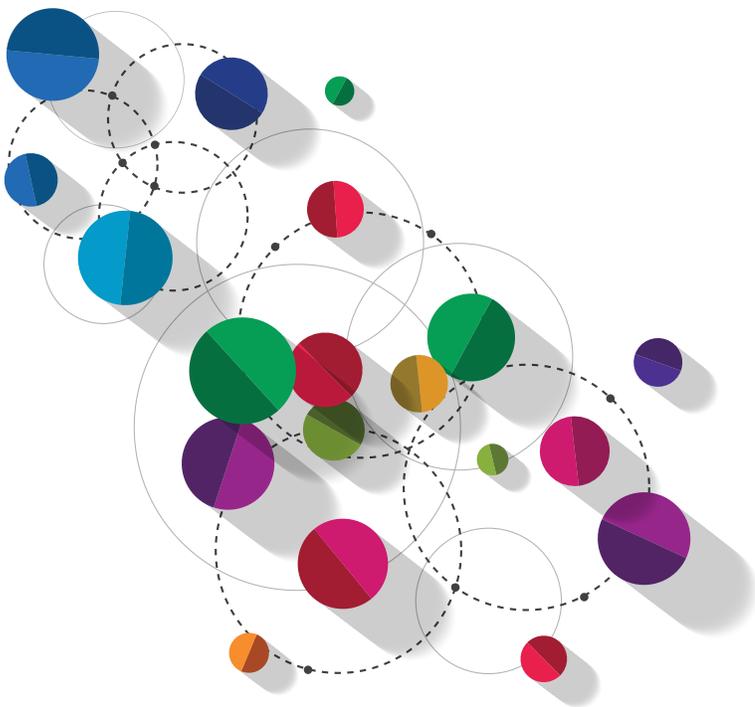
were blowing up was sort of fawning. What changes do you think could have happened if there'd been more of a critical view?

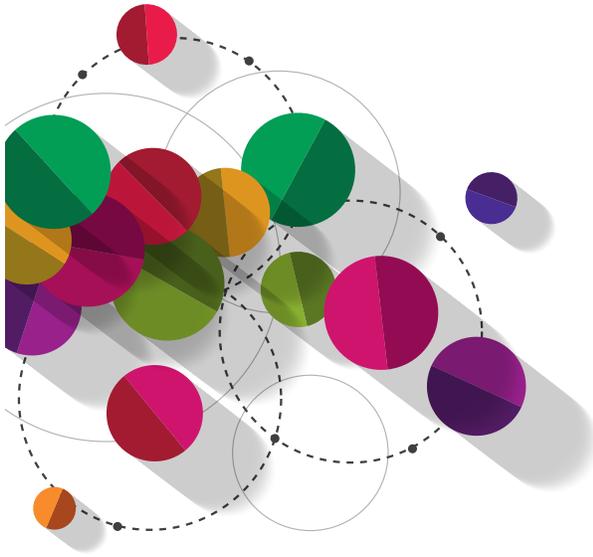
Yeah. Well, it was a little bit frustrating—if you look back at coverage just ten years ago, it would be one of two styles. There was either a lot of enthusiasm for the founders—because if you remember this moment in time, this was around the financial crisis of 2008. So you had Wall Street as the obvious bad guys. The media knew that Wall Street had created all these problems; real estate was not a safe bet at all in 2008, but here comes this new moment, a new movement out of Silicon Valley. They seem to be profitable, they seem to be politically liberal, so there was a lot of very soft coverage of the innovation happening there.

If it had just been enthusiasm for these products, that would be one thing. But hand in hand with that enthusiastic coverage was a lot of scrutinizing of the users themselves. A lot of the coverage that was not fawning over the platforms was really dismissive of the people who used them. So instead of saying, *hey, maybe it's a bad thing that Facebook is doing this thing, maybe that's a policy that is harmful to its users*—the problem would be with the users themselves. “Why are they sharing so much of their lives online?” As opposed to, “Why is Facebook targeting all these communities and encouraging [them] to move all their municipal services online so that the only way you can find out about school committee meetings is on Facebook?”

That structural critique wasn't really there. Now when you hear people say, “We have to hold onto Facebook, it's so essential to our lives,” what they're usually saying is not that they love using Facebook, it's that, *if I log off, I'm not going to know when the school committees are, I'm not going to know if someone's going to plow my roads after it snows*, or something—a lot of that information is locked behind Facebook's platform.

There was something called Free Basics, which was where they offered free internet services in various countries who would consequently conflate the internet with Facebook, and members of the diaspora from those countries could only keep in touch with their families through Facebook, because Facebook was their internet. So when it got so entwined with people's everyday lives, that's where it reached the point where, *well, we can't*





just turn around and give up on it, because they've already occupied so many different spaces and functions of our lives.

That's very relevant for churches, especially now—churches can't meet in person, so they're dependent on some of these platforms to stream their services and to connect. But what do you think—is there a way to overcome that? How does one disentangle oneself from Facebook?

That is definitely one of those tricky questions, because there are so many costs and benefits—there were costs and benefits when people decided to move their schools and churches, their communities, onto Facebook, and there's a different set of costs and benefits now. Right now, you can kind of assume that most people in your community will have Facebook identities, so it's easy to kind of loop them all together. But there's also a strong possibility that everybody has an email address, which is not on Facebook, which is a decentralized way of connecting. So in certain cases you could just set up a community newsletter or mailing list. But to be realistic, sometimes people have [their email] conflated with their work life; it's not as easy, it's not as interactive, it's not as attention-grabbing as events on Facebook—I mean, everyone loves Facebook events.

1 An open-source, decentralized microblogging platform (similar in look to Twitter)

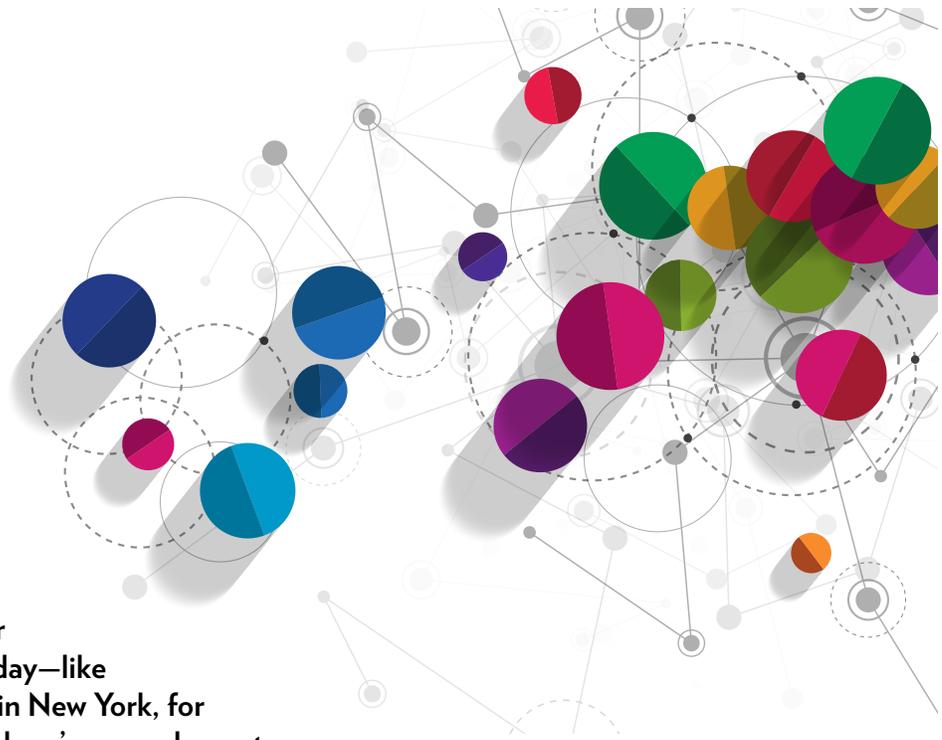
It is a really difficult question, and it matters what, ultimately, your community values. So perhaps if you could commit to the labour involved in setting up an [account] on Mastodon¹—I mean, that sounds really high-tech at first, but when you look at it, here are the benefits: we know that we can moderate based on our values, we're not subjecting our community to the conspiracies or some of the hatred that might be manifesting on this platform, and it might be a nice respite from the spaces that Facebook kind of forces you into, or those cultures that are pretty unavoidable. You won't have a risk of your privacy exploited, or of [issues with] advertisements.

A story [came out](#) the other day that showed how there were ads [on Facebook] specifically targeting Black people in America not to vote in the last presidential election. So when we have all of those as part of the context of Facebook ... the ease of convenience might actually not be worth it.

If anyone was interested in forming an online community elsewhere, the best place to look at is called [Run Your Own Social](#). It's a website put together by Darius Kazemi, and he goes through all the contemporary costs and benefits of doing this yourself. Because the labour is certainly intensive—it's not as easy as just setting up a group on Facebook, it will take some time and you will have to be able to maintain it; it's not free, you'll have to pay hosting fees. But if you and your community have come together and figured out a way to organize your responsibilities in a way that feels sustainable, it's certainly worth looking into—and it's certainly worth having it as, *maybe this is our fallback plan. Maybe we'll stick it out on Facebook for the next year or two, but know that if there's another issue of exploitation that crosses the line, we can always regroup elsewhere.*

It's really nice to just know—even if you are still using these social networks—it's great to know that the option exists to escape them, if you really wanted to.





Some of the communities online that you talk about in the book seem healthier than social networks today—like the ECHO community in New York, for example. Do you think there’s some element that they had that we don’t have now? What can make a good community online?

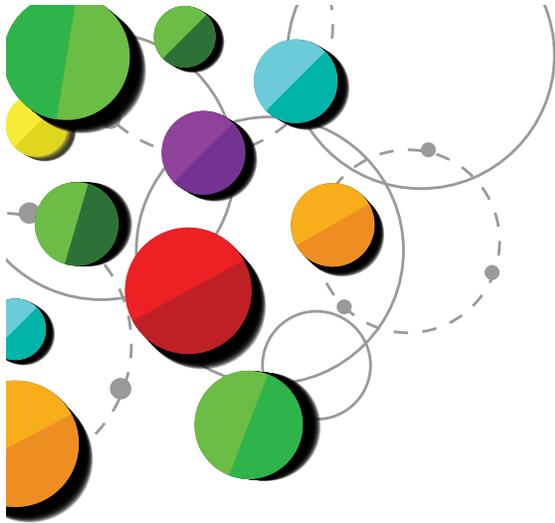
That’s a really great question, because the thing that they had that we don’t have is, they had an internet with an open future. They had an internet at a time when nobody knew what would come of it. The people that belonged to those communities were people who were excited by new things. They were excited by a new way of communicating, of entertainment—“let’s see what we can make of it.” There was no real sense of even what an online community was. So that was in their favour.

But everything about the functionality of ECHO is available today. [It was a] pretty ordinary way of communicating in a forum, sort of like a web forum. You just post a subject and people would respond to it—you can do that on Google groups or a lot of different kinds of forums that you don’t even have to code yourself, you can just set them up online and use them.

So that element is not unusual or it’s not difficult to return to. But the other elements of their community—for one, it was filtered by place, it was a local online community. Everyone was basically based in New York. So they had one thing in common, which was being in New York. Also typically they were interested in art,

and then finally, they had in-person meetings regularly enough that there were enough face-to-face connections made that a real, a true sense of community formed.

With other, earlier, online spaces, because they were so anonymous, because they were without the in-person meet ups, however lovely they might have been at the time, the close-knit community did not form the same way. They did not have their real names, they couldn’t send letters to one another, they couldn’t stay in touch over the years. What I was saying earlier about real names—knowing each other’s real-world identities does count in the depth of the connection you make with someone, the depth of the friendship. It’s not as temporary if you know somebody’s real identity. You’re more likely to just form a longer-lasting friendship. And that they’re still together today, that they’re still closely in touch, you know, this is 30 years on, speaks well of just how natural the community was—but they were still smart about moderating, they were still smart about cancelling people’s accounts if they caused trouble. All of that was present in the community. They did the work.



How do you feel about the role that social media plays in American politics now?

I don't know exactly how to say it. I feel very overwhelmed by that question right now. I feel very overwhelmed by it in general—because this is a very decisive year for [the U.S.]. I read as much as I can about these subjects, but I don't feel ready yet to state how much of a role technology plays. There is a lot of abuse on the level of the platforms, but then there's also a sense of, this technology is just taking off from where broadcast television and newspapers and propaganda over the years already have.

I have a lot of mixed feelings about the actual impact on the election verses the abuse—the abuses you can point out and remark on. I worry sometimes that when we blame these platforms we also give

them a lot of credit. Because these technologies aren't perfect. The idea of surveillance capitalism² is great, but also the way that these platforms survey us is largely imperfect. A lot of the targeted ads that you receive probably have nothing to do with what you're interested in. The classic example—if you buy a mattress, for the next ten months you're going to get mattress ads, even though how many mattresses do people buy?

I feel like we're better off with just pointing to the actual issues of consent and surveillance and privacy, rather than influence, which is a little bit harder to read.

Is there anything you think is missing from conversations about the internet right now? In thinking about the way the media covered social media networks 10 years ago—what's the blind spot now?

The blind spot now, I really feel like, is the issue of the history of these platforms. The history is so recent, and it's something that I can't state enough: I'm not a historian. It's more that I've been writing about the subject for so long. But also, these platforms are new. Facebook is not even 20 years old, and when we talk about it like it's this legacy institution, as old as *The New York Times* or something, that's absolutely not the case. It's a new institution, and it's much more fragile due to its youth than it's sometimes talked about. And when you think about it as a new institution, the opportunities to regulate it, to make it more in the service of its users than in its current state, that feels less daunting. It feels more possible. ■

2 A term coined by Harvard professor Shoshana Zuboff to describe an economic system that collects and commodifies personal data, seen in the rise of targeted online advertising