ARE YOU READY TO BE SECOND?
CHRISTIAN RECRUITMENT ONLINE[*]

by

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I am Second *is an American religious movement that uses online video narratives to promote the Christian faith. This case study analyses* I am Second*'s evangelistic strategy, with particular attention to four areas: the website, Facebook page, blogs and YouTube.* I am Second *combines online and offline resources in sophisticated ways to mobilise grassroots support and draw attention to its stories, hoping that visitors to its website will watch more evangelistic content and contact an online missionary for conversation. I find no evidence within my selected samples to suggest that supporters are using the Internet to conduct their own evangelism, but branded merchandise and local events are discussed with enthusiasm. Even if supporters are hesitant to share evangelistic content through email or social media, they hope to start conversations with non-Christians by wearing, gifting and displaying intriguing brand logos.*

KEYWORDS
Christianity, I am Second, religious movement online, proselytism, digital storytelling, social media

1. PROSELYTISM AND THE INTERNET

This article is a case study of *I am Second*, a popular evangelical Christian movement based in the United States. *I am Second* (IaS) has created almost 80 high-quality, professionally-edited videos in which celebrities retell the

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story of their triumph over struggles – fame, addiction, troubled relation-ships – through faith. IaS is a particularly sophisticated example of media proselytism, seeking to communicate a Christian message to mainstream culture through a combination of online and offline marketing tactics. These videos are contemporary interpretations of the traditional evangelical genre of the testimony narrative, in which a personal life-story is used to affirm, inspire and provoke Christian faith. This paper looks for evidence that these videos are circulating and attracting a response online, focusing on four areas: the IaS website, the IaS Facebook page, blogs and YouTube.

Proselytism has attracted surprisingly limited attention among scholars of digital religion. Heidi Campbell has analysed the discourse of online evangelism, arguing that proponents frame the Internet as a tool for ministry and a new mission field.[1] Rachel Wagner has also discussed e-vangelism discourse, highlighting a focus on building relationships through popular media platforms like forums, social network sites and games.[2] Mara Einstein draws attention to the combination of websites with other media types in televangelist marketing strategies.[3] A small number of studies have used online evangelism to analyse other issues: Robert Howard discusses "sinner's prayer" webpages to develop a theory of fundamentalist rhetoric,[4] while Bradley Wright has studied online deconversion stories to categorise motivations behind religious disaffiliation.[5] None of these studies offers much detail regarding the actual activities or impact of online evangelism, beyond some rather broad generalisations. Denis Bekkering has undertaken more detailed research into the online activity of American preachers, analysing their use of links and social media to encourage viewers to visit their churches offline, but the videos he examines are almost all recordings of off-line church services.[6] Many more case studies are needed, looking beyond what online evangelists say about themselves to find out what they are really doing, how they are adapting their techniques and how audiences are responding.

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[1]   Campbell 2010
[2]   Wagner 2011
[3]   Einstein 2008
[4]   Howard 2005
[5]   Wright 2011
[6]   Bekkering 2010

My description of IaS relies on analysis of the website, one interview with IAS Communications Director John Humphrey and two Christian magazine articles. I examine the circulation of IaS videos by attending to visible traces of dissemination and response, focusing on three main areas where such traces might be found. I have collected one week's posting to the IaS Facebook page. These postings are visible to more than 250,000 people, so I have not sought permission to quote them. I have identified the most-viewed IaS video on YouTube and coded all comments to identify themes. I have also searched for this video through Google to find any evidence of circulation elsewhere. I have anonymized quotations from these three sources.

2. INTRODUCING I AM SECOND

Christian creative magazine Collide ran a feature on IaS in 2009, hailing it as 'the best multimedia-based evangelism effort in recent memory.'[7] For Collide writer Daniel Darnell, 'engaging our culture involves utilizing new methods of communication. It requires relevant influencers, an authentic message, and effective technology to start a conversation.' The organisation behind IaS, e3 Partners Ministry, pursues this goal by bypassing the usual leaders of Christian culture – pastors, missionaries, popular Christian authors and performers - and paring Christian doctrine down to the single, simple message of "being second" to God. This message is communicated through the real-life stories of individuals, mostly celebrities, who have overcome a crisis by deciding to put God first. According to Christian Post reporter Lillian Kwon, IaS decided to 'zero in on the pure, heartfelt stories of those who have been transformed by Christ', responding to three key themes in contemporary American culture: jadedness towards institutional religion, increasing anxiety and a fascination with celebrity.[8]

This approach to online evangelism does not represent the Internet as a tool for missions or a mission field, contrary to the findings of Heidi Campbell's study of e-vangelism discourse.[9] IaS has chosen America for its mission field, particularly Dallas-Fort Worth. IaS assumes that Americans – including Christians – now see the Internet as a part of daily life, not a tool to be used or a novelty that needs justification. This may reflect a shift in

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[7]　Darnell 2009
[8]　Kwon 2009
[9]　Campbell 2010

e-vangelism discourse since the publication of the early texts Campbell relies on, following more general changes in social attitudes to digital technology.

IaS has developed a consistent, distinctive visual identity, an 'edgy, raw aesthetic' including stark, high-contrast black and white photography, stripped-down sets and a handwritten logo. According to IaS producer Scott Mayo, 'what resonates with people is the tone - that rawness.'[10] Each video features one narrator, occasionally two, dressed in a plain black T-shirt. The set is bare and deep in shadow, centred on a deep white leather chair beneath a single white light. This simple visual design resonates on multiple levels with themes in contemporary media culture, suggesting the spotlight of an interrogation or the straight-to-camera self-disclosure common in reality TV shows and YouTube diaries. Its significance is also strategic and theological. According to IaS Communications Director John Humphrey, plain clothing shows that 'in the eyes of God, everyone is equal', and the single light shows the narrator 'as if they were sitting in the lap of God, telling their story to God.'

IaS videos last from three to fifteen minutes, edited down from hours of interviews. A monologue is created in the editing suite, with all presence of the interviewer removed. Rapid cuts, blurs, rock music and sound effects are used in each film to emphasise the rhythm and shape of the story, increasing in intensity at key moments to generate drama. The typical narrative skips backwards and forwards in time, starting in the middle of a dramatic event, revealing the identity of the narrator indirectly, then breaking off at the climactic moment to jump back to their childhood. The narrative traces a journey into crisis, leading to the moment when the narrator decides to put God first and starts to recover. This decision is not always a moment of conversion: in many cases the narrator begins and ends their crisis as a believer, strengthened by unchanging or renewed faith. In all videos, becoming or remaining "second" leads to the resolution of the crisis and a brighter future. Each video ends with an assertion of the narrator's faith, ending with a set formula: "I am [name], and I am Second."

3. EVANGELISM ON THE I AM SECOND WEBSITE

IaS combines multiple online resources to encourage spiritual change. Video testimonies are ordered on the website into categories of struggle –

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[10]   Darnell 2009

abortion, abuse, affluence, etc - to help visitors locate stories that address their personal situation. Each video offers a range of opportunities for viewer response, including further information about the speaker and links to organisations specialising in Christian response to that struggle type. "Chat Now" connects the visitor to the trained chatroom and email missionaries of the Groundwire group for one-to-one conversation, while "Ready to be Second?" links to a library of videos explaining the Christian faith. IaS has prioritised one area of activity, the production of high-quality videos, and partners with a range of other organisations to provide specialist advice and follow-up contact. A clear trajectory for spiritual change is implied in this structure, moving from independent selection of celebrity stories to watching a gospel presentation and then to personal conversation and, eventually, a local church.

This combination of media libraries and personal communication is a common strategy in online evangelism. Craig von Buseck proposes essentially the same model for video proselytism: start with a short, interesting, visually powerful video, then direct your viewer to a gospel presentation or 'a chat, instant message or Skype environment where someone can lead him in a prayer of salvation' and finally invite them to a local church.[11] Von Buseck also cites ministry leaders who employ teams of email, telephone, SMS and chat specialists to respond to questions. Long-term email communication, he argues, is a powerful tool of influence: 'Through the relationships built in e-mail you can methodically persuade people to do something else - to get them to your Web site, to watch a video, to read a teaching or a Bible passage, to send a prayer request…'.[12]

Some anecdotal evidence suggests this strategy can be effective. Von Buseck admiringly quotes Mikael Andreasen, who has published the story of his 18-month email conversation with one Danish woman in book form.[13] Heidi Campbell has interviewed Patricia, an American woman who converted to Christianity through a process that began with an online search for information, followed by extensive reading of an evangelistic website, then an email conversation with a website employee.[14] Her progression to this final stage appears to have been somewhat fortuitous - Campbell reports that

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[11]   Von Buseck 2010, p67
[12]   *Ibid* p. 47
[13]   Andreasen 2007
[14]   Campbell 2010, p. 142

Patricia was 'not sure what to do next' until she stumbled across a 'Got a Question?' link - but most organisations now ensure that such offers are much more prominently displayed.

One traditional feature of evangelical media is the "Sinner's Prayer", an invitation to the listener or reader to speak directly to God, confess their sins, affirm their belief in Christ's resurrection and give themselves to Jesus.[15] The IaS archive includes a version of this prayer in the brief video "How do I become Second?", with some interesting variations. The prayer itself begins by summarising all four standard elements: 'Receive him by faith, and when I say that, I mean, simply say "Lord Jesus, I believe you died for me. Come into my life, forgive my sin."' The prayer continues, however, with a strong emphasis on the immediate personal benefits of God's intervention: '"Make me into the man or woman or teenager you want me to be. Give me your life, give me your joy, give me your peace, give me your purpose in living, give me your perspective on what life is all about."' Apart from that mention of forgiveness and one unclear reference at the start – 'come into my life and give me eternal life' - there is no mention here of any consequence outside the frame of reference of immediate physical existence, and no mention of any distinctive Christian doctrine. This focus on immediate, real-life concerns demonstrates the consistency of IaS's simple message, but also reflects a broader shift of emphasis from personal sin to personal transformation in twentieth-century testimony narratives.

This discussion so far has focused on the spiritual trajectory encouraged by the inter-related elements of the I am Second website. IaS videos are not always viewed within this controlled environment, strategically linked to gospel presentations and trained e-mail missionaries. IaS videos attract discussion on blogs and YouTube and circulate online through social media, generating interactions between Christian supporters, celebrity fans, spiritual seekers and hostile opponents that both further and undermine the organisation's aims.

4. I AM SECOND ON FACEBOOK

Social media is key to the online strategy of IaS. Each video encourages the visitor to click a button and share it through their social networks. IaS also promotes a 22 Day Challenge, in which participants receive a daily email in-

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[15] Howard 2005, p. 179

viting them to watch a selected video, send the link to a friend, undertake an action task and pray for their city. These forms of online circulation are extremely hard to study directly, since they leave no publicly-accessible trace. Research into this kind of sharing would require interviews with Christian supporters who use IaS in their evangelistic activity, supplemented if possible by access to IaS's own website data – approaches I have not yet been able to pursue. IaS also operates an active Facebook page, however, with some 250,000 followers and a regular stream of updates and comments.[16] If this page plays an important role as a platform for communication in the IaS movement, then messages posted there are likely to include some kind of evidence regarding the circulation and reception of IaS marketing and videos.

To test this hypothesis, I examined and coded all postings to the page for one week, from March 4th to 10th 2012. 127 updates were posted during that time, including 38 from IaS itself. Those 38 updates were diverse, including questions, references to merchandise, a daily video from the IaS archive, prayer requests and messages encouraging evangelism. Aside from the reposted IaS videos, only one update was explicitly evangelistic: 'Faith in Jesus is the starting point for facing your struggles', it began, before linking to partner organisations specialising in crisis support. IaS posts are rarely shared, but this message was reposted 43 times - second-highest in this sample.

Some of the most liked and commented IaS updates had nothing to do with Christian faith, including a message recognising International Women's Day (622 likes, 12 comments) and a humorous photo caption competition (269 likes, 542 comments). These examples represent a wider category of "engagement updates", promoting IaS by generating interactions with the page. The ratio of likes to comments under the IWD message also demonstrates another kind of post, the "identity update", which allows the viewer to perform some aspect of their self or values without requiring more sustained response. A third category, the "action update", calls on viewers to do something outside Facebook - say a prayer, tell a friend, make a video, buy the book. 'Preview and download materials and share with others. Post in your social networks and on the web. Spread the message of I am Second.'

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[16] 'I am Second'. Available at https://www.facebook.com/iam2nd

89 updates were not posted by IaS. 17 were requests for prayer, using the page to attract Christian attention to personal concerns unrelated to IaS. 14 were statements of faith, including a number reprising IaS's signature catchphrase: 'I am [name], and I am second.'

The majority of these 89 updates related to the material and local work of IaS. 15 posts reported back from expeditions, events and study groups affiliated with IaS, including photographs from international missions trips and US-based evangelism projects. One poster shared a photograph of himself rapping at his college in an IaS-brand T-shirt. Another posted a photograph of the words "I AM Second!", reporting that her college Bible study group always left a Christian slogan on the classroom whiteboard after their meetings for future students to find.

The website sells a wide range of IaS-branded products, including clothing, stickers and a new book of stories. 9 updates described the poster's excited response to this merchandise. Some had bought or received items – 'My best friend just gave me an I am Second bracelet! I love it! It's a reminder to let go and let GOD!! :)' – while others enthusiastically reported sightings of others wearing them. 'I saw an "I am Second" bracelet on all the techs at my vet today. Great to see the momentum.' Some reported purchasing IaS merchandise as cheap gifts for friends and acquaintances: 'I attempted to give singer casey james an I am second bracelet today and he was already wearing one!'

When one poster uploaded an artistic, black-and-white photograph of her IaS bracelets, IaS encouraged others to do the same. This generated the largest of all the update categories in the sample: 27 images were posted, including bracelets, T-shirts and tattoos.

This strong emphasis on the material culture of evangelism contrasts strikingly with a near absence of references to online communication. No one posted a message to say they had engaged a friend in conversation online. When IaS published a challenge to 'post in your social networks', only three people commented, all of them talking about the IaS book, bracelets and T-shirts. A few days later, IaS updated a personal anecdote about the material culture of evangelism: 'I am often stopped while wearing my I am Second sweatshirt and asked, "what does that mean?" Do you have a story of when something similar happened to you?' 34 supporters commented, relating encounters at school, the gym, the races, a truck stop and in hospital. 'I wear my wristband 24/7', one woman explained, 'and at work I have

been asked several times. It's cool because it is a totally secular place.' Acording to another woman, 'i wear my bracelet at work every day so that when customers ask i can share the Word :)'. Merchandise features as a catalyst in many other updates, too: 'I AM SECOND hit Managua Nicaragua last week T-shirts and bracelets started many conversations and led to a lot of prayer.'

These observations suggest some interesting conclusions regarding the role of Facebook in I am Second. Videos may be shared through Facebook in ways I have not been able to trace in this study, but the IaS Facebook page is used only by supporters wishing to coordinate their activities, share success stories and request prayer. Branded merchandise is highly valued in this discourse as a coded way to signal Christian identity, provoke conversation and promote the website, but I found no evidence in this brief sample of postings to suggest that these particular supporters engage in online forms of evangelism.

5. FINDING I AM SECOND ONLINE

If IaS videos are circulating online, traces might be found elsewhere than Facebook. To explore this possibility, I used a search engine to hunt for references to one specific film: the testimony narrative of Brian "Head" Welch, former guitarist for Korn. Welch's story is by far the most viewed and discussed IaS video on YouTube, so it seems plausible that some response might be detectable.

The first ten pages of Google results for the search terms '"I am Second" + Brian + Welch' return 100 results. These results overwhelmingly come from Christian sites, with the remainder linking to video-sharing sites and newspaper coverage. I was unable to find a single blog or forum within this sample which did not state a Christian affiliation in its title or tagline. Explicitly Christian media rarely achieves crossover into mainstream American media culture, so this lack of wider attention is unsurprising. Some Christian sites introduced the video with a proselytising message - 'If you haven't considered it before today, perhaps this video might offer some insight or perspective into what it truly means to give up everything and trust that God knows best' - but I found no comments engaging with these efforts from anything other than a committed Christian perspective.

More engagement between supporters and opponents can be found on video-sharing websites, where IaS videos are uploaded into environments

popular with non-Christian users – the classic evangelism strategy identi-fied by Rachel Wagner.[17] IaS added Brian Welch's story to its YouTube channel in October 2009. Since that date, the video has been viewed 230,000 times – one of only four on the channel to break the 100,000 mark. Welch's testimony has achieved greater attention away from the official IaS channel, uploaded in pirated copies as soon as December 2008. The first and most successful version has now received 830,000 views and was quickly fan-subbed into Spanish and Italian.

IaS responds rapidly to any questions posed by visitors to its Facebook page. On YouTube, in contrast, no attempt is made to monitor or respond to comments. IaS Communications Director John Humphrey explained the or-ganization's cautious approach to YouTube partly as a result of inexperi-ence - 'we weren't schooled in YouTube when we started' - and as a matter of focus - 'we haven't felt that was our calling'.

Some evangelists are much more willing to engage in debates through YouTube. Father Robert Barron admits that he receives, 'for the most part, opposition and derision' - but he also claims that 'there are those few – and I hear from them every day - who do indeed listen. And some of them have even come to the fullness of faith.'[18] The hostility Barron encounters is far from unusual; in fact, according to media scholar Michael Strangelove, 'one of the most intense YouTube wars is between atheists and Christians'.[19] For Strangelove, the exuberance of atheist engagement illustrates 'how marginal groups are using the Tube to challenge conventional thinking and fight for cultural legitimacy' in the American context (p. 150). Strangelove and Bar-ron actually propose rather similar arguments - but Barron, of course, presents the Christians as the heroic figures on the margins of culture.

Based on these comments, we might expect to find some heated debate in the comment threads IaS is ignoring. Sure enough, Brian Welch's videos have attracted considerable response. The IaS channel records more than 500 comments, but the most successful pirate copy of the video has now re-ceived almost 4000.

A full analysis of these postings is impossible within this brief essay, but five basic themes can be quickly outlined. The first category is familiar from our reading of the IaS Facebook page: whole-hearted Christian praise for

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[17] Wagner 2010, p. 136
[18] Barron 2010, p. 43
[19] Strangelove 2010, p. 149

the inspirational quality of Welch's story, often combined with exhortations to the wider public. 'This is truly great! God Bless you Brian! This must be shown to the world…. Oh wait, it is!'

A second category is more distinctive to YouTube. Welch's fans make frequent contributions, praising his looks, debating his decision to leave Korn and performing fan knowledge. Praise for Welch's testimony is sometimes combined awkwardly with nostalgia for his former career: 'This is beautiful… I just wish he was still playing guitar in Korn.'

In the third category, posters share their own life stories in response to Welch's tale. These brief narratives often draw parallels between Welch's struggles with addiction and his spiritually-inspired recovery and the narrator's own story, and typically address Welch directly. 'Was once living like you were', begins one comment, 'stopped and been clean for 25 years. Gave it to God and everything changed.' Another comment tells a similar story: 'coming from someone who has done drugs, ive listen to this story many times and it still makes me cry every time… his story is powerful. I actually found god while in rehab.' Other comments use autobiography to challenge the IaS message of faith-based transformation, presenting their personal recovery from addiction as evidence that supernatural assistance is not required.

A fourth common comment type mocks elements of Welch's story, most commonly his admission of drug use. 'So you have to snort meth to find god? No wonder I've never felt him!'

These four comment categories respond to specific elements of the video. Only the second, fan discourse, tends to provoke responses from other commenters. The fifth and final type of comment attracts much more sustained exchanges. Both the IaS video and the independent pirate copy have attracted viewers interested in debating the merits of religion. 'I'm really sick and tired of people saying that God or a "higher power" got them sober', writes one commenter. 'It's demeaning to the addict.' Many of these posts have no particular connection to the actual content of the video: 'I just want to know how all of you seem to know what God wants', asks one critic. The first comment provokes seven replies, the second, three.

This very brief analysis of online responses to I am Second shows that the movement's videos are providing a platform for online engagement between those who consider themselves "second" and those who do not. This engagement does not appear to be happening widely in the blogo-

sphere, but does occur with some intensity on YouTube. These hostile jokes and argumentative exchanges are very different from the model of spiritual change offered by the IaS website, which emphasises positive stories and invites the curious into private communication. Father Barron claims some success in his YouTube evangelism, but uncontrolled comment threads also provide space for attempts to undermine the Christian message. Denis Bekkering argues that the 'democratic nature' of Facebook 'allows individual to actively dissuade people from visiting the ministries of particular intervangelists.'[20] We found no evidence of this on the IaS Facebook page, but efforts at dissuasion are widespread on YouTube.

6. CONCLUSION

In this brief study, I have analysed four areas of the online activity of I am Second. On the IaS website, visitors are encouraged to view content targeted to their personal concerns and then invited to watch simple gospel presentations, email a volunteer or visit a local church. These videos can be shared through social media, but the IaS Facebook page suggests that supporters are much more enthusiastic about buying and sharing physical branded merchandise. These cheap consumer goods are framed as ideal gifts and intriguing conversation-starters, perhaps reflecting a less activist approach to the work of evangelism. I was unable to find any evidence that Brian "Head" Welch's video had attracted attention outside the Christian blogosphere, but it provoked more than 4500 comments on YouTube on just two uploads – an area of conversation that IaS actually refuses to engage with.

IaS has developed a sophisticated, multi-level approach to evangelism, using merchandise, local events and local media to market online videos that direct the viewer back to private conversations and local study groups. Analysis of the reception of these videos online demonstrates the key importance of branded products in this movement, and also indicated some of the difficulties inherent in any attempt to evangelise directly through Facebook and YouTube. Further research into the practices of IaS supporters will be pursued in my future work, including comparative studies of the reception of different videos, interviews with supporters and closer attention to the activities of offline groups. It is too early to tell if IaS represents a shift in the structure or function of the classic evangelical testimony narrative,

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[20]   Bekkering 2011, para. 42

but the work of this organisation raises issues deserving of much closer attention.

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