



PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE

A EULOGY FOR THE HOMEPAGE?

Article by Richard Rouse for "Cultures and Faith" vol. XXII, n.2

In the great sea of communications, the tides are prone to changing and over recent decades this has been occurring more frequently. From the foot messenger to the written letter, the telegraph to the fax, from fixed to mobile phones, technological progress has come at a growing rate of knots. And then the internet has, as everybody knows, caused choppy waters with the coming (and soon going) of the email, institutional and personal web spaces, RSS feeds and alerts, document, photo and film sharing platforms, the Cloud, Voips (voice over internet protocols for easy videoconferencing), and the rise of wikipedia, social media and the cultural mentality they represent and shape, not to mention image-centred app-based tablet technology which will probably bubble around 2017 when access to smartphones is expected to peak at 5 billion users (there are currently over 2 billion users). To consider the impact of these devices on human interaction and culture, just remember the average user now interacts with a smartphone around 150 times each day.

Within this *mare magnum* it appears a new moment has arrived. After Wired Magazine had declared the death of blogs back in 2008, and the rise in institutional soul-searching about online presence culminated in the Pontiff's microblog in 2012, a new turning point has now had its lighthouse moment in the spring of 2014 as analysts of the New York Times's website traffic data finally announced *the death of the homepage*.

The homepage is the front door for websites, the place you are taken to when you first visit some institution or "being". You will often end up there if an internal page is faulty or if you nose around, as it also serves as the main *atrium* as well as being a digital shop-window. Webmasters know that good homepages are mostly aggregators of other online content, possibly with a human touch, such as can be seen in the Holy See's main homepages www.vatican.va and www.news.va.

But over the last two years traffic going to the New York Times' homepage has halved, while overall traffic to the site continued to rise. No longer do users enter by the front door to see what is happening in the world, but they arrive directly via social media (e.g. Facebook or Reddit) and via search engines to the pages containing well tagged articles of interest to then depart again.

Anthropologically speaking, this tells us two things: first, people are being pushed and pulled by their peers and other influencers around the web rather than following the allegiances of the major news institutions; and secondly, users are less inquisitive, spending less time following links within websites, perhaps having grown immune to the tricks of the PRs and advertisers.

Homepages, once the primary tool of public accessibility, have been overtaken by search engines and peer-driven sharing as the web has continued transforming, becoming not just a tool, but an environment of daily experience, the air we breathe.

For what it is worth, the Pontifical Council for Culture's institutional site echoes this reality, as we have seen our visitor behaviour change since going online with our socially integrated site in 2012. Excluding specific periods of interest such as the novelty of the first six months and the storm of interest around the cardinal at the time of the Conclave, there has been a gradual downward curve from 75% to a current levelling out at circa of 45% of visitors stopping by the homepage. The total number of visitors continues to grow, the average moving towards 12,000 per month, most of whom come via recommendations and sharing on the social networks of facebook (still in crescendo) and twitter (in diminuendo).

While there are also some arrivals from fixed links on blogs and other institutional sites, these are now negligible.

It is early to write a eulogy for homepages yet, especially for an institution such as ours which is not primarily a news service, but in planning and managing the Dicastery's online presence, no harm has been done by flanking the shop-window side of our institutional presence, with Flickr (photography), Facebook (for publicising events) and Twitter (for immediate impact and clarity) feeds on our homepage, and thereby stepping a little closer into the daily existence of our visitors, into the boxes of their own special interest groups. Digital natives may not be drifting, surfing around the net via homepages as much as they once were, but it seems the tentacles of social media can be used to reach out and haul them in and make them feel at home.