
DIGITAL SPACES AND PLACES

*A SPECTRUM OF ONLINE
MINISTRY ENGAGEMENT*

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Introduction

Introduction

When we conducted the research for our Summer 2023 white paper, *The Digital Frontier of Mission*, one of the key concepts that emerged was the nature of a sort of “digital ecology.” That is, how do human beings interact with one another in digitally mediated environments. The digital environment itself was of particular interest, since the manner in which people interact with one another was dependent upon the environment itself.¹

One key characteristic of human digital engagement is that it is inherently enculturated. There is no such thing as “digital culture,” so much as there are digital extensions of physical cultures that coalesce into digital environments.² In the same way that people of distinct cultures come together and form multicultural communities, in which participants in the community retain their unique cultural identities, yet also form something new and distinct through their cross-cultural exchange, so too it is in digital environments. In this way, we continue to be as human as we ever have been in digital environments as we have been in physical ones for millennia. We might best think about digital environments not as distinct from physical ones, but as an extension of them, as we walk out what it means to be human in this hybrid existence.

Another characteristic that emerged was the distinction between digital spaces and digital places.³ I initially defined these terms as a sort of binary distinction:

Digital places are associated with the presence of two or more people engaging with one another in some capacity (e.g., an Instagram livestream or a virtual world), while spaces refer to static destinations of asynchronous communication (e.g., a blog or website).⁴

Following the publication of *The Digital Frontier of Mission*, the Digital Mission Consortia convened at Life.Church in Oklahoma City, OK to discuss the preliminary findings and recommendations provided in the paper. Simultaneously, we recognized the distinction of digital spaces from digital places, yet the Consortia also felt that the definitions were not as clear as they likely need to be to be of benefit to the broader Church. There remained a sort of “Je ne sais quoi” quality to the topic, requiring further research.

[1] Todd Korpi, “The Digital Frontier of Mission,” Digital Mission Consortia (Wheaton, IL: Wheaton College Billy Graham Center, June 2023).

[2] Korpi, 6–7.

[3] Korpi, 8–9.

[4] Korpi, 8.

In response to this felt need, and in an effort to further substantiate and refine the findings presented in *The Digital Frontier of Mission*, the research team conducted and coded additional interviews, crosschecking findings against those already conducted in preparation for the paper. To date, the Consortia research team has conducted a total of 34 interviews representing individual ministry practitioners (e.g. influencers, podcasters, digital missionaries, etc.), church leaders in online environments, and parachurch ministries engaged in digital ministry.

While the data that emerged from the subsequent research did not challenge the initial findings of the Digital Frontier white paper, they did serve to further substantiate as well as to provide further insight into practical best practices that may be of benefit in future dialogue and research. One area in which the subsequent research was most valuable was in providing additional insight into the nature of digital environments, which is the subject of this paper. The purpose of this paper is therefore to further elucidate the nuanced differences between digital spaces and digital places and to provide practical examples for how church and parachurch leaders might recalibrate their online ministry efforts by learning to exegete their digital context at this most basic level.

Defining the Terms

The terms “digital spaces” and “digital places” are not original to this research endeavor. Indeed, many scholars and authors have used both terms, generally with some degree of interchangeability or in a contradictory fashion between authors. Digital anthropologist Tom Boellstorff’s defining of “place” in his groundbreaking work *Coming of Age in Second Life* (Princeton University Press, 2015) was the source of my own use of the term:

Presence is often defined as a characteristic making virtual worlds “worlds” at all, even those that are solely textual. Like the notion of immersion, the notion of presence is founded in a relationship to place and time: presence assumes both “the present” and conceptions of locality. It has been linked to immersion, so that an “immersive virtual environment” can be equated with virtual worlds “that organize sensory information in such a way as to create a psychological state in which the individual perceives himself or herself as being present or having ‘presence’ in” them.⁵

[5] Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, First new edition paperback (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 116.

Boellestorff adds that presence can also result from both “social richness” and “perceptual realism,” meaning that presence is much to do with individual perceptions of the value of interactions, more than a particular technological modality. Having come of age in the height of AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), I can personally attest to experiencing many moments of “presence,” though the platform could hardly have been described as a virtual world like Boellestorff’s experience in Second Life. This makes the task of defining “place” difficult, though not impossible as we shall see shortly.

First, in an attempt to develop a consistent vocabulary around these terms, we will first adopt the term “Digital Environments” as an umbrella term to refer to what will be a rather fuzzy constellation of space and place types. Digital Environments simply refer to the broad range of spaces and places in which humans interact through digital forms of mediation.

We might broadly refer to Digital Spaces as platforms primarily designed for mono-directional consumption. Digital Spaces possess limited interactivity between participants and the focus of the environment leans toward content distribution and consumption, episodic engagement, and more fragmented “non-presenced” forms of digital engagement. The most extreme forms of Digital Spaces would be basic church websites, blogs (particularly those that do not possess the social features of a Substack or (its much earlier predecessor) Xanga). The most extreme digital spaces place primary emphasis on disseminating content.

Digital Places are environments that facilitate multi-directional interaction, relational connections, and community cultivation. They tend to prioritize collective experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose. They leverage various degrees of synchronous and asynchronous communication. Examples of Digital Places include Facebook groups, Discord servers, online gaming communities, and virtual churches. The most extreme digital places place primary emphasis on cultivating community.

The Continuum Concept: Fluidity and Flux

As it is likely clear to the reader, as it was to us in the Consortia meeting in Oklahoma City, it is difficult to categorize particular digital environments as either a space or a place. Some digital environments such as Twitter/X and Instagram are both environments of passive consumption (spaces) and environments that foster semblances of community and presence (places). Further, the research showed a wide variety of how individuals and ministry practitioners leverage the platform. Some looked to TikTok primarily as a space to provide content that would funnel people into their perceived community on YouTube. Others viewed YouTube as a sole means of content distribution that would funnel people into other environments such as Zoom calls, Discord Servers, and Facebook Groups.

It is therefore best to view Digital Environments not as a binary (either a space or a place) but as a continuum of fluidity, such as the visual here depicts:



- **Little To No Social Ties**
- **Primarily Asynchronous Communication**
- **Focus on Content/Info Dissemination**

- **Stronger Social Ties**
- **Shared Community**
- **Synchronous & Asynchronous Communication**
- **Focus on Belonging**

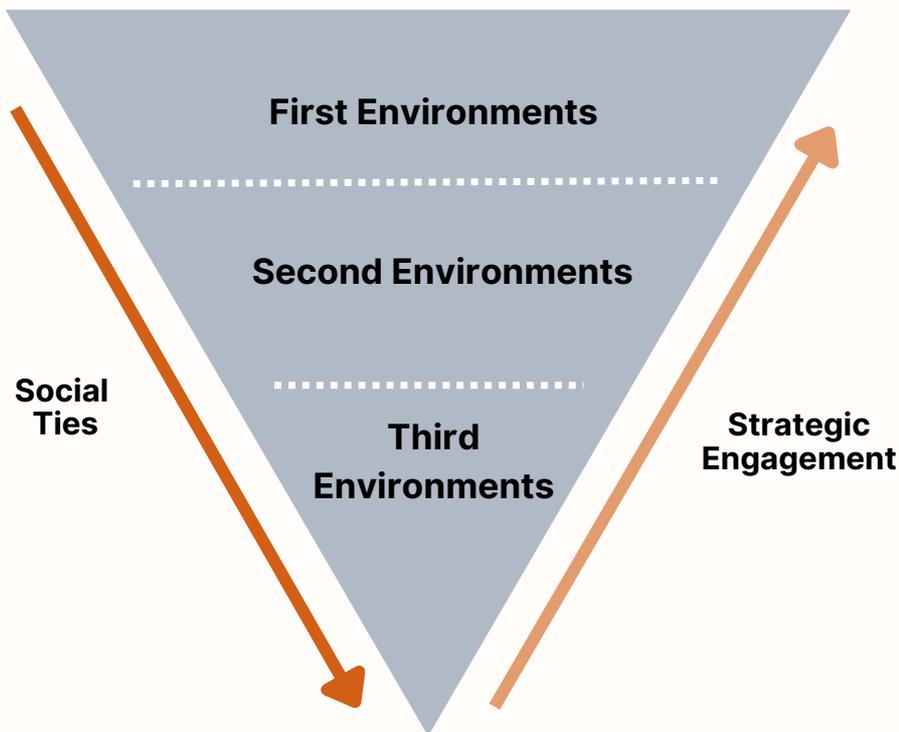
The multicolored arrows on the Digital Place end of the spectrum demonstrate a wide diversity of what sort of “places” exist. “Place” can indeed refer to virtual worlds, such as World of Warcraft or other online gaming communities (called “massive multiplayer online game” or MMO) in which users develop digital customs, rituals, social roles, and more. It can also refer to presence experienced in chat rooms, virtual communion over a Zoom call, or prayer in a Facebook Group. Among these virtual places, experiences of how presence is negotiated are wildly diverse. The perception of presence or perceived “social richness” appears to be what defines.

The fluidity of this continuum necessitates that we view various environments at various points on this continuum of space to place and recognize that each environment negotiates its own digital ecology uniquely.

Another characteristic of digital environments is also “flux.” Flux refers to the ever-changing nature of digital environments. As environment creators seek to retain participants and attract new ones, they make changes to the participant experience that shift the environment along the continuum. This is perhaps no more widely illustrated than in the evolution of Facebook. When I signed up for Facebook in the Fall of 2005, it had only a minuscule fraction of the community-oriented features it does today. Facebook’s evolution along the Digital Environment continuum is an example of Flux.

First, Second, and Third Level Environments: An Additional Layer

In *The Digital Frontier of Mission*, I referred to Mark Sayers' use of three different types of communal environments.⁶ While Sayers uses the term "space," he does so differently than we do herein. Thus, we might refer to these three environment types as First, Second, and Third Level Environments, pictured below as an inverted triangular funnel:



Sayers broadly characterizes these environment types in relation to the strength of social ties between people. So a "First Environment" might be a crowded stadium of Taylor Swift fans, who—other than their affinity for the performer, possess no common ties. The point of affinity results in their convergence into a space and nothing more. Second Environments possess slightly more social tie, such as a church business meeting. Third Environments possess the strongest social ties, such as a long-standing small group or a close-knit educational cohort.

As the illustration above depicts, as one moves from First Level to Third Level Environments, social ties get stronger and thereby group size also typically gets smaller (this is why small groups have historically made better environments for robust discipleship than Sunday morning worship services). What's more, the further out one (be it a church leader or parachurch ministry doing evangelistic work) seeks to engage the broader population, more strategy around engagement will be necessary. The work of contextualization is heightened as the affinity and relationship that forms strong social ties is diminished.

[6] Korpi, "The Digital Frontier of Mission," 18.

Pertaining to digital environments specifically, we might note that, like the difference between digital spaces and places, First, Second, and Third Level Environments are also better defined along a continuum than as neatly defined categories. The relationship between the Spaces and Places continuum and the First-Third Level Environments continuum is best illustrated along an x/y axis grid-group:



While it must be emphasized again that these placements are not precise and subject to flux as the platform changes and as people use the platform differently (e.g. as a seminary professor, I use YouTube to house unlisted lectures for my students—more as a Third Level Environment, which is markedly different than an influencer seeking to reach a wide audience—a First-Level Environment). But the visualization helps demonstrate how digital environments vary widely and their employment, therefore, for ministry purposes must also be highly strategic and varied as well.

Practical Implications and Strategies

While modern (Western) conceptualizations of both evangelism and discipleship lean too heavily upon content dissemination and retention (so that “evangelism” is getting content to people and “discipleship” is their retention of the correct doctrinal and behavioral information in that content), it is worth noting that digital environments of all varieties have their proper place in church ministry online. Places are not better than spaces, nor are Third Level Environments inherently better than First Level ones. The task at hand is therefore to assess and discern which environments are appropriate for a church or ministry’s desired level and type of engagement.

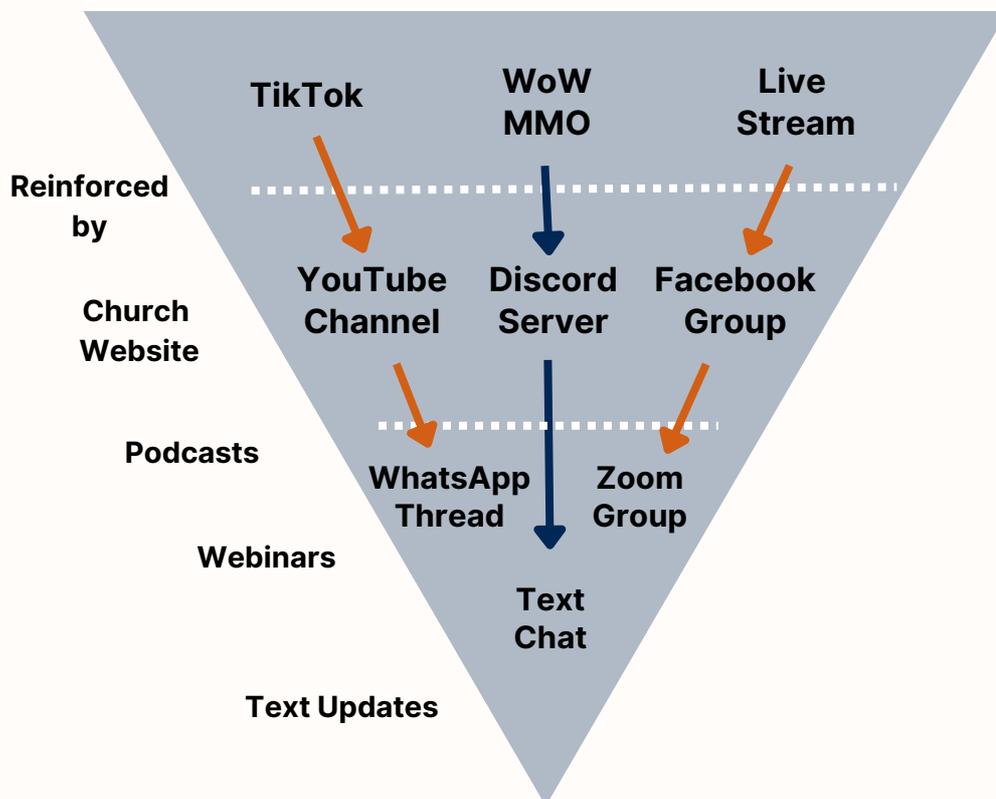
As environments favor the First Level side of the continuum, they will likely be more evangelistically focused, Third Level Environments more deeply discipleship focused. Environments that lean more heavily toward Place orientation will provide fertile community for discipleship that can be complemented by Space oriented environments that provide content that enhance the community. But perhaps the biggest takeaway the research shows as it pertains to digital environments is that ministry leaders must begin to view themselves less as providers of religious knowledge, as digital technology has made religious knowledge widely democratized and freely available. Instead, we must begin to view ourselves as digital “gardeners” of sorts, carefully tending to the environments in which people encounter Christ and one another, and grow in their faith.

First Level Digital Spaces provide opportunities for broad reach and accessibility but possess tremendous potential for passive consumption, detached from community. Third Level Digital Places by contrast have tremendous potential for nurturing digital community, resulting in rhythms of discipleship, but can easily become siloed and clique-ish. Digital Spaces

A local church seeking to have holistic ministry in digital space must then consider how it might develop strategies that leverage environments in each of the four quadrants. Consider the following theoretical case study as an example.

Theoretical Case Study

The leadership of Local Church desires to better leverage digital environments for evangelism and discipleship. They strategize by first assessing where their 1) community and 2) congregation spend a majority of their time online, which reveals that they can probably retire the church Pinterest account they've been trying to keep up with, but the youth group spends a lot of time on TikTok and there's a large portion of the men's ministry that plays "World of Warcraft" in their spare time. They also realize that their current practice of streaming online to the church's website and Facebook page is good, but it isn't really producing any sort of fruit. So they develop the following strategy digital engagement strategy:



While the above is only an example for the fictitious "Local Church," one can visualize the congruence and strategy behind digital environments based upon their function within the lives of people. Podcasts and webinars are a good resource for passive consumption, but only insofar as they complement rhythms of community engagement, which can occur in other environments. What's more, seeking to enhance where the people in one's church already are online, such as Local Church's World of Warcraft group, creates an opportunity to nudge bonds of community that are already forming toward a deepened sense of community using an environment like Discord. This empowers those in Local Church's men's ministry to live missionally in places that are already natural gathering points for them online.

A key to strategizing for digital engagement is not to create something new and attempt to force people into it, but rather to look at the digital “wells” around which people are already gathering, both in the church and in the broader community, and come alongside those wells to build bridges toward deepened community that promotes transformation. The primary task is the cultivation of digital environments, the secondary task being the creation of (or curation of) more content-based environments like podcasts, Substack blogs, and more that complement the forming digital relationships that will ultimately bear the most weight of discipleship.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to establish a baseline vocabulary and conceptual framework to help ministry leaders better understand the differences between digital environments. While the goal was to set forth a way to think about and speak about digital environments, it is necessary to underscore yet again that these environments do not exist in isolation from the physical world, but rather are extensions of and overlap with it. Our strategies for digital ministry would therefore be benefitted from taking this hybrid existence into consideration as we seek to reach people for Christ and disciple them into maturity.