

Media Technology Creating “Sermonic Events”. The Hillsong Megachurch Network

Dr. Miranda Klaver

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

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Global megachurch networks like Hillsong having its center at the megachurch in Sydney Australia, are becoming important research sites to understand how the integration of new media technology in worship services affects and even transforms liturgical practices. The Hillsong megachurch network, like most Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, regards media technology as positive. It provides access to mass audiences and enables Hillsong to extend its network and mission of spreading the gospel and planting churches. Based on ethnographic research in Hillsong New York City and Hillsong Amsterdam I discuss new modes of preaching practices enhanced by the possibilities of media technology. I argue that, because live preaching is accompanied by real-time video casting of the preacher on screens and showing sermons on video has become an acceptable substitute for live preaching, the Hillsong megachurch network challenges the characteristics of live preaching in terms of coherence between time and place, embodiment, and performance. Alternatively, the sermon is transformed into a “sermonic event” that can be reproduced across limits of time, place and context.

Hillsong megachurch network targeting global cities

Since the turn of the century the Pentecostal¹ Hillsong megachurch in Sydney has established a rapidly growing global network of new churches in urban centers in Australia, Europe, South Africa, and recently in the United States.² The success of the Hillsong sites in Amsterdam (founded in 2009) and New York City (founded in 2010), attracting respectively more than 1200 and 7000³ mainly young visitors on a regular Sunday, is remarkable against the backdrop of secularization and de-churching in the Western world. It signals a new trend of global cities⁴ becoming hot spots for global networks of connected churches. Media saturated megachurches are at the center of innovative global religious networks that successfully ‘franchise’ churches in global cities in different parts of the world. While attention for global religious networks is usually studied from a perspective of migration and

reverse mission, a recent new phenomenon is the establishment of global networks by Western based megachurches. Key features of megachurch networks are their size, Evangelical/Pentecostal background, unwaveringly growth-oriented vision, shared cosmopolitan lifestyle and the integration of the latest digital media technologies in their religious practices and organizational structures.⁵ Megachurch networks like Hillsong share a world-affirmative orientation stressing relevance over truth and hold a materialistic view of salvation often captured by the term 'prosperity' gospel.⁶ They offer cosmopolitan spaces of community and identity formation beyond categories of ethnicity and race.⁷

Additionally, megachurch networks are supported by extensive online media practices in the form of videos, blogs, live streaming and continuous updates of the church, pastors and other leaders through social media: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Periscope, assessable 24/7.

The integration of media technology in Hillsong's worship services is part of the larger trend among contemporary Evangelical/Pentecostal churches that validates technology as a God given opportunity which can be used for proclaiming the good news of the gospel and the production of entertaining church services that mirror the surrounding media-savvy popular culture. This raises the question how the integration of media technology fosters new liturgical practices. When I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at two locations of the Hillsong megachurch network in New York City and Amsterdam,⁸ I encountered several modes of preaching practices that depart from common Evangelical practices of the sermon as lecture, often supported by PowerPoint projections. Preachers on stage were also real-time casted on the screens and often videos of sermons were shown when no live speaker seemed available. These observations led me to investigate and reflect upon new emerging sermonic practices I encountered in Hillsong NYC and Hillsong Amsterdam and the implications of integrating media technology in liturgical settings.

Liturgy and technology

The Hillsong megachurch network is unique in creating a globally shared church experience beyond the cultural and contextual differences of the church locations in different parts of the world. Hillsong's worship services display a remarkable similarity in worship space, liturgy, sound, leadership style, and organizational structure. They are usually held in theatres and clubs and resemble multi-media spectacles like rock concerts with the use of

videos, lights, smoke effects, and the performance of hip pastors sharing a similar performative style.⁹ For many first time visitors, Hillsong is primarily known by its worship music as the Hillsong megachurch in Sydney has become one of the worlds leading producers of contemporary worship music since the 1990s.

Outside Australia, Hillsong churches are located at the heart of the entertainment and tourist centers of global cities. In rented theatres and clubs multiple church services are held up to four and even six times a day. The predictable liturgical structure of a Hillsong worship service begins with showing a video. With fast moving images and loud music, the video displays shots of a wondering young person, who from scenes in nature, moves into the direction of a big city. Alternating iconic images of global cities around the world, the video finds its climax (supported by music) in shots of a worship space with a stage and band, resembling the viewer's actual worship space. A smooth transition between the video and the live band on stage is made, blending the world represented in the video and the actual location into one. At the end of the video the worship team opens with an expressive upbeat opening song creating an inviting and enthusiastic atmosphere that stimulates active engagement of the audience. During the following songs, the atmosphere the mood of the visitors is gradually geared towards a more devotional state by changing to a mellow musical style. After the prayers, announcements and the offering, another song signals the beginning of the sermon. After the sermon the audience is encouraged to respond by means of an 'altar call'. The service ends with a closing song.

The highly structured liturgy of Hillsong leaves little room for improvisation or surprises. This uniformity is in part supported by the identical integration of media technology in the church service. The quality of the music and the sound of the live performing band depends, next to the skills of the live performing musicians and singers, on the right mixing of soundtracks supplied by Hillsong's music studios in Sydney. The application of media technology is visibly observed in the usage of screens and the presence of TV cameras in the worship space. The screens are used for magnifying what is happening on stage: showing background visuals and live video images during the time of singing and projecting the preacher during the sermon. Like most evangelical churches, Hillsong understands media technology as a means to transmit information to audiences and therefore focuses on the content. In the words of Hillsong's senior pastor Brian Houston:

“I see a church that is constantly innovative: A church that leads the communication of a timeless message through media, film and technology. A church with a message beamed to people around the globe through their television screens, bringing JESUS into homes, palaces and prisons alike.”¹⁰

Questions of how technology shapes the message, or perhaps distorts, the message are not addressed because of a self-understanding of technology as a neutral form, based on making a sharp divide between form and content, demonstrated in the mentioned words of Hillsong’s senior pastor Brian Houston, “beaming a *timeless* (italics MK) message around the globe”.

The surprise factor: preachers and videos

While Hillsong church services are highly structured and predictable in terms of the order of the service and the music, not all church services are identical on a regular Sunday. Different from traditional churches, the lead pastor¹¹ of the church usually does not preach in all of the many worship services on a given Sunday. For Hillsong visitors, the surprise factor of the preacher consists of two related issues: who will be preaching the sermon and how will the sermon be performed: live or on video? The following account of my ethnographic research demonstrates two different modes of preaching on a Sunday, supported by media technology.

On Sunday night, June 8, 2014, I stood outside the Manhattan Centre, waiting in line for the evening service of Hillsong NYC. Several people around me expressed their hope that Carl Lenz, the popular¹² lead pastor of NYC, would preach that evening. As usual the service started with the short video clip and a time of worship. After singing a couple of songs, Carl Lenz, welcomed the audience. Unfortunately he told us that he would not be preaching that night. Instead, we were to watch the video of him preaching in one of the morning services. He explained that he had already preached twice that day, he had spoken at a large gathering in the Yankee stadium with Joel Osteen the day before and now he was tired and exhausted. The woman sitting next to me expressed her disappointed as she told me: “a live performance of Lenz is the best experience you can get at Hillsong NYC”. As I had attended the morning service and had heard Lenz preach live, watching the video recorded sermon offered me the opportunity to compare the ‘live’ and ‘video’ experience of Lenz’s preaching. That night, a few minutes after the video was started, I seemed to forget that I was watching

an earlier recorded video. Because of the large size of the screens, the number of screens in the theatre, and the excellent sound in the theatre, the experience of watching the sermon on video came very close to the live experience earlier that day. So why, I wondered, was watching the pre-recorded sermon a far less distinct than I had expected? An important reason I suggest is that the live preaching experience at Hillsong is always accompanied by a video registration of the preaching pastor on the screens. Because of the projection of the preacher, the gaze of the audience is pulled in different directions: to the live performance of the preacher on stage and to the fast moving images of the preacher on the screens. Watching the preacher on the screens is being encouraged by the professional way the camera shots are ordered in a compelling sequence. As is explained in Hillsong's manual "Film and Television":

"The role of the TV team during the service is to help the congregation to engage with the preacher and feel part of the service rather than just be spectator." [...] We contribute to closing the distance between the congregation and the stage by magnifying what is happening."¹³

During a meeting for potential volunteers interested in joining the TV team,¹⁴ it was emphasized that *"it is our goal to connect people in the audience with what God is doing on stage"*.

Clearly, media technology is understood to bridge the distance between audience and stage in such a way, that in spite of the seating of the audience, everyone can be engaged with the preacher. However, the close up of the preacher creates a form of nearby presence magnifying the image of the preacher, an image that only can be created because of media technology. Even by sitting in the front row, the preacher's face is more distant than the image displayed on the screens. In the close up image, the dominating face of the preacher draws the attention to his face, conveying and magnifying his emotions. Screens present the body of the preacher: his posture, gestures, and facial expressions. In other words, his performance. Indeed, screens evoke a form of intimacy and privacy between the preacher and the viewer beyond the boundaries of watching a live performance on stage. So it could be argued in the theatrical/club-like worship space used by Hillsong, the focus of the sermon shifts from *hearing* the Word to *seeing* the Word, which draws the attention to the aesthetics.¹⁵ In this sense, the casting of the preacher through the media appeal encourages a personification of religion as the preacher's image and charisma are being stressed.

Furthermore, the production of the real time telecast of the preacher on the screens is not an objective registration of the preaching pastor on stage. On the contrary, the TV team aims to:

*“tell a story, [...] And every shot tells part of the story. The ways each shot is framed and composed is important as it helps to convey significance, emotion or action. Through the sequence of shots the story unfolds”.*¹⁶

The TV director who controls the camera operators (by talking to them through headphones directly) conducts the production of the sermon as a ‘story’. As he or she instructs the camera operators to take the desired shots, the TV director selects the shots that are directly recorded and displayed on the screens. As a result, the audience watches a sequence of framed shots: close up shots of the preacher to draw the attention to his face and magnify his emotions, head to toe shots of the pastor on stage to stress his body language, and wide shots to emphasize the preacher’s moving body on stage. Occasionally, extreme wide shots are used, framing the preacher to the background, which draws the attention to the presence of a large audience. As a result, the video registration of the preacher on the screens adds an extra layer of mediation in the display of the sermon. In other words, by means of media technology the live sermon is transformed into a hyper-visualization of the speaker, magnifying his image, emotions, gestures, and performance. The registration of the sermon on the screens offers the audience an experience of the sermon that goes beyond the live presentation on stage, something I would like to call a ‘sermonic event’. This event is the result of a live edited video consisting of alternating three second shots including close up shots of the speaker, wide shots of the stage, and shots of the audience. Intriguingly, watching the live casting of the sermon changes the power relations between the speaker and the audience. In a traditional church building, visitors have to some extent control over their degree of engagement during the sermon for example by sitting close to the speaker at the front row or seeking a more private space at the back bench. The live video casting of pastors on the screens compel the audience in an intense form of engagement that marks a larger process of transformation of worship space in relation to the application of media technology. As has been described above, the use of media technology transforms the subjectivity of the visitors as the audience’s gaze is directed to the screens and their personal space is altered by the magnified image of the speaker. This demonstrates that media technology is not neutral, and that the often-made distinction between form and

content cannot be upheld. Indeed, practices that include videos and screens are imbued with meaning and alter the power relations between the preacher and the audience.

Variation of sermon practices and video

During visits at Hillsong NYC and Hillsong Amsterdam sites, other preaching arrangements were observed as well. In NYC, because the church meets in two, sometimes three locations¹⁷, the pastors preach their sermons once or twice 'live' at each location at different times while in other services a video registration might be shown. The same pattern applies to invited guest speakers from befriended churches. In both Amsterdam and NYC, occasionally videos of senior pastor Brian Houston preaching in the megachurch Sydney are shown. In Amsterdam, watching the sermon through a live stream connection with the Hillsong London was occasionally observed, for example when guest speaker Steven Furtick preached at Hillsong London.¹⁸ Next to videos and live stream connections, once a year, on the so-called 'Vision Sunday' the Hillsong megachurch network marks the beginning of the new church year with a globally shared church service on the first Sunday in February.¹⁹ This is celebrated with a spectacular church service at the Sydney megachurch including artistic videos, drama, dance, and special music. Because of different time zones, this event is recreated at all the Hillsong sites around the world by showing the video registration of the Sydney megachurch on the same date.

The videos produced at the Sydney megachurch add an extra dimension to the 'sermonic event' in Hillsong sites around the world. The video registrations at the Sydney megachurch show the large bowl-like shaped auditorium filled with thousands of worshippers. The magnified performance and image of the speaker on stage against the background of the multitude of people – as a 'performance of the mega'²⁰ – exhibit the success, influence and power of the church and its leaders. As these Sydney videos usually contain sermons of Sydney's megachurch pastor, Brian Houston, the visual rhetoric of these sermonic videos display and confirm the authority structures and hierarchy within Hillsong's megachurch network.

Sermonic event and liturgical transformation

The varieties in sermon deliveries facilitated by media technology illustrate the shift away from the traditional practice of a live performed sermon towards the sermon as a mediated 'sermonic event'. By using sermons on video, the coherence between time, space, and embodiment of the sermon is being disrupted. Live stream casting of the sermon to other sites (a common practice of multi-site churches) only expands the spatial display of the sermon by connecting multiple locations to the preaching site. In these practices, a coherence of time is upheld between the sermon preached at the main center of the church and other locations. This practice clearly strengthens the notion of being one church, meeting in different locations. Furthermore, this practice can be strategically used in setting up a new church plant. For example, in the early phase of Hillsong Amsterdam a live stream connection with Hillsong London was regularly used as an alternative for live preaching.

However, the display of pre-recorded sermons on video distorts the real time presentation of the sermon. The observed variation in worship space – from the same worship premise to transnational spaces, most likely the Sydney megachurch - signals the implicit theological understanding that sermons can be distributed within the megachurch network despite limits of time, place and context. This corresponds with the type of sermons encountered in the various Hillsong locations²¹: topical and life-situation preaching that focuses on personal salvation and individual needs rather than addressing local contextual issues concerning political injustice and social inequality.²²

So is it really new, one could ask, this mode of preaching and delivering of sermons one encounters in Hillsong's megachurch network? In the first place, from a historic perspective, Hillsong's spectacular worship space reminds us of the revivalist innovation of designing worship space in the nineteenth-century by Charles Finney. The transformation of worship space into amphitheatrically space served the goal of reaching a large audience in such a way that everyone could see the performance taking place on stage. Hillsong offers a modified and 21st century expression of the evangelical revivalist tradition by their use of a more intimate theatrical and clubbing space where the same goals are reached: creating an entertaining visual spectacle by magnifying what is happening on stage by means of and supported by the use of media-technology.²³

Secondly, the phenomenon of a circulation of sermons beyond the primal context and audience reminds us of a practice known from the early church on, namely the

distribution of written sermons in the form of books. Written sermons and video sermons materialized in the form of books or videos gain entextualized qualities and timeless, objective meaning. Yet, written sermons lack the performative dimension of the sermon that can only be captured by means of contemporary media technology. Video sermons offer the possibility of reproducing a 'sermonic event' as an almost 'real' live sermonic experience in liturgical settings. Radically different from written sermons, the subjective element of the performance of the preacher is being emphasized. In this sense, new media technology mediates the presence of 'live preaching pastors', bridging the limits of time and space to even convey immediacy, as the preaching pastor is made 'present' through the use of screens, sound and moving images. The application of video sermons evokes the temporary 'real presence' of the preacher, and therefore changes the sermonic practice from listening to the sermon and watching the preacher in front of the congregation to the experience of watching a video on screens. It is not without reason that the video sermons I observed in the Hillsong sites display pastors with excellent communication skills and highly entertaining qualities. Clearly, preachers most likely to be shown on video resemble a mixture of stand-up comedians, actors, entertainers, and pastors.

Churches like Hillsong are often critiqued for offering a form of consumer religion²⁴ as their theatrical and club-like spaces highlight the world of entertainment and leisure. Interestingly, the Hillsong megachurch network, like many other megachurch networks, plays down the relationship to the outside world, as the leading metaphor for the church is 'home'. In every Hillsong worship space, banners with the words "Welcome Home" are displayed, signaling that church is a place different from the busy and stressful everyday lives of the visitors. At first sight, Hillsong church services could not be further removed from the home, as they are similar to event-like spectacles where visitors encounter mainstream entertainment media. Yet one could argue that it is because of the application of media technology that Hillsong makes visitors feel at home as they experience a setting that resembles their everyday life, acknowledging that their lives are dominated by technology and screens: on their smartphones, computer screens, and even the rock concerts they attend. As one Hillsong member from Sydney expressed her appreciation of watching sermon videos in church: *"because of videos, we get to listen to the best preachers around and are assured of a qualitative good sermon. And why would there be a problem with watching a sermon on video? Watching screens is something we do all the time: we watch*

Ted Talks online, we watch videos on Facebook, so watching a video in church is really not that different.”

In spite of the fact that believers experience and value media technology positively, the integration of screens and videos affects the liturgical setting as it changes the power relations between the congregation and the preacher, impacting the type of sermons being preached, the messages and religious authority and leadership roles.

Conclusion

The integration of new media technology in global Pentecostal megachurch networks gives rise to new modes of preaching practices around the world today. The use of live video casting of preachers and the use of sermon videos without a live preaching pastor raises new questions regarding the impact of the physical presence of the preacher, the reception of sermons watched on screens, and the importance of the context in which these sermon videos are produced and watched. It demonstrates that traditional ways of conducting a sermon as a ‘live performance’ by preacher is no longer self-evident anymore. By means of media technology the sermon is produced as a ‘sermonic event’ that links audiences, pastors, messages and contexts across boundaries of physical space and time. The global distribution and circulation of sermons on video and the application in liturgical settings within the Hillsong megachurch network around the world, fosters a personality culture of preachers and a universal message of salvation, disregarding cultural contexts. Yet, Pentecostal churches like the Hillsong megachurch network eagerly embrace media technology with the conviction that media is a neutral force which not only can be used, but must be used, motivated by the strong evangelistic zeal and understanding of growth of and expansion of the church is a sign of the blessing of God and the fulfilment of a God mission to the church.

¹ Hillsong is a member of Australian Christian Churches (www.acc.org.au/about-us), an alliance of Pentecostal churches previously known as the Assemblies of God in Australia.

² Senior pastor Brian Houston mentioned 39 Hillsong sites around the world in his Vision speech, February 2013. In 2015, he announced the start of two new sites in Latin America: Buenos Aires and Sao Paulo. www.youtube.com/watch?v=22wRTk4g18I, accessed February 10, 2015.

³ These numbers are an estimation based on media interviews of NYC pastor Carl Lenz (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/new-york-city-hillsong-megachurch-draws-thousands-every-sunday/>, accessed August 19 2015) and my observations in the period 2014-2015.

⁴ Global cities are characterized by global cultural flows, economic influence and highly developed communication infrastructures, see Saskia Sassen. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokio*. Princeton University Press. (2001).

⁵ Robbie BH Goh. "Hillsong and "Megachurch" Practice: Semiotics, Spatial Logic and the Embodiment of Contemporary Evangelical Protestantism. *Material Religion* 4.3 (2008): 284-304. Marion Maddox. "In the Goofy parking lot': growth churches as a novel religious form for late capitalism." *Social Compass* 59.2 (2012): 146-158.

⁶ Maddox Ibid, 148; Stefan Paas. "Mission from Anywhere to Europe: Americans, Africans, and Australians Coming to Amsterdam." Paper presented at the Conference Neo Calvinism and World Christianity, Princeton, 17-18 April (2013); Miranda Klaver. "Hillsong Megachurch Network: Christianity in Global Cities." In: *Megachurch Accountability in Mission: Critical Assessment through Global Case Studies*. (forthcoming 2015)

⁷ Ibid Miranda Klaver (forthcoming).

⁸ My research has been conducted in 2013 - 2015 and is funded by the Lilly Endowment as a fellow of the Congregational Studies Team 2013 and supported through Auburn Seminary as a CrossCurrent Fellow 2015.

⁹ Miranda Klaver. "Pentecostal Pastorpreneurs and the Global Circulation of Authoritative Aesthetic Styles." *Culture and Religion* 16.2 (2015)

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14755610.2015.1058527#>

¹⁰ Vision Statement Hillsong senior pastor Brian Houston 2014: "The Church I Now See". <http://hillsong.com/vision/>, accessed August 10, 2015.

¹¹ Within the Hillsong global megachurch network a distinction is made between "leadpastors" and "service pastors". Leadpastors (usually married couples) are responsible for overseeing a Hillsong church in one of the cities, while service pastors are responsible for one of the congregations on a given Sunday, for example the 10 'o clock service. While women are allowed to preach at Hillsong, I observed that female lead pastors occasionally preach when their husbands are away.

¹² Lead pastor of the Hillsong NYC Carl Lenz has amassed a large following among other things because of his radiant personality and his friendship with Justin Bieber.

¹³ Manual Hillsong "Film & Television" .7. Handout NYC Team Night July 2015.

¹⁴ July 2015

¹⁵ Miranda Klaver. "Pentecostal Pastorpreneurs and the Global Circulation of Authoritative Aesthetic Styles."

¹⁶ Manual Hillsong Film and Television, 18.

¹⁷ In 2015, Hillsong NYC changed from two to three campuses. Next to the location in New Jersey, the church moved from the Manhattan Center to Best Buy Theatre and Irving Plaza in Manhattan.

¹⁸ May 12, 2013, Furtick is the Lead pastor of the Elevation church, Charlotte, Carolina USA.

¹⁹ Interestingly, in the Southern hemisphere, February marks the end of summer. Hillsong churches in the Northern hemisphere have to comply with the Australian calendar.

²⁰ Robbie BH Goh. "Hillsong and "Megachurch" Practice: Semiotics, Spatial Logic and the Embodiment of Contemporary Evangelical Protestantism.

²¹ During my ethnographic research I also visited Hillsong London and Copenhagen.

²² This is not to say that the Hillsong church does not respond to social needs. In Sydney the church has a large social ministry. In New York City the church runs a small outreach program in the city and also in Amsterdam occasional volunteer projects are initiated. In the sermons, social and political issues were hardly mentioned, except through the promotion of large organizations like A21 (see A21.org), an organization that "aims to abolish slavery in the 21st century".

²³ Jean Halgren Kilde. *When church became theatre: The transformation of evangelical architecture and worship in nineteenth-century America*. Oxford University Press, (2002), 218,219.

²⁴ See for example Brett McCracken. *Hipster Christianity, When Church and Cool Collide*. Baker Books, Grand Rapids (2010).