

Article

The Digital Media Sermon: Definitions, Evaluations, Considerations

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Abstract: The question driving this particular paper is how to understand the place of the sermon on the digital frontier. In hopes of accomplishing this rather abstract task, this essay will begin with an analysis of the concept of digital rhetoric as articulated by Richard Lanham, Douglas Eyman, and Angela Haas. Next, this paper will review the dissertation literature published since 2013 that address preaching and technology. Then, this essay will address the “best practices” research on preaching and technology from Tripp Hudgins, Michael Chan, Sunggu Yang, Casey Sigmon, and Joshua Schatzle published since 2019 to see what influence the dissertation research is having on functional conversations. Finally, a proposal for capturing the concept of “digital homiletics” will be articulated based on John McClure’s idea of theological invention.

Keywords: preaching; digital rhetoric; digital media; technology; theological invention

1. Introduction

In many ways, conversations related to all things “digital” have become a hot topic, especially in sub-disciplines connected to the meta-discipline of communication. Studies in rhetoric, media, writing, information technology, creativity, and even homiletics are circling the concept of “digital”, primarily in light of the continuing effects of the culturally seismic COVID-19 pandemic. Generally thought of as a conversation for junior scholars, those working to establish a niche for themselves in academic discourse, this Special Issue features contributions from senior scholars who are seeking to understand preaching in the digital frontier. For example, [Sensing \(2023\)](#) explores how pastoral presence can be achieved through online preaching. Additionally, [Knowles \(2022\)](#) explores how the foundational voices of media theory provide guardrails against losing authentic pastoral ethos on the digital frontier, a topic that will also be addressed below. The question driving this particular paper is how to understand the place of the sermon on the digital frontier. In hopes of accomplishing this rather abstract task, this essay will begin with an analysis of the concept of digital rhetoric. Next, this paper will review the dissertation literature published since 2013 that address preaching and technology. Then, this essay will address “best practices” research on preaching and technology published since 2019 to see what influence the dissertation research is having on functional conversations. Finally, a proposal for capturing the concept of “digital homiletics” will be articulated.

2. Defining “Digital Media”

The phrase “digital media” has had an evolutionary journey to this point in history, as much of its development has taken place in the field of rhetoric, which itself has experienced something of an ongoing revisioning over the last three decades. The phrase was first coined by noted University of California at Los Angeles rhetorician Richard A. Lanham in a 1989 essay on the digital revolution in literary studies. These were still the early days of digital media, as commonly understood today. Research still needed to be conducted in libraries, often still using microfilm and microfiche. The personal computer was still a dream for many, and access to the World Wide Web was still a full high school or college



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experience away. Yet, Lanham argued that a time when one could read books in “pixelated print” was closer than commonly imagined (Lanham 1989, p. 265). Lanham further argued that “Digitized communication is forcing a radical realignment of the alphabetic and graphic components of ordinary textual communication”, something that he saw as becoming a collaborative process between author and reader (Lanham 1989, p. 265). This, in his estimation, would lead to a general revolution of the concept of a “fixed text”, thus accelerating the oscillation of interpretations that a given reader could make about the text under consideration (Lanham 1989, p. 268). Not only this, however, there would also be a sharpening of constructive and deconstructive approaches to literary and rhetorical interpretation. In what now seems like prophecy, Lanham postulated our current ability to access numerous editions and renderings of classic texts such as *Paradise Lost* on a single reading device while also envisioning the “director’s cut” approach to releasing films after their theatrical run. To be specific, what Lanham envisioned is more akin to the “dangerous precedent” of Zack Snyder’s “director’s cut” of *Justice League*, which repurposed the film into “narrative acts” that can be viewed continuously or independently and provide nearly two additional hours of content (Dockterman 2021), than it is to the simple adding of edited footage, such as in *True Romance* or *Kingdom of Heaven*—which are considered two of the best “director’s cut” films of all time (Hanley 2022). “Digital media”, then, is the “metaphysical adjustment” that all media—print, music, art, film, etc.—will eventually evolve into, as technology continues to expand the boundaries of what is possible, what Lanham refers to as “the relentless dramatically” (Lanham 1989, p. 275).

The next major definition of “digital media” comes in a 2005 essay from James P. Zappen. Rather than the abstract postulating of Lanham, Zappen takes a more functional, more technical approach. He refers to “digital media” as “digital rhetoric” and notes that the study of this subject “is at once exciting and troublesome” (Zappen 2005, p. 319). It is exciting because it opens new possibilities for the nature and function of rhetoric. However, it is troublesome because rhetoric brings over two millennia of cognitive baggage with it to the emerging digital frontier. Yet, a way of explaining traditional models of rhetoric in digital spaces is needed. In what ultimately functions as a literature review, Zappen notes the common characteristics that are emerging with digital media. In terms of characteristics, digital media provides speed, reach, anonymity, and interactivity. Speed goes without saying. The existence of digital media facilitates access to content much quicker. Even in a 5G world, dial-up internet is still faster than spending hours combing through newspapers and reference books at the library. Reach also goes without saying. As I have noted elsewhere, one of the intrinsic values of digital media (or social media, specifically) is that it builds relationships (relational), expands the capacity for doing good (influential), and shares what we have with others (generous) (O’Lynn 2014). Reach is only determined by the platform chosen. Digital media also offers anonymity, which allows both the freedom of expression yet also causes problems when it comes to ownership of content and expressions of anger, hatred, and abuse. Interactivity relates to reach in that it allows for persons to engage with the spectrum of humanity, although it brings concerns of personal privacy more to the forefront of ongoing conversations. Additionally, while epistemological debates about how one even defines digital and interactivity continue, Zappen noted that digital rhetoric (media) would move beyond the simple goal of persuasion to the exploration of identity (what has colloquially become known as truth-telling) and community building (also known as creative collaboration). Finally, Zappen envisioned that digital rhetoric (media) would become “an amalgam of more-or-less discrete components rather than a complete and integrated theory in its own right” (Zappen 2005, p. 323). Ultimately, it would become the medium or context in which conversation and exploration would occur rather than a model to be applied.

The third major definition of “digital media” comes from Douglas Eyman in his book *Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method, Practice* (Eyman 2015). Here, Eyman seeks to demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of rhetoric, and digital rhetoric specifically, as the study of rhetoric is both performative and conceptual in nature. It bleeds over into other disciplines

other than just communication or grammar. It influences a number of disciplines, such as political science, education, and, for our purposes, religion, broadly speaking. As such, digital rhetoric requires a holistic approach to its study, as it is becoming its own field of study rather than a discipline within another field of study (Eyman 2015, p. 9). This is where the notion of “digital media” comes into the picture, presented by Eyman more as the vehicle for digital rhetoric than as a synonymous or interchangeable concept. Specifically, in contrasting analog and digital, where analog is “based on the principles of similarity, proportion, and resemblance” (Pawlett 2007, p. 79), digital functions in coded differences and dissimilarities. In so doing, digital media “can be articulated and rearticulated, reshaped or recreated as (nearly) perfect copies, carrying with those copies and ancillary works an apparent cohesiveness, but digital work is also composed of discrete bits (individual binary digits)—these components enable reconstruction, but they can also be susceptible to fragmentation” (Eyman 2015, p. 20). As such, digital media becomes a metaphor for postmodern thought, as it represents both construction and deconstruction (and even reconstruction) simultaneously—a development from Lanham’s original concept. The articulation of rhetoric through digital media takes on a “hyper” quality, borrowing from Heba (1997), who saw rhetoric taking on a continuously reinventive nature through ongoing use by the various users involved in multimedia practice. Eyman notes that the emergence of postmodern thought in mainstream content discussions brought about major shifts in concept and methodology, specifically such as how “persuasion” is understood, now seen as more collaborative than unidirectional. Digital media, according to Eyman, is more than a vehicle, such as watching a sermon on YouTube as opposed to reading it in a printed collection. Digital relates to the foundational concept of literacy, as digital media becomes the new framework through which we discern meaning through communication. This will lead to a synergism both in the development of content and the interpretation of meaning, as competency in use of the media will determine efficacy in interpretive practice.

The final major definition of “digital media” comes from a 2018 essay by Angela M. Haas. For Haas, rhetoric offers a cultural framework, one that outlines accepted values as well as norms that foster conversations and methodologies. Haas thus defines digital rhetoric as follows:

Digital rhetoric is the digital negotiation of information—and its historical, social, economic, and political contexts and influences—to affect change. By digital negotiation, we can think in terms of the role(s) of digital media in relation to invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. Further, we might consider the rhetorical work of digitality as key to digital rhetoricNo matter which approach, digital cultural rhetoricians typically agree that digital rhetoric requires a negotiation—an interfacing—between bodies, identities, rhetoric, and technology. (Haas 2018, p. 412)

On one hand, Haas’ concept of rhetoric does offer a cultural framework, as noted above. Rhetoric not only provides the language of virtue and ethics (more on this below) but also offers the vehicle for communicating virtue and ethics through digital media. On the other hand, Haas’ concept of rhetoric brings the problematic issue of power systems to the surface. Given that the goal of classical rhetoric is persuasion, the concern of philosophical colonization is very real.¹ We have seen and continue to see this dysfunctional application of power in modern American politics (Bail 2021). Either way we approach this, this is what Haas further defines as “interface”, the practice of engaging digital media for epistemological expression (Haas 2018, p. 413). Thus, and something that will course as a thread through the remainder of this essay, is that rhetoric—and the ways in which we communicate—is *not* morally neutral. Regardless of whether the information and media are employed to emancipate the oppressed or oppress the emancipated, the rhetorical form takes on moral currency. For example, a politician standing in front of a church and holding up a Bible holds negative moral currency, due to the semblance of this act to the actions of the 45th US President at Lafayette Park during the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in May 2020. With this in mind, communicators, and preachers specifically for our purposes,

must give attention not only to what they communicate but also through what media they communicate. Preaching on the digital frontier must continue to imagine how it will “foster and sustain more ethical, positive, and just relationships between rhetoric, bodies, cultures, communities, and technologies in our disciplines, organizations, communities, and the world” (Haas 2018, p. 420).

The question that comes after this survey of roughly thirty years of conceptual development is how one defines “digital media”. Initially conceptualized by Lanham, “digital media” would be the move of traditional forms of media into digital forms, such as reading a print book on a digital reader, such as a Kindle. This has happened, and continues to happen, as more and more digital applications are developed. What we can observe, as predicted by Lanham, Zappen, and Eyman, is the move toward “digital media” as a practical function. With Zappen, “digital media” evolves into the medium for rhetorical communication. With Eyman, “digital media” is itself the framework for literacy. Together, we see the advent of media as both message and messenger. Finally, through Haas, we see “digital media” as providing the framework for understanding the culture in which we exist. It provides us with our interface for meaning and existence. Thus, the journey has progressed from media as tool to media as existential space. As homiletics and preachers, it is imperative to discern how “digital media” impacts the communication of the gospel.

3. Evaluating Relevant Homiletical Research

The conversation regarding the move toward digital is not new or unexpected. This conversation has been brewing below the surface of homiletics for the better part of the last three decades—perhaps four, depending on how one assesses the influence of televangelism on rhetoric and media. Back then, the conversations were labeled “multimedia”, which would encompass everything from using projectors to display images on a screen to visual aids. One of the first to enter this emerging conversation was Thomas H. Troeger. In his book *Ten Strategies for Preaching in a Multi Media Culture* (Troeger 1996), Troeger offers more of a defense for creativity in preaching than explicitly engaging with multimedia or digital culture. Some of his strategies include “create a parable”, “use a flashback”, and “reframe a sacrament”. Each chapter then ends with a sample sermon where the creative application is incorporated into the sermon. The strategies are more static than they are dynamic and remain largely oral in delivery. However, it does demonstrate an awareness of the need to include more than just the spoken word.

As a quick aside, Daniel Overdorf and Karyn L. Wiseman offer solid updates to Troeger’s groundbreaking effort, although their focus on multimedia and digital media is limited. In *One Year to Better Preaching: 52 Exercises to Hone Your Skills* (Overdorf 2013), Overdorf includes chapters entitled “Illustrate with Video”, “Conduct E-Interviews”, and “Show Websites”. In *I Refuse to Preach a Boring Sermon! Engaging the 21st Century Listeners* (Wiseman 2013), discusses creativity in preaching more explicitly. Some of her chapters discuss using visual aids such as Play-Doh and social media such as Twitter as avenues through which to engage hearers. One noticeable difference between Wiseman’s book and the others discussed is that she includes a chapter on the process of selecting and using audio and visual equipment.

Between the publication of Troeger’s book and those written by Overdorf and Wiseman, Rick Blackwood published his dissertation; titled *The Power of Multi-Sensory Preaching and Teaching* (Blackwood 2008), Blackwood ramped up the conversation from preaching being a strictly (or, at least, predominantly) oral event to one that could be fully immersive sensorially. However, this was not about engaging the senses of touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound just for the sake of engaging the senses. It was for the sake of discipleship, of growing faith in those who gave ear to the sermon. Engaging more with learning theories than with homiletic theories, Blackwood developed his master template for designing creative and engaging sermons and worship services, including the REEKS (relevant, excellence, engaging, kreative, and seamless) model (Blackwood 2008, pp. 121–24). Out of all

of this construction emerges a model that leads to improved “attention, comprehension, and retention” (Blackwood 2008, p. 15). From this, an equally niche conversation has emerged—the role of neuroscience and learning theory on preaching and discipleship, seen in the work of Richard Cox (2012), J. Ellsworth Kalas (2014), Julius J. Kim (2015), and Richard W. Voelz (2019), as well as my own dissertation research (O’Lynn 2015). As we will see below, the ongoing conversation regarding the intersection of theories of creativity and learning will continue to seed future conversations about preaching.

We now turn to evaluating the literature relevant to our discussion of preaching and digital media. Specifically, we will examine four doctoral dissertations, two Ph.D. and two D.Min., published since 2013. Two notes about criteria: First, doctoral dissertations were selected due to the concentrated nature of dissertation work. Rather than selecting established scholars who may or may not be invested in this topic long-term, the emerging scholars chosen demonstrated commitment to not only engaging this conversation but also expanding it. Second, it is assumed that dissertations on preaching and digital media were published prior to 2013. However, the date coincides with the dates listed above of works from established scholars who have written on the subject. Dissertation work in coming years on the intersection of the topics of preaching, technology, media, rhetoric, and discipleship, then, will seek to validate the more established opinions rather than be validated by them. This will be demonstrated through the use of essays published since 2013, with many of them by the doctoral students whose dissertation work is being evaluated.

The first dissertation considered is by Alison C. Witte. Submitted in May 2013, Witte was a Ph.D. student at Bowling Green State University who authored a dissertation entitled “Preaching and Technology: A Study of Attitudes and Practices”. The focus of Witte’s research is how Christian congregations adopt and implement various technologies for the purpose of communicating the gospel. Witte argues that “understanding genre expectations, which are steeped in the traditions and values of a community, is key to understanding how and why digital technologies are used in particular ways and further, how those uses shape or fail to shape the preacher’s *ethos*” (Witte 2013, p. iii). As her research demonstrates, most Christians—whether in the pulpit or in the pew—prefer the oral communication of preaching and, therefore, use technology in supplemental roles. In some cases, technology is perceived as a necessary evil, something that is expected by contemporary worshippers. As such, pastoral and ecclesiastical *ethos* is restricted to what occurs in the worship hour, promoting exclusionary tendencies, such as establishing boundaries to liturgical and pastoral access, and isolating the congregation from the larger community. In conclusion, Witte argues that how preaching is both heard and perceived as fluctuating due to the presence and use of technology, specifically digital technology. If preaching is to remain effective, Witte argues, preachers must acquaint themselves with appropriate methods of engaging “an increasingly digital culture” (Witte 2013, p. iv).

The second dissertation considered is by Bryce Ashlin-Mayo. Submitted in September 2013, Ashlin-Mayo was a D.Min. student at George Fox Evangelical Seminary who authored a dissertation entitled “Shift: Expanding Preaching for a Social Media Sermon”. The focus of Ashlin-Mayo’s research is how the introduction of various modes of information technology has drastically shifted how humans communicate and relate to one another in social settings. Based on the foundational rhetorical theories of Ong and McLuhan, Ashlin-Mayo argues that “people are using old tools in new environments” (Ashlin-Mayo 2013, p. vii). As such, well-worn approaches to preaching are losing their connectivity to contemporary listeners. Attention and comprehension are declining and discipleship is waning. Preaching itself, in terms of its rhetorical and theological nature, is not the problem. The problem is a question of methodology, namely *how* preaching is communicated. Thus, Ashlin-Mayo argues that preaching, in its contemporary state, has lost its “north star” and needs to realign itself with the “constellations” of relevance, Christocentric theology, participatory, and responsive (Ashlin-Mayo 2013, pp. 12–13). Using the metaphor of one who repairs stringed musical

instruments (luthier), Ashlin-Mayo crafts a more pedagogical and narrative approach to preaching that connects with social networks that are perpetuated through social media.

The third dissertation considered is by Casey Thornburgh Sigmon. Submitted in May 2017, Sigmon was a Ph.D. student at Vanderbilt University who authored a dissertation entitled “Engaging the Gadfly: A Process Homilecclesiology for a Digital Age”. The focus of Sigmon’s research is that preaching needs to undergo a significant transformation in order to engage the growing influence of postmodernity. The ever-growing number of new methods for preaching both demonstrates this reality while also noting the very lack of ability for homiletic thought to do so. The digital age is ever-evolving and responsible preaching and ecclesiastical practice must address this. Drawing on Whitehead’s concept of novelty—what Whitehead termed as a “gadfly”—Sigmon argues against the binary approaches to defining reality (Sigmon 2017, p. 4). This concept of novelty, then, offers preaching and homiletical practice a necessary avenue for engaging the digital age in which we find ourselves. As such, Sigmon proposes that preaching adopt more conversational and dialogical models of homiletical design and delivery. Sigmon offers a theological method that she has termed “homilecclesiology”, which centers its delivery in touch, here defined as “a full-bodied sensation of coming into contact with another in ways that are mutually affirming” (Sigmon 2017, p. 175). Whereas technology has a tendency to disconnect and isolate (a common complaint against traditional forms of preaching), Sigmon’s approach seek to connect and embrace through the preaching moment and our continued engagement in the digital culture. In her final analysis, Sigmon argues that preaching carried out in this way restores humanity as created in God’s image (*imago Dei*) as we engage in the homiletic and missional work of discipleship. Additionally, Sigmon’s research presents a significant shift in research, not only related to this project specifically but in regard to homiletics broadly speaking. Whereas the other projects focused on one specific area of preaching, Sigmon envisions a substantive revision to both the art and science of preaching, both how to understand preaching and how preaching is accomplished. It will be interesting to see how Sigmon’s work ripples through the homiletics community in coming years.

The final dissertation considered is by Ramona Hays. Submitted in May 2018, Hays was a D.Min. student at Luther Seminary who authored a dissertation entitled “Digital and Analog: Preaching in a Multi-Media World”. The focus of Hays’ research is how sermons are heard by two different listening groups—“analog” listeners and “digital” listeners. Analog listeners are those who have been formed rhetorically via more traditional forms of communication and process information in a linear fashion. Digital listeners are those who have been formed rhetorically via more technological forms of communication and process information through disconnected excerpts. More practical in nature, Hays provides an analysis of her own preaching to these two listening groups through the delivery of five sermons crafted and delivered in different ways—a traditional manuscript, an integrated worship service, a TED Talk, a participatory sermon, and implementing multiple learning styles. Unlike the other research projects analyzed here, Hays’ project is more personal, more of an estimation of her own preaching as a self-described analog who preaches in a digital world (Hays 2018, p. 1). However, by the end of the project, she admits that any effective preacher must learn to lean into the digital world (Hays 2018, p. 94). What this project confirms more personally is that the conversation regarding preaching in a digital context is a locked component of any rhetorical or theological conversation.

4. Considering Digital Media “Best Practices”

What this dissertation research demonstrates is that the homiletical community, in general, is unprepared to engage the digital world through effective rhetorical practice. At best, the use of technology and ability to engage the digital frontier are secondary or tertiary concerns at best. This reality has only been compounded by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, where houses of worship were closed for extended periods of time and much of the liturgical and pastoral work moved to digital spaces out of necessity. As I have noted elsewhere, even those of us who considered ourselves conversant and competent with

technology were caught off-guard when we stepped into our digital pulpits in March 2020 (O'Lynn 2023). While it would be impossible to have expected those who engaged in the above research to have divined for the need of technological competence that could have navigated the shift to virtual preaching and worship—and the further shift to continuing forms of homiletic and liturgical hybridity—this research does demonstrate that a necessary partner has been missing from ongoing homiletic and liturgical conversations. As Peterson (1999) noted nearly 25 years ago, we who declare the good news of God do so in a “wired world”. However, as Yang has astutely noted, there has been a “paucity of theological reflection related” to preaching and digital media (Yang 2021, p. 75). While that has changed some due to the COVID-19 pandemic, what has emerged is more akin to individual “things learned while preaching to a camera”. I will even admit to doing this.

What is needed is an exploration of the consistent wins discovered from preaching in digital and hybrid spaces. As was noted in Ashlin-Mayo's research above, contemporary approaches to preaching have continued “using old tools in new environments” (Ashlin-Mayo 2013, p. vii). This is not to say that tools that have served preaching well in the past cannot be repurposed for digital and hybrid environments. What it does mean is that a new wave of invention needs to crash through the discipline of homiletics, washing away what is no longer useful and reshaping the landscape of the conversation of what is considered responsible and competent preaching. However, more on this below. We are getting ahead of ourselves.

Since Yang's essay cited above was published in 2021, a number of articles, essays, and book chapters on preaching in digital spaces have been published (many of them in recent Special Issues published by *Religions*), and full-length book projects are starting to pop up on the literary horizon. Eventually, enough content will be produced that similarity and consistency of thought will emerge. New “best practices” for the digital sermon will distinguish themselves from more rudimentary or less effective practices. This is the very nature of invention in any practice, especially more creative practices. Additionally, preaching is a creative practice. This leads to the question of what is emerging now. What practices are setting the tone now? Who are the voices shaping and contributing to the conversation?

To answer this question, an extensive search of essays published on the themes of “preaching online”, “digital preaching”, and “preaching and digital media” was conducted. The search produced six essays by five different authors. One essay predates the COVID-19 pandemic by a few months. Additionally, the essays published in the Special Issue of *Religions*, in which this essay appears, were not discovered in this search. The discovered essays will now be analyzed in publication order to determine whether any “best practices” are emerging. First, Hudgins, writing before the COVID-19 pandemic, argues that the mass dispensing of content “across social media platforms completely disrupted the information marketplace” (Hudgins 2019, p. 79). Whereas people once turned to static outlets such as newspapers or news broadcasts to discern what was happening in the world, people can now open an app on their phone and find out not only what has happened that day but what is happening *at that moment*. As such, people now feel that they are more informed and, therefore, seek out more connection to content providers. Yet, are people wiser? The jury seems out on this, which is where preaching comes into play. Hudgins here argues that the thoughtful exegesis of scripture remains the starting place for effective preaching in such a context. Then, he offers three examples of digital preaching. First, there is the “social media platform sermon”. Here, the preacher preaches their sermon in the traditional setting of the gathered worship service. Then, thoughts from the sermon are posted to social media in a thread. This allows listeners (followers) to engage with both the preacher's process of crafting the sermon as well as the preached sermon. Second, there is the “live from the pulpit sermon”. Here, the preacher preaches the sermon to a camera. The sermon is communicated with the same verbal and nonverbal notes that a traditionally preached sermon is preached with. However, here, listeners are not present in the sanctuary but are gathered around their computers or smartphones. Third, there is the “online sermon for the

online church". Here, the preacher preaches the sermon in real time with the service being broadcast (a.k.a., livestreaming). The intention here is to reach more listeners than those who have gathered physically for worship. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, these options, at least the second and third, were used by "resource rich" congregations, congregations that invested resources and funds into how technology is used for missional purposes (O'Lynn 2022, p. 28). Yet, they also demonstrated where the conversation about preaching in digital spaces was moving in its beginning phase. Much of what Hudgins saw as outlier practices became—and have remained—staple approaches to preaching during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, Yang (2021), as noted above, seeks to address the scarcity of homiletic scholarship that focused on preaching in digital spaces. Yang begins with a re-examination of Barth's "threefold" dimensions of God's Word—written, revealed, preached. Then, he offers an innovative concept—a fourth dimension of the Word digitalized. Here, the written Word (the Bible) is digitized for accessibility. The revealed Word (Jesus) is digitized by "cross-cultural ubiquity" for connectivity (Yang 2021, p. 79). The preached Word (the sermon) is digitized for spontaneous and sharable interaction. These traits of digital preaching are then used to envision eight creative approaches to preaching online: lecture style (livestreamed from traditional worship service), conversation style (recorded sermon from behind a desk), reporter style (removed from pulpit or desk and presented as real-time presentation), interview style (situated in a comfortable setting to promote interaction between preacher and listener), drama style (presented theatrically, possibly with props), Zoom/Chat style (like conversation style but presented informally to decenter authority/power and promote equality between the preacher and listener), rock concert style (portrayed as an engaged presentation between preacher and listener), film (or Vidpod) style (filmed in a cinematic or documentary style). While not each of these styles addresses every trait, we see in Yang's styles options that are available for creative homiletic use in digital spaces.

Third, Chan (2022) seeks to discern a set of "best practices" rather than new models for preaching digitally. These practices may resonate as common sense to even the novice preacher. However, as discourse continues its demise in some religious and political circles, these practices are offered as a remembrance of what should undergird effective preaching rather than a propping up of what Ashlin-Mayo referred to as "old tools" (see above). First, Chan reminds the preacher to know their audience. This means that preachers must not only know the names and faces of those who give ear to the sermon but should also be qualitatively and quantitatively adept sociologically. Preachers should learn how social media works and how to engage their members through social media. Additionally, it means that preachers should learn about the concerns that are present in the cultural ethos and how preaching can address these concerns. Second, Chan reminds the preacher to engage the text. In addition to traditional print resources, such as original language translations and commentaries, Chan encourages preachers to take advantage of the plethora of online resources, such as digital lectionaries, for instance "Working Preacher" and "Preaching Today", as well as podcasts from Biblical scholars and pay-to-play academic sites, such as "Logos" and "Oxford Biblical Studies Online". All of this content opens the preacher up to the rich and beautiful diversity that is Christian scholarship. Finally, Chan reminds the preacher of the need to cultivate empathy and understanding. As noted above, the dysfunctional uses of power continue to manipulate and distort views held by those who adhere to Christian faith. Caught in what Bail (2021) calls "echo chambers", most are not even aware of the distorted and potentially destructive views that they hold. Authentic pastoral authority is not demonstrated in equalizing all opinions, especially those that contradict the mission of God. Instead, authentic pastoral authority addresses these doctrinal discrepancies with considerate compassion in the hope that God can redeem them.

Fourth, Sigmon (2022) offers an apologetic for the connectivity that digital media provides, especially when isolation is mandated to ensure safety. Forced indoors, people of all

kinds turned to digital forms of community building in order to assuage social disruption, the anxiety and loneliness being felt due to the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sigmon talks about hosting social events via Zoom while also noting the concerns with relying on technology to maintain human connection. Sigmon quotes Kranzberg who noted, “Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral” (Kranzberg 1986, p. 545). From here, Sigmon argues against the commonly held poles of thought regarding technology—technophilia (the worship of technology) and technophobia (the fear of technology). The appropriate use of technology, Sigmon further argues, is a matter of discipleship and spiritual maturity. Here, Sigmon turns to *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen’s classic study of spiritual formation. Written during the early days of significant digital technological advancement, Nouwen addressed the spiritual concerns of loneliness, hostility, and illusion—concerns still felt deeply by many today—with the disciplines of solitude, hospitality, and prayer. Sigmon, then, builds an ecclesiastical approach from Nouwen’s model that can be applied to digital preaching and worship. She notes the obvious concern about missionally engaging in digital spaces—clickbaiting. Homiletic and liturgical engagement is about proclaiming the gospel, not securing followers and acquiring likes. Therefore, although not fully discussed by Sigmon, pastoral ethos returns to the forefront of the conversation. Do we offer solitude, hospitality, and prayer, or are we simply looking for clicks? Sigmon concludes by offering a number of examples of those who sought to develop Nouwen-like communities of belonging amidst a time of loneliness and isolation. These examples are intended to demonstrate how Nouwen’s model can be applied homiletically.

Finally, Schatzle (2023a, 2023b), in a two-part essay, examines the digital ecology in which preaching occurs, building primarily on Ong, McLuhan, and Postman, and then offers six practices for effectively engaging this ecology. Much of what Schatzle addresses in his section on digital ecology has been covered elsewhere in this essay. First, Schatzle encourages preachers to be captivating, not only entertaining. Second, Schatzle encourages preachers to be succinct, not only shallow. Third, Schatzle encourages preachers to be narrative, not only illustrative. Fourth, Schatzle encourages preachers to be savvy, not only trendy. Fifth, Schatzle encourages preachers to be deep, not only content-driven. Finally, Schatzle encourages preachers to be imaginative, not only intellectual. In conclusion, Schatzle postulates that the application of these practices brings preaching full circle, as many of these practices have been adopted time and time again throughout the history of the Christian mission.

5. Proposing “Digital Homiletics”

To begin bringing our conversation to a close, this final section will proceed in the following fashion. First, a summary of the above discussions will be offered. Second, John McClure’s concept of theological invention will be analyzed and evaluated, especially as it relates to preaching. Finally, a proposal for “digital homiletics” will be articulated. To begin, we should assess and summarize the two previous sections—the review of relevant dissertation research and the discussion of “best practices”. These two collections of research unintentionally collaborate to form an important track that will lead us through this final main section. To be more specific, it will be argued that the above discussions are the paving stones for all future conversations about preaching and digital media. First, from Witte’s research, the importance of ethos in preaching is reaffirmed. This discussion has always remained integral to any discussion of contemporary homiletics, with significant studies on the topic emerging from Resner (1999), Reid and Hogan (2012), Schultze (2020), and McClure (2021). Ever since the days of Aristotle, the authenticity of character has been accepted as a foundation element of effective communication. Does the personality presented on stage match the person encountered off stage? As Schultze notes, “One aspect of ethos is virtue—intrinsically good qualities of character. Virtuous persons habitually display an authentic, positive ethos. As a result, others generally like and trust them” (Schultze 2020, p. 102). The opposite practice is to craft a persona, a false projection that is rooted in dishonesty. In a highly digitized world, this is an ever-growing concern as the

use of a persona (a.k.a., avatar) is a commonly accepted—if not encouraged—practice of social media usage, video game playing, and content creation culture.

Second, from both Ashlin-Mayo and Sigmon's research, we need an intentional shift toward more pedagogical and dialogical models of preaching. Although still a niche topic in homiletics, the work mentioned above—especially that of Rick Blackwood, Julius Kim, and Richard Voelz—deserves special attention. Preachers simply can no longer expect spiritual growth or missional engagement to simply happen because we have preached the sermon. This does not remove divine authority from inspired texts such as Isaiah 55 or Romans 10. However, it does mean that preachers should pay more attention to effective modes of learning and homiletical pedagogy. An excellent example is Sigmon's essay in this issue. In it, [Sigmon \(2023\)](#) applies the pedagogical method of master educator Parker Palmer, in reference to his classic work *The Courage to Teach*, to homiletical practice. Additionally, preachers must pay more attention to measured forms of discipleship that are rooted in developmental theory. Recent work by [Lamb \(2022\)](#) and [Powery \(2022\)](#), as well as the trauma-informed work of such homileticsians as Joni S. Sancken, Sarah Travis, and Kimberly Wagner, are addressing this developing area. However, more work is needed.

Third, from both Hays and each of the "best practices" essays reviewed in Section 4 above, the reminder to be creative is reaffirmed. One of the continued blessings of the New Homiletic movement is the plethora of new sermon development and delivery models that have emerged over the past 45 years. However, like the more deductive and topical models that preceded it, the New Homiletic has stagnated as it has remained locked to the physical pulpit. As will be proposed below, digital preaching will need to be creative both in content as well as delivery. However, this creativity will be applied to non-traditional worship spaces.

What is needed is a moment of invention, a moment where imagination becomes the philosophical currency and epistemological capital. Invention, according to [McClure \(2011\)](#), is the process of play applied to the making of meaning. Theologically speaking, creation is the activity of taking nothing and making something out of it. Since humans are incapable of literal creation, humans, instead, invent. We take tools and materials already in existence and invent the chair, light bulb, and computer chip. Specifically, McClure looks to music as his heuristic, specifically the "mashup". The mashup is a form of music where a musician mashes two (or more) different songs together in order to produce a new song for a new listening audience. A classic example is Wyclef Jean's, formerly of The Fugees, mashup of Queen's rock song "Another One Bites the Dust" (originally recorded with David Bowie), where Jean sampled the original recording's chorus, remixed Freddie Mercury's vocals, recorded new instrumentation with the remaining original band members, and wrote new lyrics to give the song an updated sound that mixed classic rock and hip hop. While there was certainly a familiarity to the song, it was fresh and funky. McClure suggests the same be applied to theological invention—or, in our case, preaching: "Whereas some theologians use newer technologies to spruce up the presentation of traditional ideas, they do not use them to aid in the invention of new ideas" ([McClure 2011](#), p. 2). To engage in this concept of invention, preachers should engage in four contexts. First, preachers should decide what to say, meaning preachers should explore new ideas both rhetorically and theologically. Second, preachers should engage in discovery, meaning preachers should venture out from traditionally held norms in order to explore the grand diversity of theological thought. Third, preachers should push toward stylistic morphing, meaning preachers should discontinue methods of rhetorical and theological imitation and engage in methods of cross-cultural contextualization. Finally, preachers should participate in ideological legitimation, meaning preaching should engage in crowdsourcing, fan networks, and movement development. Although the connections to homiletics may not be readily evident, McClure's "inventive practices" provide a context for fostering encouraging conversations regarding preaching, creativity, and digital rhetoric ([McClure 2011](#), p. 8). McClure's focus on musical techniques, such as sampling and remixing, speak deeply to how new ideas are formed and articulated. As such, the preacher can approach the task of

sermon design in much the same way as a musician approaches the crafting of an album. While we hear and are guided by scripture, we sample from other theological voices and then mix these perspectives together, along with how these ideas will be presented, into the sermon.

Finally, what would “digital homiletics” look like? It should be noted here that what is proposed in the following sentences can also be found in the abstract. This is a conversation that we are still on the emerging cusp of. Habituating the digital frontier requires both patience and zealous ambition, patience for discerning movement from trend and zealous ambition for tapping the pulse of culture in order to resist stagnation. At this point, the following are proposed as starting points for articulating the course of the conversation. First, “digital homiletics” will require an authentic practice of ethos. In a culture where persona is encouraged, preachers must live in the pew in the same way as they do when communicating from the pulpit. Second, “digital homiletics” will demonstrate an intentional focus on pedagogy and discipleship, preaching for intentional spiritual growth and missional engagement rather than simple cognitive assent. Dominique A. Robinson’s iHomiletic program serves as a good example of this concept, as she focuses on training ministry leaders on developing pedagogically and technologically competent approaches to preaching and discipleship through digital media.² Finally, “digital homiletics” will foster creativity in both content and delivery, not in that the method will dictate the message but that the method will not be restricted to traditional avenues but will strive to discover creative ways to deliver the message. Melva Sampson’s *Pink Robe Chronicles* serves as a good example of this concept, as she focuses on using non-traditional approaches that are influenced by historic methods of truth-telling to proclaim the gospel and engage in discipleship.³

6. Conclusions

As mentioned in the introduction, the conversation about the digital nature of preaching is not going away. It can no longer be ignored. It is now part of the larger meta-conversation of preaching and homiletics. Yet, the conversation revolves not only around how technology and media is used in preaching but will now consider embodiment, presence, creativity, digital rhetoric, and media theory alongside more traditional topics such interpretation, ethos, and delivery methods. It is hoped that this will foster more robust articulations of homiletical theory and practice as we continue moving into the digital frontier.

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Notes

¹ Jerusha Matsen Neal offers a thorough and stinging critique of rhetoric, especially the more exclusionary applications of rhetoric; *The Overshadowed Preaching: Mary, the Spirit, and the Labor of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Neal 2020), pp. 24–54.

² Please see Robinson’s website for more information: <https://www.dominiquearobinson.com/>; accessed 26 May 2023.

³ Please see Sampson’s website for more information: <https://www.drnelvasampson.com/pink-robe-chronicles>; accessed 26 May 2023.

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