



# WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

## Social media and the Virtual Visit

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### **Pope Benedict's historic visit to England and Scotland last September was always going to be more of a 'Virtual Visit' than that of his much-loved predecessor Pope John Paul II.**

In 1982, attending open-air public events was a completely different ball game. These days Health and Safety considerations are paramount and much tighter than 30 years ago. It was clear from early planning meetings that this time round, the outdoor venues would only accommodate around 250,000 pilgrims.

Despite the crowds in Bellahouston, Cofton and Hyde parks, and thousands lining the Popemobile routes, the desire of several million people to interact and take part in this 21st century papal visit was never going to be fully satisfied on the ground. From a web perspective we were looking at a once-in-a-generation opportunity to share the joy of the Catholic faith with the whole world live and uninterrupted.

So what were the challenges? The official Papal Visit website was to be the one-stop-shop for information, resources and multimedia. [thepapalvisit.org.uk](http://thepapalvisit.org.uk) was launched when the government and the Church jointly announced the visit at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in March 2010 – a full six months prior to Pope Benedict touching down in Scotland. How do you keep content fresh and interesting so far in advance of the action? How do you generate momentum? It is important to recognise that this was an 'event' website. That meant we would see most of our web traffic in the weeks before the visit, a massive spike for the four days, followed by a significant 'watch again' audience. As it transpired, ahead of the live events, most of our visitors wanted basic information: Can I drive up and see the Holy Father? Where and when? Can you reveal the Popemobile routes? An audio diary featuring visit co-ordinator Mgr Andrew Summersgill dispelled myths and offered the vehicle for 'you heard it here first' content.

Pope Benedict is a global icon and is immediately identifiable to the faithful, lapsed, hostile and everyone in between. We decided we wanted to let the Holy Father speak for himself – to offer a visual journey to our online pilgrims without heavy comment and analysis. With backing from the bishops of Scotland, England and Wales we committed to 24/7 live streaming for the full four days – a first online. In the event, this allowed for a global audience of around 5m. During the Big Assembly, an event broadcast solely online, we facilitated an ambitious live link to a Catholic school in Gambia. Knowing, from our professional streaming partners what this involved in terms of infrastructure, this was quite an achievement.

Social media was to play a crucial role. Pope Benedict has dedicated his last three World Communications Day messages to new technologies and digital media. Whilst sounding a note of caution about the authenticity of our online identities, the Holy Father is broadly supportive of social networks as places of community where Catholics can bear witness to their faith:

“Entering cyberspace can be a sign of an authentic search for personal encounters with others, provided that attention is paid to avoiding dangers such as enclosing oneself in a sort of parallel existence, or excessive exposure to the virtual world. In the search for sharing, for ‘friends’, there is the challenge to be authentic and faithful, and not give in to the illusion of constructing an artificial public profile for oneself.”

World Communications Day message 2011

Facebook provided the cornerstone of our community efforts. We decided to go with a ‘fan’ page. A truly empowered community needs to interact so we decided not only to allow comments on our own posts but also to permit those who ‘liked’ the page to post to the Wall. In the Church, there’s always the pre-moderated versus post-moderated debate. How do you police the page to ensure it remains focused and positive? Many of those who liked the page invested time and energy in building the community – one that eight months on still has 10,000 active users. The commitment of our facebook users cannot be called into question. In no time at all we had a positive, vibrant, self-policing community that allowed challenging comments and questions but kept things upbeat and interesting.

Twitter, the second of the twin pillars holding up today’s social media roof, offered a very different communications channel. Most people are aware of the challenges of micro-blogging (140 characters is your tweet limit without using deck.ly or twitlonger). It forces bloggers to keep things simple. For me, twitter is a much better platform for sharp commentary rather than as a signpost to a website. We empowered a group of tech-savvy young pilgrims armed with social media mobile apps to tweet from Popemobile routes and live events. This worked pretty well and was, at times, very moving.

Flickr, the photo-sharing platform, has always been one of the Church’s strong suits. It plays well to our open access strategy – to offer high quality images not only to the press but to all visitors. Four talented photographers were deployed with a brief not only to snap high quality shots of the Holy Father but to capture the joy of the faith on the faces of thousands of pilgrims. I still smile when I see the internationally-viral “We love you Papa more than beans on toast.”

Eight months after Pope Benedict’s visit, the online legacy is already bearing fruit. We have a site that has been visited by millions and will now be archived for posterity by the British Library. We have social media channels that are reasonably well established and a clear roadmap for upping the ante online. It is important to recognise that we are on the first rung of the ladder. We need to bear witness to all that is good about our Catholic faith in the digital arena. To quote the Holy Father: “a new way of learning and thinking is being carried out, with unheard of opportunities to establish relationships and to build communion.” Amen to that.

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