

# THE USE OF THE INTERNET AND DIGITAL MEDIA BY INDONESIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH: THE CASES OF HIERARCHIES SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNT AND LAY CATHOLICS SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNT

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**ABSTRACT.** The Internet is connecting people and organizations around the world in new ways, changing the way we relate to one another, find resources, share information, and form communities. These changes also have implications for church institutions and Catholics in Indonesia. This article provides an overview of the use of the Internet, social media, and digital media in the Catholic church. The study identifies (1) characteristics of social media accounts managed by the official hierarchy of the Catholic Church versus social accounts managed lay Catholics groups, (2) and the role of the Internet and social media in the Catholic church in Indonesia. This study concludes that Catholic Church accepts and has positive hopes for the presence of the Internet because it offers potential or opportunities for proclaiming the Catholic faith. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought fresh air to change the Indonesian Catholic Church to going digital. If before the Covid-19 pandemic, the catechesis was mostly carried out by hierarchies, the presence of the Internet and digital media allows ordinary people or Catholic laymen to actualize and implement the Catholic faith in the digital world. This study found that there were differences in the characteristics or approaches of the use of social media accounts managed by the official hierarchy of the Catholic Church and accounts managed by lay Catholics groups.

**KEYWORDS:** internet; social media; catholics; bishop; diocese, Komsos.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Internet is connecting people and organizations around the world in new ways, changing the way we relate to one another, find resources, share information, and form communities. These changes also have implications for religious institutions, including Catholics Indonesia.

As a plural country, Indonesia presents an interesting phenomenon related to the use of the Internet and religion. Indonesia has a significant growth of Internet users. At the same time, Indonesia is a very religious country. Indonesians are among the most religious people in the world. The Pew Research Center survey (2020) states that almost all Indonesian respondents (96 percent) stated that believing in God is necessary to be moral and have good values. Indonesian law guarantees freedom of religion, although in practice, citizens must adhere to one of the six officially recognized religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, or Protestantism (Iswara, 2020).

Since the 1960s, the Catholic Church has paid special attention to social communication and mass media. In 1967, Pope Paul VI launched the first World Communications Day. The Pope calls the attention of "all persons of good will to the vast and complex phenomena of modern media such as the press, cinema, radio and television" (Balonas, 2011). Pope John Paul II is arguably the pope who led the adaptation of the church to modern technology. Vatican press officials also use SMS messages to send news bulletins to journalists' phones. The Church also uses cell phone SMS to send daily messages based on papal speeches and daily homily.

In 1990, Pope John Paul II wrote an article entitled "The Christian message in today's computer culture." The Vatican launched the Holy See website in 1995. This was followed by the launch of the Vatican Museums

Website in 2003 which provides online access to 500-year-old art collections as well as virtual tours of the Vatican Museums. The Pope has his own email address (john\_paul\_ii@vatican.va) (Vries, 2005).

On November 22, 2001, Pope John Paul II made history on the Internet when he published an official document on the Internet and sent it to the targeted communities located in other parts of the world. After signing the document "The Church in Oceania," the Holy Father was in front of a computer containing the email address of the Oceania diocese. With the click of a button, the document is sent to its recipient (Pope sends, 2001).

In his Address to the Celebration of the World Day of Peace (2001) Pope John Paul II said "Use of the internet can help people use freedom and democracy responsibly, expanding the range of options available in various areas of life. Broadening the horizons of education and culture, removing boundaries, fighting for the progress of humanity in various ways" (Foley, 2002). The development of the digital world, especially the internet, provides many opportunities for human life. In principle, the Catholic Church views positively the existence of the Internet and social media.

In 2002, the Holy Father John Paul II immediately saw the internet as a new tool for evangelism, the internet "provides excellent opportunities for evangelism, as long as it is based on competence and a clear awareness of its strengths and weaknesses" In 2006 Pope Benedict XVI, the successor to Pope John Paul II, raised the theme "Media: Networks of Communication, Fellowship and Cooperation".

In 2009, he wrote an essay on "New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue, and Friendship." In 2010, he raised the same thing: "Priests and pastoralists in the Digital World: New media, means of spreading the Word. In 2011, he titled "Truth, advertising and authenticity of life in the digital age." Consistently, Benedict XVI encourages the church to take its place in the digital space. This has been emphasized by the Vatican since the early 1990s. Supported by this assumption, the Church is confidently getting on the Internet, using websites and social networks to reach the digital generation (Kerckhove, in Balonas, 2011). The seriousness of the Catholic Church to enter the Internet is exemplified directly by Pope Francis who opened accounts on Instagram and Twitter in 2012. Instagram account of Pope Francis @franciscus has 8.9 M followers (28/5/2022). Twitter account @pontifex followed by 18.9 M followers (28/5/2022).

This article provides an overview of the use of the Internet, social media, and digital media in the Catholic church environment. The study wanted to compare the differences in approach between accounts managed by the official hierarchy of the Catholic Church and accounts managed by Catholics or lay people. The research approach is descriptive quantitative with online document research by identifying the number of followers of social media accounts managed by the Catholic Church hierarchy and social media accounts managed by Catholic laymen.

## **2 INDONESIAN CATHOLICS CHURCH AND THE INTERNET**

The presence and introduction of the Internet in Indonesia cannot be separated from the community of Catholics youth, especially those who are studying abroad. In the era of 1987-1988, Indonesian students at Berkeley, United States formed the first Indonesian mailing list via email [indonesians@janus.berkeley.edu](mailto:indonesians@janus.berkeley.edu). They use the UC Berkeley server developed by Eka Ginting, an Indonesian student who is currently studying at the University of Seattle. The mailing list is the most strategic medium that allows Indonesians to interact and collaborate. Allows many Indonesian students to be able to interact with other people. The initial discussions were quite constructive and had a nationalist spirit. In 1989, heated discussions on religious issues began to appear on the mailing list [indonesians@janus.berkeley.edu](mailto:indonesians@janus.berkeley.edu).

The mailing list Isnet (the Islamic Network) was born from the efforts of two Indonesian students in the United States specifically for Muslim students (Indonesia). The Isnet mailing list is arguably the most active mailing list, with an established organization, and spanning national and international networks. Members are divided into smaller mailing lists: (1) [is-lam@isnet.org](mailto:is-lam@isnet.org) (discussions on Islam) and (2) [dialog@isnet.org](mailto:dialog@isnet.org) (discussions between Muslims and non-Muslims). Christian groups create a mailing list: [paroki@paroki.org](mailto:paroki@paroki.org) (only for Indonesian Catholics), then there is the [paroki\\_asia@wave.ec.t.kanazawa-u.ac.jp](mailto:paroki_asia@wave.ec.t.kanazawa-u.ac.jp) mailing list (only for Indonesian Catholics in Asia Pacific), and the [iccn mailing list @dbi.informatik.uni-muenchen.de](mailto:iccn@dbi.informatik.uni-muenchen.de) (only for Indonesian Christian computer network).

Parokinet ([paroki@uiuc.edu](mailto:paroki@uiuc.edu)) was launched on Christmas Day 1991 from the University of Illinois server by Pastor Alex Soesilo Wijoyo, a Columbia University student. This mailing list, which was originally created to discuss Catholicism, ended up as a rich source of political information and an active forum for political discussion (Lim, 2005).

By 1992, Isnet was operating with its own servers, starting with the first server Sun SPARClassic II purchased with a fundraiser. This server is located at the Electronic Engineering Laboratory of the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, and is managed by Budi Rahardjo, with the domain name [isnet.ee.umanitoba.ca](http://isnet.ee.umanitoba.ca). The current domain name, [Isnet.org](http://Isnet.org), was registered under this server in May 1994, and thus the list name was changed to [is-lam@isnet.org](mailto:is-lam@isnet.org). Isnet is a pioneer of the Islamic community on the Internet which in fact was initiated by Indonesian Islamic students residing abroad (Mahdi, 2002).

### **3 THE INTERNET AND PASTORAL: STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS**

Internet and multimedia provide a new challenge for the Catholics church in proclaiming the gospel. According to F.X. Didik Bagiyowinadi (2010), Internet and multimedia have strengths and opportunities for pastoral care. First, the operational cost of evangelism via the internet is relatively cheaper and has little risk. Reporting through multimedia, such as the internet, can reach a much wider range of reporting subjects and has little risk. Digital reporting through the internet can also be accessed by fanatical city dwellers, or in remote areas if there is an internet connection. Second, multimedia can help disseminate information and preach the church, and can even help greet those who are less accessible. The Internet really "brings advantages from a religious perspective. They carry news and information about religious events, ideas, and personalities. They serve as vehicles for evangelization and catechesis. Third, the internet offers direct and immediate access to important religious and spiritual resources, such as large libraries and museums, places of worship, teaching magisterium documents, writings of church fathers and poets, and religious wisdom from various ages. They can also contact and affirm each other in virtual communities. Fourth, it is true that the internet cannot replace the real interpersonal community, the reality of the incarnation of the sacraments and liturgies, or the direct proclamation of the Gospel, but the internet can complement it, draw people to a living experience of faith, and enrich the religious life of its users.

On the other hand, multimedia and the Internet also have limitations as pastoral tools. First, pastoral through multimedia and specifically the internet, can function well if there is a network and access to the internet, either through a personal computer or accessed from an internet cafe. Second, there needs to be skilled and interested personnel to manage the web so that the managed sites are kept up to date and appear attractive. Various spiritual sites that seem perfunctory and not taken seriously are also not attractive, especially if the contents seem clichéd. Skilled and professional personnel are increasingly needed when we want to work on other multimedia, such as computer animation, VCD, etc. Third, there is a demand for multimedia so that the content of writing on the web is not too long, only about one page, which of course limits the depth of the discussion. Presentation on websites tends to be simpler and lighter when compared to books. Fourth, the writings on spiritual sites also tend to be relative in terms of truth. Unlike the book, the writing on the website will never have zero obstat and imprimatur. Fifth, personal data on the internet tends to be anonymous or disguised, in contrast to direct pastoral care. This needs to be realized in assessing and using the background of those who access spiritual sites.

### **4 THE CATHOLICS CHURCH AND THE INTERNET IN A TIME OF COVID-19 PANDEMY**

The Catholic Church in Indonesia has been familiar with the internet since the beginning of its existence (in the 1990s). However, the existence and role of the Internet in the Catholic church in Indonesia is still far from being expected. That situation has changed, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world, including Indonesia. Covid-19 began to spread, the Catholic Church continued to carry out prayers/masses, but followed health protocols, for example eliminating handshakes. As the situation worsened, the Catholic Church suspended regular services. The priests lead without congregations, and broadcast through social media platforms especially YouTube live streaming so that people can participate from their safe places, including during Holy Week.

COVID-19 provides an opportunity for the Catholic Church to do new and creative ways by going digital. The Covid-19 pandemic has made the Catholic Church, especially the Social Communications Commission (Komsos) and the Catholic media wake up from a long slumber. Because the Church is closed and experiencing a lock-down, the only alternative is to do worship, especially Holy Mass online. Almost every Catholic Church provides video streaming equipment to be able to do mass online. Suddenly, every church finally activates YouTube and social media accounts. In addition, there was a massive movement of Catholic priests, and nuns to use the Internet and social media as a medium for interacting and evangelizing. They create accounts on Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, and others. Young people, of course, become the motor of change or

movement in the Internet world because they are more Internet literate and better understand the characteristics of the Internet and social media.

#### 4.1 Catholic Church Social Media Official Accounts vs Lay Catholic Groups Social Media Accounts

##### 4.1.1 Catholic Institution of Social Media Accounts

The official institutions of the Catholic Church and several the Catholic hierarchy (bishops, priests) have social media accounts. The data shows that the most followers of the Diocese's YouTube account and Instagram account are dominated by the diocese in Java Island (Tables 1 and 2). The pattern is slightly different for the number of followers of the bishop's personal Instagram account, where the most followers are the Archbishop of Semarang, Mgr. Robertus Rubiyatmoko, followed by bishops from the island of Borneo.

Table 1: Youtube Account of Communication and Social Commission (KOMSOS) of the Diocese level (Data 18 November 2021)

Institution	Followers
Archdiocese of Jakarta	221000
Diocese of Bandung	194000
Archdiocese of Semarang	154000
Dioncese of Malang	41400
Komsos KWI	38100

Table 2: Instagram Account of Communication and Social Commission (KOMSOS) of the Diocese level (Data 18 November 2021)

Institution	Followers
Archdiocese of Semarang	17000
Komsos KWI	9310
Diocese of Bandung	5741
Archdiocese of Jakarta	5526
Archdiocese of Pontianak	4803

Table 3: Instagram Account of Bishops (Data 18 November 2021)

Accounts	Followers
@mgr.robertus.rubiyatmoko	58700
@mgr.agus	6179
@mgr_paulinusyanolla_msf	2512
@mgrpiusrianaprapdi	1784
@mgr.ignatius.suharyo	1651

A few Instagram and Twitter accounts owned by priests are dominated by young priests. The most Twitter followers are Father Benny Susetyo Pr's account who serves as Special Staff to the Chairman of the Steering Committee of the Pancasila Ideology Development Agency (BPIP).

However, on November 22, 2021, the @susetyopr account was deactivated. Previously, one of the status uploads on the Twitter account @susestyopr had gone viral. In his tweet, the account promoted a YouTube channel that discussed the push for the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) to improve itself. The title is, "MUI Must Improve Don't Become a Nest of Radical Groups".

Table 4: Indonesian Priest's Instagram Account  
(Data 18 November 2021)

Accounts	Followers
@mohary.bdg	61400
@harnoleonardus	20000
@Romoderrysaba	11900
@romo_gandhi	8628
@Kristiadipr	8198

Table 5: Indonesian Priest's Twitter Account  
(Data 18 November 2021)

Accounts	Followers
@Susetyopr	26000
@ZuAndreas	13700
@Edyprasscj	11100
@RomoKristiadipr	10400
@marco_svd	10300

On the YouTube, there are several channels developed of Catholics priests. A YouTube account that is followed by many followers is an account that contains catechesis or teachings of the Catholic Church that are presented in an interesting, simple, and not patronizing manner.

Table 6: Indonesian Priest's YouTube Channel  
(Data 18 November 2021)

Accounts	Followers
Bible Learning With Father Josep Susanto	223000
Romo Ndeso	82200
Katkit (romo istimoer bayu aji)	78600
Romo Alvons Kolo Channel	57900
Mea Cvlp	46050

#### 4.1.2 Social Media Account of Catholic Lay Groups

It is interesting to compare the number of followers of official accounts or those managed by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and 'unofficial' accounts or those managed by Catholics or lay people. The data shows that accounts managed by lay Catholics have a higher number of followers, and they are logged on almost all types of social media.

Table 7: YouTube Channel Developed by Catholic Lay Groups  
(Data 18 November 2021)

Accounts	Followers
katolikku keren	235000
Hidup TV	165000
Sahabat Katolik	150000
Katolikpedia	125000
Suara Katekis	98000

Table 8: Instagram Account Developed by Catholic Lay Groups  
(Data 18 November 2021)

Accounts	Followers
@Katolikvidgram	219000
@Sahabat Katolik	214000
@Hitsomk	182000
@Instakatolik	171000
@katolikmedia	157000

Table 9: Twitter Account Developed by Catholic Lay Groups  
(Data 18 November 2021)

Accounts	Followers
katolik_ku	151000
katolik_garis_lucu	141800
Katolik Indonesia	6149
Komsoskwi	5528
Omknet	4258

Table 10: Facebook Page Developed by Catholic Lay Groups  
(Data 18 November 2021)

Accounts	Followers
Katolik Itu Indah	647300
Tradisikatolik	524000
Gerejakatolik	501900
Facebook Katolik	341100
Kekuatan Doa Rosario Katolik	289600

In general, there are differences in characteristics and approaches between social media accounts managed by institutions/hierarchies and social media accounts managed by Catholic Lay Groups as shown in Table 11.

Table 11: Hierarchies Official Social Media Account vs Lay Catholics Groups Social Media Account

Types	Catholic Church Hierarchy of Social Media Accounts (Official)	Catholic Lay Group Social Media Accounts (Un-official)
Characteristics or Approaches	Formal, rigid, serious, teaching, like a sermon in the pulpit, minimal interaction.	Informal, interactive, like chatting in the market, comment or reply more, creative.
Contents	Catechetical Content, Devotionals, Scriptures, Catechism, Birthday Greetings.	Catechism, social issues, current issues.
Followers	Fewers	More

## 5 THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

From the practice of Internet and social media use in Catholic Church in Indonesia, there are four important roles that could be identified. First, the Internet and social media becomes a medium for the new style of catechesis. Catechesis is one form of carrying out the task of proclaiming the Gospel mandated by Jesus Christ. Catechism is the formation of children, youth, and adults in the faith, including the transmission of Christian teachings. Catechesis is generally administered in a systematic manner, with the aim of ushering listeners into the fullness of the Christian life (Catechesi Tradendae 18). Catechesis is the act of teaching and knowledge imparted by the teacher.

The internet and social media become tools to spread the good news with new styles and ways: more interactive and less patronizing. This is exemplified by the Instagram @katolikmedia. In one post, this account explains what Catholics should know about the Eucharist and whether when praying the Lord's Prayer, should people join hands? Other accounts, e.g. Katolik Garis Lucu created Funny Cross Word (Teka Teki Santuyy) about who decides someone to be a Saint?



Figure 1: Instagram feed about Catechesis  
Source: Instagram @katolikmedia



Figure 2: Instagram feed about Catechesis  
Source: Instagram @katolik\_garis\_lucu

Second, the Internet and social media build relationships and interactions among fellow Catholics, people of different religions, including public or government officials. Interaction with fellow Catholics that are cross-regional or parish develop a Catholic-based virtual community. Interaction with people of other religions aims to build mutual understanding and a tolerant attitude that underlies cooperation and togetherness. Interaction with government officials build egalitarian relationships and remove bureaucratic barriers.



Figure 2: Interaction between Katolik Garis Lucu (Catholics) and NU Garis Lucu (Moslem)  
Source: Twitter @KatolikG and @NUgarislucu

Third, the Internet and social media become a medium for meeting and fighting discourse to build dialectics. Social media is an open space, so anyone can convey different attitudes, ideologies, and perspectives. Those who have the same views will support each other and gather (the phenomenon of filter bubbles and echo chambers) and together 'attack' enemies or people with different views. Meetings or encounters between different discourses can result in a compromise or otherwise a cyberbalkanization. For example, there are differences in views between groups who support the Second Vatican Council and those who reject the Second Vatican Council.

Fourth, the presence of the Internet and social media makes the institutions of the Catholic Church more open. Digital media makes access to information easier. Therefore, the Church is also required to be more open and present in digital media/social media. Cases that occur within the Church will quickly and easily be accessed and brought to the attention of the public. Cases can no longer be covered and must be resolved openly.



Figure 3: Twitter Post and Facebook post related to sexual abuse in Catholic Church.  
Source: Twitter and Facebook



## 6 CONCLUSION

The Catholic Church put a positive hope on the presence of the Internet because it offers opportunities for the proclamation of Catholic faith. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought fresh air to change the Indonesian Catholic Church to going digital. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, catechesis was mostly carried out by hierarchies. The presence of the Internet and digital media allows ordinary people or Catholic laymen to actualize and implement the Catholic faith in the digital world.

This study found differences in the characteristics, approaches, and content presented by social media accounts managed by the Catholics church hierarchy and accounts managed by Catholics lay group. The practice of using the Internet and social media among the Catholic Church in Indonesia shows four important roles. First, the medium for the new style of catechesis. The internet and social media become tools to spread good news with new styles and ways: more interactive, but less patronizing. Second, to build relationships and interactions with fellow Catholics, people of different religions, including public/government officials. Third, the medium for meeting and fighting discourse to build dialectics. Social media is an open space, so anyone can convey different attitudes, ideologies, perspectives. Meetings and encounters between discourses can result in a compromise or otherwise a cyberbalkanization. Fourth, the presence of the Internet and social media makes the institutions of the Catholic Church more open. Digital media makes access to information easier. Therefore, the Church is also required to be more open and present in digital media or social media.

## 7 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Catholic Church needs to master the management, marketing, social media management and digital literacy for lay people and hierarchies. Catholic Church needs to pay attention on the potential of the Internet to build relationships in digital communities.
2. Church hierarchy needs to be present and greet netizens to direct and remind if something goes off track or provokes conflicts.
3. Catholic Church must change its approach, which so far tends to preach in the pulpit to talk in the market. Social media is synonymous with interactivity (two-way communication). If the approach is one-way, rigid, formal, then netizens are not interested.
4. Catholic Church needs to provide guidelines regarding social media ethics related to hoaxes, comments, and bullying.
5. Catholic Church needs to be more open and accountable because in the era of the Internet and social media, problems within the Church can no longer be covered up. Crime cases should be resolved fairly and in favor of the victim.

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