Chapter 27

“Type Amen” or Perish!
Religious Deception on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines religious discourse on Facebook and brings to the fore the recurrent deceptive requests that have given rise to new forms of religious extremism and radicalism. Many Christians have turned to social media as a medium where their faith can be practiced and with the intention of enforcing it on others. One major avenue through which this ensues is in the inherent ideological requests on Facebook where members are threatened to either type “Amen” or be afflicted with curses as punishment. These misleading requests usually attract instantaneous thousands of “likes” and consenting responses that depict underlying fear. An awareness of these extremist inclinations against the backdrop of religion is crucial to the understanding and interpretation of the semiotic realities within such Facebook posts.

INTRODUCTION

The present information age is marked by the urge for people to share their beliefs and world views with others especially in limitless and porous spaces as provided by the Internet (Hjarvard, 2011); in turn, the internet has been saturated with propagation of beliefs that are not completely true, leading up to the dissemination of deceptive information. For instance, Mejias and Vokuev (2017) observe that in state politics citizens are active participants in their own disenfranchisement by using the social media to generate, consume or distribute false information, thereby legitimizing disinformation. Deceptive information in this study refers to all forms of disinformation and misinformation that are geared towards dissimulation, propaganda or distraction. Religion is one of the social domains that has suffered major hit by this flawed information trend (Campbell, 2013). Being the “opium of the people” as observed by Karl Marx, religion affords people the opportunity to freely and persuasively propagate both shared and individual beliefs on the efficacy of the supernatural, however, this freedom sometimes metamorphose

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into the use of subtle verbal or written ideologically saturated threat, patterned after specific religious
dogma, to enforce one's view on others without recourse to facts. According to Kumar and Geethakumari
(2014), the birth of social networks has made every user a self-publisher with no editing, checking for
factual accuracy and clearly with no accountability. They are also of the opinion that the truthfulness
of a post is certified once such post is seen by millions of users on their computer screen. Agreeably, it
must be acknowledged at this earliest point that many propagators of deceptive religious information on
the internet do not often see any harm in their practice, rather they perceive it as a way of evangelising
their doctrines.

Consequently, with the extension of religious practices to an online platform, many have turned to the
social media as a medium where their faith can be practised and enforced on others. One major avenue
through which this forced participation ensues is in the inherent ideological requests on Facebook where
members are threatened to either type ‘Amen’ or be afflicted with curses as punishment. These persuasive
requests usually attract thousands of ‘likes’ and responses such that one wonders at the motives behinds
the posts and responses and on whose authority are such posts endorsed (see Caspi & Gorsky, 2006).

The study examines an emerging ideological threat on Facebook in order to bring to fore the subtle
deceptive acts that are embedded in them. The deception in them is presented as graphic posts with
various afflicted individuals, objects and renowned personalities, requesting readers to ‘type amen’ or
be afflicted or even ‘perish’. To achieve this objective, the study will answer the following questions:

1. What are the semiotic patterns used in ‘Type Amen’ texts on Facebook?
2. How do such semiotic patterns express deceptive persuasion?

BACKGROUND: DISINFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a computer and Internet-based technology that expedites the sharing of information, ideas
and thoughts through the building of virtual networks and communities. It enables people to quickly
share contents such as videos, photos, documents and other personal information via their computer,
tablet or smartphone (Newman, 2011). The social media was created as a fast and easier way to find,
connect and interact with family and friends. It has also been embraced by businesses as a faster way
to reach customers (Qualman, 2010). Global Digital Statshot Q3 2017 puts the number of active social
media users at over 3 billion, with over 90% of users being young people between the ages of 18 and
29 (Pew Research Centre, 2016).

Table 1 shows the top ten popular social media networks worldwide and ranked by the number of ac-
tive accounts as at January, 2019. Facebook which is the first to hit 1 billion active subscribers maintains
its position as the leading social media network. Facebook was created by Mark Zuckerberg at Harvard
University and launched as FaceMash in July 2003 but later became TheFacebook on February 4, 2004.
Although access to the website was initially limited to the United States and Canada, by September
2006, everyone with a valid email address and 13 years and above was allowed to join the Facebook
community (Ellison, et al. 2007).

While social media has many advantages, especially in terms of making business connections easier
and faster, a lot of disadvantages still trail its use; one of which is social media being a conduit for dis-
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