"If you need a virtual community, something is wrong with your congregation": Institutionalized Laestadianism and the use of digital media

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Abstract:

This article studies how the Laestadian movement (a Christian confessional revivalist movement that is sceptical of technology) uses digital media in general, and the internet in particular, in its work. In a time when churches on a large scale are concerned with how to communicate with people through digital media, the Laestadian movement choses another path, based upon other assumptions and choices. The focus here is on how congregations and representatives use digital media, and not on individual and private use, and this article will focus primarily on Sweden and Finland. Based on interviews with representatives and by mapping the congregations' online presence, this article provides an interpretation of the use of the internet within Laestadianism. Through this group, we see how ideology, faith, and practices regulate a restricted, negotiated, and conscious use of the internet, which challenges any preconceptions regarding use and effect of the internet on religion. This case study therefore gives additional perspective for understanding the role of digital media within and in relation to institutionalized Christianity.

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1. Introduction

This article will study how the Laestadian movement, a Christian confessional revivalist movement, uses digital media in general, and the internet in particular, in their work. The movement can, in broad terms, be described as conservative in terms of theology, family values, and morals, but also when it comes to use of digital media as means for communication. This article deals with how the official movement, its institutions, and its representatives use and think around the internet, focusing primarily on Laestadianism in Sweden (with some detours into Finland). This article is not concerned with how individuals with a Laestadian affiliation use the internet in their personal and private lives.

The internet has permeated, influenced, and thus transformed large parts of our society and individual lives (cf. Castells 2003; Jenkins 2006; Rainie & Wellman 2012) – from being one component in the process of overthrowing established authorities in for example Iran and Tunis (cf. Howard & Hussain 2011; Lindgren 2013), to transforming journalism (cf. Hayes, Singer, & Ceppos 2007), changing education (cf. Metzger & Flanagin 2008), empowering marginalized groups (cf. Lievrouw 2011), changing how we interact with people (cf. Turkle 2011), and so on. We live our lives online to a higher degree than just a few years ago, in what is claimed to be a hybrid reality, where the virtual and the physical are mixed (cf. Lindgren 2013). we make friends and sustain relationships online; people gather and spend recreational time, seek pleasure, and perform political actions online, and so on. People also live and practice parts of their religious life and faith online, and religious institutions are increasingly active online.

One might think this is a transformation that can only be complied with, just to give in and follow a predestined path, without reflecting upon alternatives or other ways to deal with the inevitable process of the "internetalization" of society. The use of digital media within specific groups is, however, always accompanied by a negotiating process, and in the case of the Laestadian movement, we will see how they tend to deliberately restrict the use of digital

media instead of adapting to the situation, and to emphasize how it does not comply with beliefs and practises within the movement.

As Howard Rheingold, an early internet pundit and the founder of the concept of "virtual communities" (1993), points out, perhaps we might even "find better ways to wield technological power, other than simply unleashing it and seeing what happens? What can we learn from a culture that habitually negotiates the rules for new tools?" (Rheingold 1999). A study on the use of digital media within the Laestadian movement can give us other perspectives and attitudes toward digital media in a media-saturated world.

2. Laestadianism: An overview and introduction

The confessional Laestadian revivalist movement originates from the founder Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1861), born and active in the northern part of Sweden (literature in English on the background and history of the Laestadian movement is scarce, but see for example Andreassen 2012; Foltz and Bergman 2005; Hepokoski 2000, 2002; Lindmark 2012). Today the movement has its stronghold in Finland and in the northern part of Sweden, but it is also found in central Sweden and parts of Norway. It has also been spread and established in the USA, first and foremost through Finnish and Swedish immigrants. It is found all around the world but in rather small groups.

Laestadius came from a family of clergymen and after studies in Uppsala, in botany and theology, he was ordained in 1825 and came to work in the upper north of Sweden for the rest of his life. As a clergyman and vicar in the Sápmi area, close to the Finnish border, Laestadius grew up speaking Finnish and Sami. He gave sermons primarily in Finnish, but also in Swedish and Sami[i]. He is known for his powerful and colorful language in encouraging people to convert, and for converting Sami people to Christianity. Laestadianism thereby occasionally empowered Samis to protest against the Church of Sweden (but they never broke away), the State, and mainstream society, and also to improve their living conditions. As with other revivalist movements influenced by the Pietistic and Movarian movements, there is an emphasis on conversion to "true" Christianity, the atoning death of Christ, and reading the Bible (Bebbington, 1989). There is also a specific emphasis on the need to confess your sins to a fellow Christian, have them forgiven, and try to live a modest and moral life apart from the mundane and sinful world (an aspect also relevant for the use of modern media and technology within the movement).

Like other revivalist movements of that time, Laestadius circumvented the regulations of the Conventicle Act (1726–1858) through having lay-led gatherings where his distributed handwritten and, later, printed sermons were read out. Readings of Laestadius' preaching, alongside lay preaching, has been strong within the movement since that time. The use of media for spreading the Word goes, in other words, back for a long time within the movement.

In the years after Laestadius' death, the movement split into three major "branches" (each with different subgroups) in Sweden and Finland, regardless of national borders: the Firstborn Laestadianism (*Västlaestadianism*, with no institutionalized umbrella organization – with approx.. 30,000 members in the world); the Little Firstborn group

(*Gammallaestadianism*, organized through *Laestadianernas Fridsföreningars Förbund – LFF* – with a few thousands members); and Conservative Laestadianism (*Östlaestadianism*, organized through *Sveriges fridsföreningars centralorganisation – SFC* – about 4,000 adherents in Sweden and 100,000 in Finland, and all in all approximately 115,000 adherents in the world). The Firstborn Laestadians broke away from the Conservative Laestadian branch at the beginning of the 20th century, while the Conservatives formed their own branch at approximately the same time. In Sweden they are all still part of the Church of Sweden (the former State church). Among these three groups, the Firstborns are the most reluctant to engage with the life and habits associated with the profane world and thus try to live according to the original teachings of Lars Levi Laestadius.

When, for example, Gerd Snellman (2011) characterizes the Laestadian movement of today, she emphasizes the community of believers and a shared identity. This is upheld through shared traditions and practices within the family and through meetings in the prayer chapel and within the movement as a whole at larger meetings. Their accentuated distinction between true believers and non-believers is strong (similar to but probably stronger than within other revivalist movements). The central role of individual and shared confession is also important. The practice of repenting and forgiving builds trust, identity, and community among the members. Reading, hearing, and talking about the Word of God and living a humble life accordingly, together with praying, are considered key elements of a Christian life for Laestadians. The Laestadian movement can be considered conservative when it comes to family values and theology and are still today formulated in opposition to secular society, and also to the (former State) Church, which the movement still belongs to (see for example Kejonen 2014; Nordvik,2015).

Context and perspectives

Within the field of "digital religion" (cf. Campbell 2012; Cheong et al. 2012), there has been a tendency to study the use of the internet in relation to different religious individuals, collectives, and institutions. Less attention has been paid to groups who choose not to use, or are reluctant to use, the internet and other modern means of communication. Relatively few studies have been made on religious environments in which the use of technology is contested, restricted, and under negotiation. In studies on, for example, the Amish, the Mennoites, and the ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities (see below), it is evident how these seemingly technologically hesitant groups have a moderate attitude towards modern technology rather than a strict anti-modern and forbidding attitude. They are "filtering out its negative aspects, embracing its positive features, and using it to impart religious knowledge", as Rashi puts it (2011, p. 20).

Livio and Tenenboim Weinblatt (2007) study how ultra-Orthodox Jewish women negotiate the use of the internet in their personal and professional lives in their households. In a study of the so-called "kosher cell phone", Campbell (2007) studies how the use of the cell phone is negotiated in conservative Jewish communities. In that particular case, a negotiating process took place to make the use of cell phone technology possible by adding some crucial restrictions and filters (see also Rashi 2012). A similar approach can, for example, be seen in Kraybill's (1998) study of Amish and Mennonites' views on computers or Umble's (1996)

study of the negotiated use of the telephone in the same communities (also Umble and Weaver-Zercher 2008). Amish communities, for example, place a communal phone in a shed on the outskirts of the village, or hand their cell phones to their English neighbours for recharging overnight.

We see similar thoughts in history. In European 19th century Evangelical revivalism, comparable thoughts of concern flourished regarding the use of fiction and music. Novels and what was called "true fiction" were transformed into a means for making the Gospel easily accessible for common people instead of spreading the worldly values of contemporary fiction. A separate distributing system, distinct from the worldly literature, with their own colporteurs and bookstores, was established as well (cf. Brown 2001; Gelfgren 2003).

These cases show how different (religious) groups test and evaluate each technology according to the effects they have on their life and values. Only one study so far has focused on the Laestadian movement and the use of the internet, although on a rather general level, with the aim to discuss and present an overview of Laestadian official websites with focus on online content (Andreassen 2013). Olsen (2008) uses Laestadian internet material in his study on Norwegian Laestadianism and gender, but similar online forums for discussions to those Olsen mentions are not to be found in relation to this study on Swedish and Finnish material.

Andreassen notes the relevance and long tradition (dating back to Lars Levi Laestadius' days) of the written text and the monthly bulletins within the movement. Even if the use of digital media differs between the different branches, the content of the websites reflects the use of the bulletins – invoking existing knowledge from a sender to a receiver with little interaction, according to Andreassen. Another study does touch upon the use of television in Finland in relation to the Laestadian movement, which totally banned the television until the 1980s (Alasuutari 1996). According to Alasuutari, people within the Laestadian movement are hesitant to watch television since it brings the worldly things into their homes and "distort[s] the picture we get of the world" (1999, 96-7), and that is something to protect oneself from. Interestingly, Alasuutari compares the Laestadian view on television with an overall critical view on television and mass culture among the upper middle class.

Interpretation

In cases mentioned above, we can see how religious bodies and institutions negotiate, in a conscious way, to restrict the use of communication technologies. But how does one interpret the negotiation process when it comes to a rather restricted use of digital media and the internet within a Christian movement? Based on the work done by Ferré (2003), Campbell (2010) has developed a four-step religious-social shaping of technology approach for this, emphasizing that there are different ways to interpret the relationship between media and the change in religious faith and practices. According to Campbell's model, attitudes towards digital media within various religious branches and institutions can be interpreted and analysed in four consecutive and distinctive steps: 1) "History and tradition"; 2) "Core beliefs and patterns"; 3) "The negotiating process"; and finally 4) "Communal framing and discourse" (2010, pp. 57-63). What is central, and an important contribution by Campbell, is how background, beliefs, and internal context set the framework for use of the internet within a religious group, institution, or movement. Campbell's model thereby questions more

deterministic and mono-causal models and adds consciousness and awareness into the interpretation – thus giving the actors agency, which is important. This article will not use Campbell's model step by step, only as a starting point for emphasizing the necessity of taking internal factors within a movement into account when interpreting why and how digital media is used.

In previous work I have also argued for including an external contextual frame for understanding the negotiating process since no religious institution lives in a societal vacuum (Gelfgren 2015). Hence, the negotiating process takes place within a structure of how one understands and relates to society. Here I would like to refer to the mediatization theory promoted by Hjarvard (2013). To start with, modern democratic society has, according to Hjarvard, an autonomous media sphere with its own set of communicative rules. Anyone with a message or opinion has to relate to this condition, and also go through it, in order to reach out to society and the people who are the foundation of society. This affects how media itself, politics, science, and religion communicate and are perceived and interpreted, thereby affecting the role of religion in society. Hjarvard claims that the "mediatization of religion … is changing the representation of religion in late modernity at the same time that secularization … is evoking both a decline and a transformation of religious organizations, practices and beliefs" (2011, p. 22).

In the case of the Laestadian movement, we will see how important internal factors, such as history, tradition, and core beliefs, as well as external factors, such as how the surrounding world is understood, are for the use of the internet. When it comes to the use of media, there is a reflective awareness of what is considered advantageous or disadvantageous in relation to tradition and beliefs, which is a part of the negotiation process, not only internally but also in relation to the societal context.

3.   Method and material

This article is based upon available online resources published within the Laestadian movement, which differ between the different branches (see below). Interviews were done with a selection of representatives of the movement. The article focuses first and foremost on Sweden and Swedish conditions, but includes the Fenno-Swedish relations when there is added value in this (further explained below).

Regardless of branch, most congregations have a webpage on www.kyrktorget.se ("kyrktorget" can be translated approximately as "the church square"), which is a portal/noticeboard where all Swedish churches and congregations can post announcements, short information, links to additional/external webpages, and contact information. In addition, some of the Laestadian congregations have their own webpages, made in different ways, with different functionality.

At an initial stage of this research, all webpages were traced and mapped, starting with the lists and contact information available on the Wikipedia (Swedish and English) entry "Laestadianism", where the different branches are listed and linked. From there I moved on to www.kyrktorget.se for a more complete list of the different congregations.

Six interviews were also conducted, with the aim to speak to at least one (preferably two) representative from each branch. I promised them all anonymity and confidentiality, and they are treated accordingly. I assumed six informants would be enough to complement the online material, as well as feasible. Through a colleague I found one informant, who then introduced me to another informant. Another colleague introduced me to the third informant. The three others were found among the congregations that are most active online, in two different branches, and I contacted them via email. The six informants are: one preacher from the Firstborn Laestadian movement; one web master from the Swedish Little Firstborn group; two members from the Finnish equivalent (one web master and one preacher); and two members from the Conservative Laestadians (one secretary from the umbrella organization and one with another administrative role in a local congregation). All six labelled themselves IT-skilled persons, through their work and personal interests, so their hesitant attitude cannot be said to be a result of ignorance or fear (which one might be tempted to assume).[ii] They were all happy to honestly discuss their use of the internet in their congregations and context.

The interviews were semi-structured and centred around questions of how and why the internet is, or is not, used within the different movements. The interviewees are all male, and their ages range between approximately 30 and 70. They have different professional backgrounds, varying between theology, business, and IT administration, and they live in capital cities, mid-sized towns, and small villages. Variables such as gender, class, or ethnicity are not studied and problematized in this article. The interviews were between 30 and 40 minutes long and were conducted and recorded via telephone or Skype. Each informant gave their consent and was informed about how the content of their interviews would be used. An application for ethical vetting was approved by the Etikprövningsnämnden (approx. the Swedish Ethical Vetting Board).

4.   Laestadianism online resources and presence: "get acquainted […] and find information about us"

The three different branches have a similar approach to the internet, what to put online, and with which purpose, but there are some dissimilarities in extent and also content.

The Firstborn Laestadian movement
The Firstborns is the most restrictive branch in this respect, and they only have a web presence on www.kyrktorget.se with (often, but not always) a calendar and contact information (telephone, email, postal address, and map). One representative from the movement, a clergyman, was interviewed. There is no umbrella organization for the different congregations. There are eleven congregations listed at "Kyrktorget". None of them has its own webpage or any content outside "Kyrktorget". Two of the congregations have a picture of their church. In most cases there is also a link to a map showing where to find the prayer house or church and a calendar with the program for coming weeks. In some cases, it is said that some meetings take place in someone's home. The webpage welcomes people to get in touch in order to be told when and where these meetings take place.

The "Kyrktorget" web usually says something like: "We hope you have the possibility to visit one of our services. If you have questions, please contact us" [my translation, from: "Vi hoppas att du har möjlighet att besöka någon av våra gudstjänster. Om du har några frågor så får du gärna kontakta oss"], indicating that meetings in the physical world are preferred over virtual conversations and encounters.

Little Firstborn group

The branch of the Little Firstborns group has more detailed information than the Firstborns. It is the smallest branch in Sweden in terms of members; however, it has 15 congregations and is organized in close relation to the Laestadianernas Fridsföreningars Förbund (LFF, www.lff.fi) in Finland. It stretches over the Finnish-Swedish border and unites the Fenno-Swedish and Finnish-speaking communities.

The Little Firstborns group has basic contact information and links to a map to the fourteen different congregations; it also has a calendar with meeting information and a bit more information about some of the congregations, such as background information and some Bible verses. All webpages have a picture – either of the church/prayer house, nature, or the Bible. Four of them link to the local congregation of the Church of Sweden's webpage. This indicates the confessional nature of this branch and a closer relationship to the Church, compared to the Firstborns, who have a more conflicting relationship to the Church. Six pages have a link to streamed radio from different meetings in the local congregations. Three of them have links to other Laestadian sites, primarily the Finnish LFF.

Only one Swedish congregation within the Little Firstborn group, Luleå Fridsförsamling, have their own website (http://luleafridsforbund.com). There you can find basic information – contact address, map reference, and calendar. You also find streamed and archived services and links to the congregation's counterparts in Finland (LFF) and the USA (The Apostolic Lutheran Church). You can find out about the aim of the congregation.

LFF in Finland, on the other hand, has an even more detailed web presence. One important difference is that LFF offers a national umbrella organization under which the different congregations can be gathered. No similar organization exists in Sweden. There is information about national and international work, contact details, a calendar, and links to their radio station and newspapers. Some of the Finnish congregations also show up at "Kyrktorget". LFF in Finland has its own local radio station in the area around the city of Jakobstad (a Fenno-Swedish area in Finland), where LFF is particularly active. The radio station transmits from the local congregations and produces weekly programs for worship. There is also a link to their own paper, "Sions Missionstidning", which is published and distributed throughout the movement. The paper itself is not available through the web. There are also links to different youth camps and to a missionary blog run by LFF's youth, relating stories and experiences from missionary activities in Finland and abroad.

Conservative Laestadianism

The Conservative branch in Sweden is organized under an overarching organization – *Sveriges fridsföreningars centralorganisation* (*SFC*, http://sfcorg.se), with six congregations in northern and central Sweden (and one in Norway). This is also the most web-active of the

Swedish branches. There are approximately 500 adult members in Sweden. The webpage says: "here you can get acquainted with us and find information about us and our associated congregations". "Everybody is welcome to our meetings. Some meetings are streamed online".

The individual congregations are to be found on www.kyrktorget.se, and three (one in Norway) of them also have individual webpages, organized under SFC's web. The webpages have information about the organization, contact details, a calendar, links to ongoing and archived streamed services, and so on.

Apart from basic information about contacts, calendar, and places to meet, there is a short background history of SFC and the Laestadian revivalist movement, as well as a short account of how the organization works with publications (such as cassettes, CDs, and books). "[T]he need has grown over the years", it says, and it features statements regarding the faith of the congregations and information about meetings and services. There are links to their counterparts in Finland (*SRK – Suomen Rauhanyhdistysten Keskusyhdistys*) and the USA (*LLC – The Laestadian Lutheran Church*). There is an archive of pictures from different events and the ordinary life of the congregations. There is also a link to Google Play and the App Store where one can download the hymnbook (*Sions sånger & psalmer*).

The different congregations are presented, and two of the Swedish ones have their own webpages (*Dalarna fridsförening* – www.dalarnasfridsforening.se and *Stockholm fridsförening* – www.stockholmsfridsforening.se). Dalarna's webpage has information about their history, aim and activities, contact details, a map, a calendar, and links to sister organisations, Google Play and App Store for the hymnbook, and streamed and archived services and meetings. *Stockholm fridsförening's* webpage is similar in content to Dalarna's.

Summary: The Laestadian branches and digital media representation

To sum up the content of the different online Laestadian resources, even though they differ slightly between the branches, one can conclude that there is primarily information and glimpses of ongoing activities, and that communication is one-way. At the same time, web visitors are openly invited to come to the physical meetings. After a few case studies on different topics related to the use of digital media within Christian organisations (Gelfgren 2015, 2014, 2013), and with a good overall sense of what is going on in the religious online sphere (first and foremost Christian), it is notable that there are no interactive social media, such as blogs, or Facebook groups or Twitter, YouTube, or Instagram accounts. Apart from the link to the youth blog on LFF's page, there are no social media and consequently no interaction at all on the web resources hosted by the various Laestadian branches.

Based on web presence, and what is known about the hesitant attitude towards modern technology within Laestadianism, one might assume there is a simple rejection within the movement of "anything modern". But as pointed out in research concerning other technology-hesitant religious groups such as Amish, Mennonites, or ultra-Orthodox Jews, the answer is not that simple. Instead, it is a deliberate standpoint based on faith, tradition, and prerequisites. This more nuanced approach comes through in the interviews that were conducted.

5. "We use the internet when the advantages supersede other technical solutions"

For a complementary view of the Laestadian online presence, six interviews were conducted. Their answers and reasons for how the net is used on an official level can be divided into seven different themes, which are here called: "Consensus communicated through the board", "Use the internet when it supersedes other solutions", "Physical versus virtual meetings", "Information versus communication", "The problem of being public", "Private use of the internet", and "Thoughts about the future".

Physical versus virtual meetings / Communication versus information
A reoccurring theme is not the non-use of digital technology, but rather the best use of specific media. All six informants mention that they use different kinds of digital media – where it is apt for the intended purposes. There is a difference between sharing information and engaging in relations over the net – similar to the division between web 1.0 and 2.0, where the former is roughly associated with publishing and sharing information and the latter is related to social media, building relations, user-created content, participatory culture, converging media, etc. (cf. Bruns 2008; Jenkins 2006).

Nevertheless, in the internal work of the congregations, emailing is used for communication between associated members, and newsletters are distributed through email (and also "snail mail" if sent to someone without internet access). Google Drive and Dropbox are used for sharing and collaborating with documents, and Skype is used for board meetings and similar – locally, nationally and internationally. Special events and larger meetings often have their own web page for information sharing and live streaming. In these cases, digital media add an advantage compared to their analogue predecessors.

The main reason the internet is used in a limited, but specific, way is how the separation between the virtual and physical is perceived among the informants. Recent research claims that the internet dissolves the boundary between the two modes of reality, and consequently, they are intertwined and overlapped (for example, Hoover and Echchaibi 2012; Lindgren 2013). In the case of the Laestadian representatives, there is a sharp division between the physical and the virtual – and the blurring of this division is not to be encouraged. The physical and the personal meeting and interaction is prioritized, and a possible contact is encouraged to "take contact there and then, so and so, with this or that person", says one informant. The internet is seen only as a means to send a message or information to someone else.

Information online is about where to find the actual meeting place, some notes regarding the basics of the movement, and the schedule of activities so someone interested can get an initial overview and find out where to go, according to one informant. One representative of the Conservative branch mentions that "the web presence can lower the threshold for someone who is seeking a spiritual home within the Laestadian movement".

Streamed radio is frequently used online as a means to reach people who cannot attend the actual service – but it is considered by all informants to be the second choice, a choice only if you cannot come to the service in person. They try, for instance, to reach old members

who cannot leave their homes, sick members in hospital, and people who are on journeys far from their spiritual home, but also to reach out to a limited extent. Commercial or search engine optimization is not used. The radio transmissions make it possible for anyone to listen to a service, just out of curiosity and to seek God and Christian community. Live-streamed radio is quite common on a regular basis, but mainly from larger meetings. It is more unusual for streams to be archived, even though it happens. "A service or sermon needs its context and without that, the full meaning and actuality is lost", according to one informant. That is also why a virtual community is disregarded. As one informant put it: "Why do you not seek your fellow brothers and sisters, why do you go online instead? If you are not comfortable within the congregation, something is probably wrong".

The important communication, the meeting and interaction, and, first and foremost, the community of fellow believers cannot be transmitted through a media channel. "We are preaching the Gospel, and it is going out, and people who find it have the possibility to listen", one claims. Consequently, the webpage is primarily used to publish and communicate activities in the congregation to a wider audience, and radio transmissions from meetings are streamed online (and only occasionally archived). Digital media can, however, never supersede heart-to-heart and face-to-face meetings, according to all the informants. Building and maintaining relations, talking about things that matter, sharing faith and community can never be done over the net. You are supposed to find community where you live and not to go online to find it.

Consensus communicated through the board

The informants express that there is consensus within the movement on how to use the net; there are, according to the informants, rarely conflicting interests. Resolutions or deliberate discussions rarely occur.

Structure differs between the groups, but there is a hierarchy, usually with a board or a group of reliable and trustworthy people, a preacher at the local level or a group of preachers on a higher level, who have the final say. People who run and maintain the sites have their defined tasks, stated in guidelines or established practice, to publish and to keep the webpages up to date. If there are questions or initiatives to extend the use of the web further, or to develop new features, it is possible to raise the question and reach a decision in due course.

The informants all say that it is no problem to have new ideas and to develop the use of the internet, but simultaneously they all seem unaware of, or do not wish to have, any new features at the present time. The interviewee from the technology conservative Firstborn Laestadians is also the one who said there is no impetus to develop the use of the internet any further. The others discussed possible ways to go, but referred to a common understanding of how to use the internet and social media. The youngest informant is the one who speaks most about his role as a sole performer of his duties. According to him, it has never been an issue at all to, for example, include social media channels on the webpage, while others mention discussions concerning social media.

The problem of being public

Even if it is toned down in the interviews and no one wants to make a big thing of it, the representatives and the movement as a whole have had bad experiences from being in the public eye. Several of them mention a media discussion in which the Laestadian movement has been exposed to negative opinions and writing in media, especially in Finland; Finnish media, for example, reported a sex abuse scandal in 2011 where cases of abuse within families were reviled (most material is in Finnish, but see, for example, Dave 2011 for an overview). In relation to a Norwegian case, Olsen (2008) mentions how experiences from initially having an open online forum led the movement to close it down and lock it behind registrations and passwords due to a polarized discussion (and also a lack of resources).

One of the interviewees assumes members of the Laestadian movement can be viewed as old-fashioned and backward, and he mentions in particular the fact that they have large families with many children – since kids are viewed as gifts from God (see also Snellman 2011).

In media coverage, it has been assumed that Laestadian women are forced into an involuntary role as child-bearers. This is frowned upon by the majority/secular community, and the interviewees claim that Laestadian webpages have been exposed to malicious and negative comments and discussion online.

They have indeed experienced negative attitudes in blogs and other more open channels in the past. According to the informants, it basically takes too much time and effort to monitor and moderate comments on blogs, Facebook, and other places for open discussions. There is also a shared opinion that there is little use in trying to have to a balanced discussion online. "The problem is that discussions cannot be mutual and respectful. It is possible [online] for people to express hateful comments without any consequences. [---] it makes you only sad." Soon discussions become polarized and nuances are lost, which makes it difficult to have a meaningful conversation – an experience shared with other groups such as journalists, feminists, the Catholic Church, the Royal family of Sweden, and others who are exposed to malicious attitudes and internet trolls (for example Hardaker 2010). One informant mentions that they want to meet people with openness and respect, but the internet forums make this difficult.

Private use of internet

Since the focus of the article is on official use of digital media and the internet, i.e., how Laestadian organisations and congregations use the net, questions were not asked about how the net is used privately. However, all interviewees, apart from the person representing the Firstborns, mentioned that individuals use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. The Firstborns explicitly encourage members to abstain from private use of the internet. There is a risk that the internet will function as a mediator to the secular, and tempting, world, and as such, it should be avoided, according to the oldest and most conservative informant. In other cases, the use of the internet is discussed and taught about within the congregations, especially for the young ones. There are, however, closed Facebook groups, often for internal communication, especially among the younger generation, and some use Twitter and so on. However, the recreational use of the net and social media is discouraged – since time spent in front of the screen is time away from your friends, family, and the Bible.

All interviewees also mention how easy it is to get access to disturbing and morally dubious material. "Even if you go to an innocent site like *Blocket* (Swedish site for a private buy and sell market), you find flickering adverts that can be about just anything", one said. The same person, the youngest of the interviewees, mentioned that he wanted to spend his time with family – meetings that really meant something to him (an attitude comparable with a discussion on the use of television, which was banned) (see, for example, Alasuutari 1996).

All mention that they, and others in their context, use the net in their professional life as IT administrators, for marketing, or for finding special hymns and melodies as clergymen, but also for seeking specific information about just anything. The informant within the most technology-conservative branch, the Firstborns, pointed out that people in his congregation use online Bibles and hymnbooks during services and at Bible study meetings. Technology, even for personal use, is in general not prohibited but still viewed with some concern.

Tentative thoughts about the future
Most informants said that there is consensus at the present time about how to use the internet in a rather restricted and conscious way, but they could see changes coming in due course. Some changes will come with the young generation who are more tech savvy, while the older generation, less skilled and more traditional, will decline in the near future. Change will thereby come gradually and naturally.

At the same time, the informants could anticipate and wish for some other changes already today, given the possibility to develop their web presence – if only time and resources were allocated. They could foresee an extended use of social media to some degree in some cases, but it takes time and resources, something they could only wish for at the moment. One informant could see how the live-streamed radio broadcasts could also involve streamed video from services and meetings. He also anticipated it being possible to make short films with preachers, missionaries, and other persons of interest, perhaps on their own YouTube channel.

6. Summary: "If you need a virtual community: something is wrong with your congregation"

There is, in other words, an informed and cautious attitude towards digital media within the Laestadian movement in general even though it differs between different branches. Andreassen (2013) claims in his study that there is a general ambivalence towards new technology, for example the internet. At the same time as the possibilities of digital media are seen, there is always a risk to engaging with the internet. On one hand, the movement can reach out to a wider audience through the internet; on the other hand, the internet is seen as a risk for deception and sin. While Andreassen writes about an emerging eLaestadianism based upon sources from 2012, it seems like there is less, rather than more, signs of such progress today, in 2016. In Olsen's (2008) study, on the other hand, he notes that the internet is used in work with youth.

Based on the empirical evidence provided by this article, the attitude is more thought through than just being ambivalent. In interviews, rather than the online material, the voices

from the representatives are quite unanimous. The official use of digital media is restricted to transmitting information ('push' media as Andreassen calls it, based upon Stewart Hoover (2008)), rather than 'pull' media (media more in the hands of the end user to do whatever s-/he wants). There are only a few traces of eLaestadianism in the material. At first glance, one might see an overall technology-resistant religious group, but that is too generalized an assumption. We find the movement as a whole on the resistant and reluctant side of the scale; however, while there are also differences within the movement, it does not refuse technology per se. In the case of the Laestadian movement, we can see an attempt to resist the almost inevitable movement toward mediatization and the related process of secularization. Simultaneously, the Laestadian movement also relates to the fact that society is mediatized, but instead of embracing media and an alleged mediatized society in order to reach out, measures are taken to contest and negotiate such assumptions.

In order to understand this Laestadian position on digital media, we must look at the specificity of the movement, as pointed out by Campbell. She writes: "[T]he success, failure, or redesign of a given technology by a specific group of users is based not simply on the innate qualities of the technology, but on the ability of users to socially construct the technology in line with the moral economy of the user community or context." (2012, p. 84) Campbell calls for attention to the way history, tradition, beliefs, and practices shape religious negotiations with, and discourses about, technology, and not something attributed to technology itself.

Sharing faith and life among fellow believers is at the centre of Laestadian life, and that cannot be achieved online, according to the interviewees. Confession and forgiveness take place face-to-face among your brothers and sisters in faith, and consequently cannot be mediated.

The distribution of the Word of God is important throughout the Laestadian tradition and is prevalent in their online activities, in particular through papers and streamed services. The internet is thus not used to build a shared and virtual community among believers, but rather to support the individual believers to take part in the community of believers – in the physical space. The congregation is the people present in the prayer houses or at other physical meetings. As one informant mentioned – "if you need a virtual community, something is wrong with your congregation".

The use of digital media is, as in other cases, negotiated based on traditions, beliefs, and established practices. The Laestadian movement come to the conclusion that digital technology is to be used when it is regarded as better than other solutions. The spiritual meeting at a physical place cannot be mediated, but sharing documents and administrative work can be done online, and services can be streamed (although it is still a second choice) to reach people who cannot attend the actual meeting.

When it comes to the communal framing and discourse within the movement, it seems quite unproblematic to have a rather hierarchical structure where everybody appears to know what is expected and possible. There are ideas for how to move in other directions, and it is deemed possible, but not always necessary or even desirable.

Campbell's model primarily focuses on internal factors, but (as she mentions) there are external factors as well. Contemporary society is mediatized, if we follow Hjarvard's (2013) line of thinking, and in many cases, actors and representatives of various institutions might be

obliged to be public and communicate through available media channels in formats established in the media sphere. This does apply to the Laestadian movement too, but they choose to deliberately abstain from communicating according to the rules of the mediatized society. As long as the use of digital media does not conflict with ideas and practices within the movement, it is possible to use digital media for communication.

Publicity and openness are obviously dilemmas for the Laestadian movement, reflecting the dual nature of the internet (Turner 2006), due to experiences from being in the public eye and how digital technology is perceived. The internet and its consequences are not, by any means, determined in any direction, but a reflection of how the internet is used in certain contexts. Social media are used in private, but for the institutionalized movement, recreational use of the internet and the participatory culture of the internet is problematic, so that aspect is toned down or acted against. This approach bears resemblance to examples from Amish and Jewish Ultra-Orthodox communities. A nuanced discussion is considered difficult due to the affordance of the media. Living a Christian conservative life, with large families in a modern secular context, has spurred unwilling controversies and exposed their members to outspoken prejudices and public condemnations from anonymous people.

In other words, even though there is a cautious approach towards technology, with differences regarding the use of digital media between the various branches within the Laestadian movement, it is difficult to claim there is a hostile attitude toward technology in general. Virtual community is always a secondary option and not an alternative to the "real life", and based upon that assumption, digital technology is used only when it supersedes the alternatives.

Interviews (recordings and excerpts in the possession of the author)

Informant 1: interview conducted 15/01/22
Informant 2: interview conducted 15/02/11
Informant 3: interview conducted 15/03/05
Informant 4: interview conducted 15/03/13
Informant 5: interview conducted 15/03/22
Informant 6: interview conducted 15/11/03

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[i] There are five different Sami languages in Sweden (North, South, Lule, Pite, and Ume Sami). Laestadius wrote down and hence "constructed" the written language for the Lule Sami language, based upon vernacular language. This is comparable with Martin Luther's construction of written German and Olaus Petri in Sweden, when translating the Bible into the vernacular.

[ii] Anecdotally I can say that I've never talked to someone in their 70+ who was so knowledgeable about the internet and its various aspects, while still being a non-user on a recreational basis.