

The Need and Possibility for Evangelizing Through the Internet

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Abstract

In today's society of technological advancement, evangelizing through the Internet is an adequate tool for proclaiming the Good News. By using the Internet, the Church communicates on a local level to its local church but also on a broader scale at the global level, thus fulfilling its mission of proclaiming the Gospel "to all the nations." The paper talks about the need of using the Internet and social networks for evangelism, as a medium for communicating the message of salvation and hope in Jesus Christ. By analyzing the usage of the Internet in Evangelical churches in Croatia we gain an insight into the current condition and the possibility of a more efficient way of using the new media in proclaiming the Good News.

Introduction

In Matthew 9:16-18 we read the words which can easily apply to our modern times and methods of evangelism: "But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved." The question is, in today's pluralistic secularized world, whether the Internet is becoming an adequate means of evangelism and proclaiming the Good News, regardless of whether the local churches are using the new media or not? If we take a look around and see how the youn-

ger generation is using the modern social media in mutual communication and acquisition of information, we will surely notice that the modern media play a significant role in the lives of those individuals. Also, if we wish to gain a greater presence in society, we will accept some of the modern social platforms on offer today, such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, blogs, Internet chat rooms, or some other ways of achieving social contact.

New media and society

The Internet, as the medium of today, is no longer limited to just young people but is present in all generations. Its presence is more pronounced among the young, but the number of users from the older population is growing daily. Slowly but certainly, the Internet fever is slowly creeping into all levels of society.

The Internet is a communication tool which the Church can use to better present its activities, its mission, and its vision in society. By using the Internet, the preached and written Word of God, prayers, spiritual meditations, and the Gospel in general can reach many people. The practice in local churches is usually such that those communication channels are used which are most common for certain church workers. Those are the typical channels through which people have found out about the Good News, such as the radio or printed materials. However, the fact that some communication channels were useful in the 1980's does not mean they are still equally efficient. We need to consider who is our target group for proclaiming the Gospel and then find a way that will prove most efficient for that particular group.

There is an increasing number of people who think that reading the news on their own mobile devices is much more acceptable, easier, and cheaper than printed newspapers. In the past, the newspapers played an important role as a means of public informing in society. Today, the young people are rightfully asking, "Who even reads printed papers?" A comparative analysis in the dissertation by Franjo Maletić (2008, 289) showed that, globally speaking, the audiences who read printed daily newspapers are on the average older than fifty. The analysis concludes that the printing industry in the daily newspaper market may cease in the next ten years and new communication channels will be found. By adopting new forms of communication and by utilizing new media in proclaiming the Gospel, we may be able to reach the younger generation in a way that is adequate for them. Being acquainted with the modern society that the young people live in will contribute to the efficiency of our evangelism. Uncertainty and relativity are important characteristics of modern society and of the world in general. Everybody doubts everything, even children, as well as adults. There is less and less belief, and more and more questioning. Everything is questioned, from sci-

entific methods to elementary existential basics. There is no more perfect clarity. There are no absolutes.

Postmodernism and its characteristics have left a significant mark on the lifestyle and the behavior of young people who are only beginning to discover, form, and adopt their own worldview. The emphasis is placed upon the present which is not disturbed by metaphysical questions but a present which consists of satisfying momentary desires and needs. Postmodern qualities are characterized by the loss of certainty, by abandoning firm foundations, and by venturing into the unknown. In a world that is so uncertain and all but chaotic, how do we offer the young people any meaning and a faith for the future? How do we present them with responsible freedom; the freedom given by Christ? How do we make them excited about life and offer them hope?

During history, people have been finding their fullness in God and faith in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, the people of today no longer expect faith in God to satisfy their longing for the lost paradise, but science, advancement, and technology. In such a climate, faith is becoming increasingly marginalized and reduced to an exclusively private level.

New Media and Evangelism

Throughout history, the Church has been very successful in adopting new media for the purpose of evangelism. Printing, radio, and television have been used and are still being used for proclaiming the Gospel. Printed media made it possible for the Gospel to spread like never before. Radio added transcontinental character to this speed, and television added picture to the sound, thus making it a very efficient and also expensive medium for spreading the Gospel message. The modern media, such as the Internet and social networks, allow us to unify all the technical capabilities of the media up until now in the cheapest and most creative way. The utilization of the new media makes it possible for the Church to use great opportunities for spreading the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is currently possible to communicate Christ's message of hope and new life to large numbers of people. Therefore, the crucial question is, how do we use the Internet for God's glory?

Effective evangelism requires good communication. Evangelism via the Internet is communicating the Gospel and proclaiming the Good News, the message of salvation and hope, which transforms the sinner's life into a new life that is fulfilled and turned toward eternity. However, like any other type of communication, it should also not be left to chance. The Church communicates with believers, but also with the general public. By using the Internet, the Church communicates on a global scale, as well as local. Modern media such as social networks allow us to send and receive messages; i.e., two-way communication,

exchanging opinions, discussion, and sending text and video messages by utilizing the universal cyber space.

Evangelism involves a whole array of endeavors pertaining to the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ in order to make the offer of salvation, forgiveness of sins, and the freedom of new life in Christ as they serve Him in fellowship with other believers in the Church, more familiar and understandable. Apart from the person's conversion, the Gospel message also includes making disciples who will go on to faithfully live, act, and help in the development of the local congregation. In John's Gospel 6:35 we read that Jesus Christ is the foundation for spreading the Good News, i.e., the Gospel, "*Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.'*" This is why each Christian should have a dynamic faith in the risen Christ, whose Word reaches into the innermost corners of human beings and alters the condition of individuals by forgiving their sins and releasing them from the burden of guilt before God.

Michael Green emphasized that "Evangelism is not human propaganda. God became involved in it when He sent His one and only Son. Jesus Christ thought it was so important that He made it the center of His last commandment. The Holy Spirit was given with the purpose of equipping the Church for witnessing. Evangelizing is an active expression of God's love in the fallen world" (1979, 15). This is why the church should be open and focused on evangelizing their own nominal believers - *ad intra* - but even more so on evangelizing the society which it is a part of - *ad extra*.

In today's globalized world of mass media, Internet, and social networks, Christians and the Church need to utilize modern communication channels in proclaiming the Good News. The purpose is to reach people who are looking for "the way and meaning" in their life and to point them to the salvation in Christ, which has eternal value. By receiving Christ as our Lord and master of our personal life, a bridge is built between God and man. New life is born in peace with God. Christ's reflection and conforming to him in everyday Christian life is becoming a visible sign of belonging to Christ's body - to his Church. It is each Christ's disciple's mission to be "salt and light" of the world; to be a clear road sign in society, pointing others towards Christ through their life and actions.

In Matthew 28:19 we see Jesus' commandment and the call to evangelism to His disciples, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.*" The Good News of Christ the Savior who brought salvation is meant for all those who would believe in him, whether Jew or pagan. They need to receive this message, accept it, and live by it. The new media allow us to transfer the message, which is the initial purpose of evangelism. Growing in faith requires true fellowship with brothers and sisters

in the local church. Digital virtual relationship that is offered by the new media does not allow for development of discipleship and spiritual growth in faith. The real relationship and exchanging spiritual experiences between believers in a congregation has no alternative. Through his actions, the Holy Spirit enlightens the sinner's mind, helping him understand the message of salvation. The gift of eternal life, which is given to the sinner in Jesus Christ, needs to be received by faith. Through his sin, man has ruined his relationship with God, causing an immediate communication breakdown. By confessing his sins and entering into a relationship with his Savior, a connection is established between God and man. Man is no longer alone but is now in fellowship with God and he becomes a witness for Christ. In Matthew 28,20, Jesus said that he is with us "*always, even to the end of the age.*" It is an encouraging fact to know that God is always "online." He is always there and always responds to those who seek Him.

By using today's modern technology, it is possible to proclaim Christ to the ends of the earth, but it is necessary to encourage each born-again Christian to join the local church and to become a disciple who will follow Christ faithfully. A witness of Christ is filled with the Holy Spirit, which results in the desire to act towards proclaiming the Gospel. In the Acts of the Apostles 1:8, Jesus said to his disciples that he'll enable them to be his witnesses and task them with going to the lost parts of the world, "*but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.*" A witness of Christ uses all available tools in proclaiming the Gospel, which includes the new media.

Social Networks

There are four basic types of websites: family-themed, territorial, professional (career, education), and relational (focused on friendships). It is a prevailing opinion that the latter two are dominant in urban environments, and the first two are dominant in rural environments. Depending on the group, the first or the second types of social networks will be used. The church can utilize all types of social networks in its work.

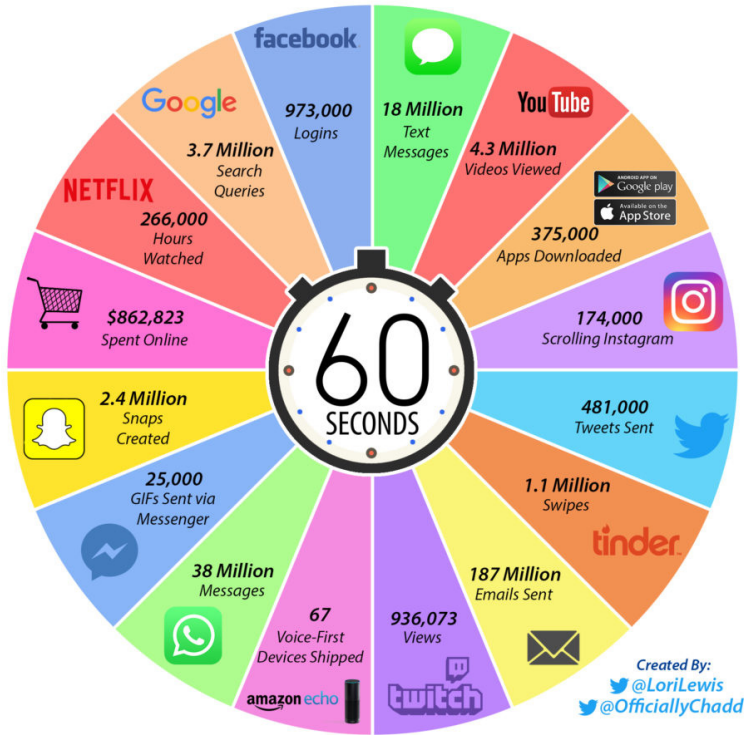
The number of social network users is growing exponentially on a daily basis. This is why the Church's online presence in the digital world is extremely important for believers. Social media such as Facebook can be used as effective platform for evangelizing, for informing people about church events, and a tool for developing relationships between believers and all those interested. During the last few years many analysts have warned that Facebook will have the same fate as MySpace, and that it will eventually become boring and fall into oblivion. However, that has not happened. The number of users kept constantly increasing

and the data regarding the number of users published by Facebook in January 2015 shows that in 2014, the number of Facebook users outgrew the total population of China, which is the most populated country in the world. According to data published by Huffington Post (Stenovc 2015), the number of users who visit Facebook at least once a month was over 1.39 billion by the end of 2014, whereas the population of China at the time was 1.36 billion. In 2014, Facebook registered an increase in the number of users who visit the network daily by 18%, i.e., more than 890 million (Facebook, January 2015), which is almost twice as many as the population of Europe, which was 513 million in 2018 (Eurostat, July 2018). According to data from the third quarter of 2018 (Statistica, 2018), the number of Facebook users in the world was 2.271 billion, which is almost twice as many as four years earlier, while the population of China was 1.391 billion in 2018 (National Dana). According to the report about the use of social media in the USA in 2018, there is an evident increase in usage when compared to the previous year. Over 73% adults use YouTube, while 68% adults use Facebook (Smith and Anderson 2018).

Regardless of the large prevalence of social media, the Internet cannot replace actual friendships. Actual fellowship in church on Sunday cannot be replaced with online church services in the comfort of one's room. Regardless of the potential negative aspects of social media, Lemoyne College professors, Krystine Batcho and Michael S. Broder agree that social media has more positive things to offer to society than negative ones, stating the importance of the way in which the news is reported on a global scale through social media. Batcho stated that, by using social networks, "you can achieve instant social contact and connect people from all over the world, with people who have different worldviews, religion, and political stances" (Graham 2014). By using social media as tools for achieving contact between people, we have the possibility to communicate the message of salvation in Jesus Christ.

The Internet has become a medium for sharing vast quantities of information in a relatively short time period. This is shown in an illustration of millions of people using various Internet social networks all over the world. Users of YouTube, Google, WhatsApp, and Facebook click their devices almost 27 million times in a minute.

2018 *This Is What Happens In An Internet Minute*



Source: Fred Jacob. *Wait an Internet Minute*

All this data speaks to the fact that modern media are extremely important in communication and their significance is on the rise. It is therefore crucial for Church to have a presence in the cyber world. Each local church needs to have a developed IT communication strategy. This strategy should define the quantity and information exchange via web pages, blogs, social networks, as well as evangelistic and spiritual contents which would be available to all users. The goal is to develop such an evangelism strategy which will connect potential believers with the Church or Christ, enabling them to get in touch with the Good News and to develop a relationship with Christ and with the Church as a whole. The Internet and social networks can be used as a medium through which the hurt and burdened people would be able to get in touch with a pastoral caregiver who would hear them out and point them to the one who is “the Alpha and the Omega... the beginning and the end” (Rev. 22:13).

Social networks can be successfully used for increasing the overall presence and the influence of the Church in the world, and for leading potential believers towards fellowship in a local church. Also, these networks can be used for deepening relationships between existing believers and for connecting them in fellowship. In this way, believers can gather around various religious programs and projects, thus building up the Church together.

Social networks have an impact on publicity and social recognition because generating Internet pages and the presence on social networks help present the church community to the general public. Social networks are a great tool for increasing the Church's presence in its mission with the purpose of spreading the Good News and the Kingdom of God for the Lord's glory. Christians used to travel the world in order to take the Gospel to the remotest parts of the world. Today, this option is available to everyone who has an Internet connection.

Using the modern media helps us to make and maintain friendships with people all over the world. The Church must not remain hidden within its four walls; instead, it needs to be open and present in cyberspace, which is understood by the world of today. Maybe the results of our hard work will not be obvious immediately, but we need to remember that the outcome is in the Lord's power, while the Church is called to obedience and perseverance in the labor of love. And love is reflected through dialogue and communication.

The Analysis of Use of Social Network in the Church

A survey conducted by Paul Steinbrueck (October 2014) in August of 2010 on a sample of 193 examinees reveals five specific opportunities that the Church may use in order to improve its usage of Facebook and its connection with its members. Most examinees considered that their church was not doing enough in terms of using Facebook. While these results may be interpreted as being negative, they still reveal great possibilities for the Church in using social networks. 39% of examinees rated the use of Facebook in church as weak (1-3 on a scale of 10), 41% of examinees rated the use of Facebook in church as mediocre (4-7 on a scale of 10), and 10% of examinees rated the use of Facebook in church as good (8-10 on a scale of 10).

It was decided that the opportunities which enable the use of social networks include:

1) *Increased communication*

The results from examinees revealed that most of them wanted to see their church become more active on Facebook. 54% of examinees pointed out that they would like to see their church posts on Facebook more frequently; 13% of examinees noted that they would like their church

posts to be more frequent at the moment; and only 1% of them stated that they would like their church posts to be less frequent.

2) *Missionary and evangelistic activities*

Another opportunity for churches is including believers into individual missionary work through Facebook. 87% of examinees agrees or agrees strongly with the statement that “they would join the church Facebook group if they would also be involved in its mission work.”

3) *Simple connecting*

The third opportunity for churches is helping people connect with each other. 88% examinees stated that they use Facebook for keeping in touch with family and friends. However, only 53% stated that they use Facebook for keeping in touch with friends from church and for being up to date with local church events. The gap between these two groups is 35% examinees, which consists of believers who are connected with their friends on Facebook, but not with their friends from church.

4) *Evangelism*

The fourth opportunity for churches is encouraging and training believers in the church to develop relationships with non-Christians and to show them God’s grace and love. Only 45% of examinees stated that they are working towards that goal.

5) *Facebook Ads*

The fifth opportunity is using Facebook ads in order to reach people in their society. While there are more examinees who do not use Facebook ads (or did not answer the question) than those who do, 54% would recommend to churches that they start using Facebook ads, and only 7% examinees were opposed to it.

This research reveals that there are numerous opportunities which are available to church leadership and to believers in general. A large number of local churches do not use web pages at all, even though they can be created in such a way to offer acceptable contents for all age groups in the church. Along with some basic information about the church, the page can also contain a section for younger people with various interesting things and games, a section for young families with advice on parenting and overcoming problems in marriage, selected topics for young people, lectures for adults, Christian movies, selected sermons, etc. In creating a web page, special attention needs to be paid to quality structure, contents, and pleasant design. It is just as important that the domain would have a name that is easy to remember and that the page is optimized (SEO). The Internet can be used as a marketing tool to help us present church events, ideas, and future plans to the general public.

Today’s social networks have been created with different groups of users in

mind. Facebook is more of a friendly network where people exchange their events and everyday experiences, while LinkedIn is a network based around professional vocations and fields of interest. Chat rooms and forums are pages where various stances may be expressed and debated, but they can also serve as places for spreading positivism and hope, pointing to Christ. Social networks are platforms which allow for the exchange of thoughts, viewpoints, images, stories, events, videos, messages, and links, within the framework of two-way communication. Social media offer excellent possibilities for direct evangelism. A research called, *The Social Media Revolution* (Qualman 2015) published in 2015 uses data from Qualman's book, *Socialnomics*, and emphasizes that:

- 50% all economic trades involve mobile drivers
- In first place by population we have Facebook, 2. China, 3. India, 4. Tencent, 5. WhatsApp, 6. Google+ 7. LinkedIn, 8. USA
- Over 50% world population is under 30 years of age, which speaks in favor of using new technologies in communication.

Apart from computers, which are used for communication, there is an increase in using smartphones, which can also be used as platforms for proclaiming the Gospel message and Gospel-related contents. By networking on social networks, an opportunity is created for the evangelizing process. Exposing the same person to the Gospel message through different communication channels increases the odds of that person committing their life to Christ and beginning their walk of faith.

In Matthew 4:18-20, Jesus gathered His disciples and told them that He would make them "fishers of men." Later on, in Matthew 13:47, we find a verse where Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a dragnet, "*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind.*" We can compare this dragnet to today's World Wide Web. We can see an example of using the Internet for evangelism on *Global Media Outreach's* website (<http://gmo.globalmediaoutreach.com/>). The website was established in 2004 by *Campus Crusade for Christ*. GMO has the vision for using the Internet, mobile devices, and social networks in spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ to all people living on the planet with the purpose of evangelizing each individual by the year 2020. GMO offers an online Bible, seminars, and discipleship courses. There is an interesting statement by Walt Wilson, CEO and founder of GMO, and former CEO of Apple. During the 2010 Biola University iSummit, he stated, "We're the first generation in all of human history which holds in its hands the technology which can reach every man, woman, or child on the Earth by 2020." (Vu 2010).

It is evident that this goal is slowly being achieved. Wilson clarified that the purpose of this mission is not only for people to make an online decision for Christ, but also to make disciples out of the new believers and to connect them with the

local Church. We can use this kind of example on the local level as well, where the local church can use the online approach and make a difference in the community and its people, where it is called to fulfill the Church's Great Commission.

In 2013, the *Global Media Outreach* website offered more than 300 million evangelistic presentation, including making more than 2 million presentations in a single day. 34 million people made a decision to receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior through GMO's websites, which included them in the conversion process. The statistical data shows that God is using this technology in order to reach the lost who are seeking salvation. Today, the new mission field is no longer some distant part of the world, but homes of people who live in our immediate vicinity, as well as those who live all over the world.

The Analysis of Usage of the Internet and Social Networks in Reformation-Heritage Local Churches

A research conducted in 2018¹ included the following members of the Protestant Evangelical Council in the Republic of Croatia (<https://pev.com.hr/>): the Church of Christ (<http://kristove-crkve.hr/>), the Evangelical-Pentecostal Church (<http://www.epc.hr/>), the Baptist Churches Alliance (<https://www.baptist.hr/>), and the Church of God (<https://crkvabozja.hr/>). The analysis revealed that each religious congregation was using a central website with relevant information. One of the members was also using Facebook as an information-exchange social network. However, on a local level the congregations were only using the Internet and social networks partially. Out of all 52 members of the Baptist Churches Alliance in Croatia, only 12 local churches have a website, while 22 of them use Facebook. Six of them are using both the Web and Facebook, and two of them have websites which are not being updated. So out of all members, 56% of them utilizes some form of modern communication. From 53 members of the Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Croatia, seventeen local churches have websites, while nineteen of them use Facebook. Nine churches use both the Web and Facebook, while eleven websites are not being updated. From all the members, 51% of them utilize modern means of communication. From twelve members of the Church of Christ in Croatia, four local churches have a website, while eight of them use Facebook. Two churches use both the Web and Facebook. 75% of all members use modern means of communication.

Out of all eight members of the Church of God in Croatia, only the congre-

1 The research was conducted by Danijel Časni based on the analysis of available data on the PEV website and the Google search engine in December 2018.

gation in Vinkovci has both a website and a Facebook page where they post news and events relating to all other congregations.

This research shows that there is a lot of room for improvement and development in terms of informing the public about the life and work of local churches. When it comes to bigger congregations which are members of the PEV, almost one half of the local congregations do not use the Internet or social networks.

In the same way that the Internet redefined economy and business, it will also have a significant future role in the Church. There is a need for creating quality online programs for evangelizing and discipleship, which will encourage a more active involvement from pastors and believers. There are available tools, an online network, and contents, and it takes more “fishers” who will be able to utilize the opportunities offered by modern social media and become “fishers of men.”

Proclaiming Jesus Christ as Savior should be every Christian’s imperative. Christ needs to be proclaimed to everyone and everywhere in today’s world. He needs to be recognized in every true believer. The apostle Paul wrote this to the Corinthian church: *“Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures”* (1 Cor. 15:1-4). This is the Gospel message. This is the message that needs to be preached to all people. In order to make a difference in society, change needs to take place in every individual. That is why the Internet, as a place of social dynamics, can be utilized as a place where man meets man, and man meets God.

Conclusion

The Internet, as the medium of today, is present in all age groups. By using it, new possibilities for proclaiming the Gospel of Lord Jesus Christ in today’s globalized world of mass media, the Internet, and social networks are being opened for the Church. Since the number of the new media users is on constant rise, the purpose of using modern methods in spreading the Good News is to reach out to people who are looking for the meaning of life and to point them towards the eternally precious salvation in Christ. Social networks are characterized by two-way communication, and the Church’s online presence in the digital world is extremely important. Social media may be an effective platform for evangelizing, sharing news about Church events, and a tool for developing relationships between believers, and with the society which they work in. By generating a church Internet website and by its presence in social media, the congregation and its activities are

being presented and promoted to the general public, and its evangelistic contents may encourage individuals to come to know Christ. A situational analysis of religious congregations in the Republic of Croatia which belong to the PEV revealed that the advantages of using the Internet and social networks have not been fully utilized. This shows that there is much room for progress and development of new media in the life and activities of a local church.

There are tools, an online network, and salvific contents available for evangelizing, and we need as many “fishers” who will use the advantages of today’s social media in order to become “fishers of men.”

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Translated from Croatian by Davor Edelinski

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Potreba i mogućnost evangelizacije putem interneta

Sažetak

Evangelizacija putem interneta, u današnjem društvu tehnološkog napretka, primjeren je alat za naviještanje Radosne vijesti. Upotrebom interneta, Crkva komunicira na lokalnoj razini u svojoj mjesnoj crkvi, ali i šire na globalnoj razini, ostvarujući pritom svoje poslanje naviještanja Evanđelja „svim narodima“. U članku se govori o potrebi upotrebe interneta i društvenih mreža u službi evangelizacije, kao medija za prijenos poruke spasenja i nade u Isusu Kristu. Analizom upotrebe interneta u evanđeoskim crkvama u Hrvatskoj, pruža se uvid u trenutno stanje i mogućnost učinkovitijeg korištenja novih medija u naviještanju Radosne vijesti.