

The Production of Discursive and Non-Discursive Accessibility and Authority in Adam4d.com

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THE WEBSITE ADAM4D.COM is home to “A curiously Christian Webcomic” (ACCW), an online comic series written and illustrated by Adam Ford. The comic covers a wide range of political and theological content, usually presenting strong opinions that fall within traditionally conservative, Evangelical viewpoints. In this paper, I will explore how Adam Ford utilizes the form and design of online mediation, digital art, and technology to engage larger discussions and tensions about textual accessibility and authority within Protestantism. I will first explore how Adam4d works within an online landscape to increase the accessibility of Ford’s work and promote the democratization of religious deliberation. I will then examine how this democratization, especially of online content, creates a landscape of media saturation that may pose a risk to his strict Evangelical tradition and discuss how Ford maintains the authority necessary to keep an online public engaged with his content. Ultimately, though it appears that Ford grounds his authority within discursive Protestant ideals of textual authority and democratization, Adam4d utilizes creative, non-discursive aspects of its internet context like the immersive quality of certain art styles and website layouts to create affect, retain readership, and remain an authoritative and accessible source of religious commentary.

Adam4d and “A curiously Christian Webcomic”: An Overview

Before analyzing how Adam4d functions as online mediation of the Protestant Evangelical tradition, it is important to understand ACCW’s basic attributes: its overarching themes, form, and authorship. Ford’s webcomic addresses three fairly distinct motifs: current events and modern culture, Christian morality and lifestyle, and theological discussions of Protestantism. In all these areas, Ford’s commentaries follow traditionally conservative and Evangelical narratives. Ford offers a critique of modern culture and current events, focusing on popular debates like abortion, homosexuality, and terrorism (on which he adopts largely anti-abortion, pro-traditional marriage, and anti-Muslim stances¹) while also addressing broader topics like political correctness, atheism, feminism and progressivism. Ford’s critique of modern culture augments his directives for proper Christian behavior and lifestyle, and he is especially critical of Christians whose beliefs and behaviors acquiesce to the norms of American culture and values, criticizing “liberal protestants” and prosperity gospels. At times, Ford focuses on smaller, more sophisticated arguments within Protestantism, celebrating the Reformers, or, bemusedly, critiquing Calvinists. While this approximates the range of topics covered by ACCW, one general theme permeates the comic. Ford is particularly concerned with Christians placing the Bible above cultural authority, interpreting it literally,

¹See Adam4d.com, “Abortion language,” <http://adam4d.com/abortion-language/>; Adam4d.com, “I was born this way,” <http://adam4d.com/born-this-way/>; Adam4d.com, “The gay Anglo-Saxon warrior,” <http://adam4d.com/gay-warrior/>; Adam4d.com, “To: radical Islam. With love, Martin Luther,” <http://adam4d.com/isis/>. These comics provide a few examples of Adam Ford’s stances on contentious topics.

resisting profane norms, and evangelizing (perhaps culturally unpopular) Christians principles.

I will explore the style of the comic in greater detail later, but it is worth mentioning here briefly. Each comic is relatively short (usually a few panels) and utilizes art styles and fonts typical to traditional webcomics like XKCD and the Oatmeal. The art generally depicts one-dimensional scenes and characters or relatively simple, graphically bold representations of quotes or theological principles. The font is large and readable, and Ford tends to adjust its size (sometimes integrating it directly into the art) to accentuate a main point or elicit a response. The resulting webcomic echoes classic comic strips, with panels, dialogue, and simple artwork.

Finally, I will discuss ACCW's authorship by mentioning what Ford does and does not choose to share with his reader. Adam4d is almost exclusively devoted to ACCW, but an FAQ page offers some additional information. When asked "Who are you?" Ford writes simply, "I'm Adam Ford . . . I'm a Christian, husband, and father of 3 young boys."² He also discloses that creating Adam4d is his full-time job and that he is supported through a Patreon campaign that invites donor support.³ Occasionally a comic reveals personal information: that he struggles with anxiety and depression⁴ or that he enjoys reading theology.⁵ Generally, though, Ford keeps information about himself to a minimum, allowing the comic to speak almost entirely for itself.

Adam4d, Protestantism, and the Accessibility of Online Content

Ford has designed Adam4d in a way that utilizes the internet and digital technologies to situate ACCW firmly in the Protestant tradition of promoting unmediated access to religious deliberation and democratizing text. He follows a long Protestant narrative of harnessing novel technologies to promote and facilitate a wider engagement in religious contemplation. Protestant notions of *sola scriptura* and the subsequent democratization of text were only possible with textual accessibility (vernacular, financial, and physical availability) and depended on technologies like the printing press to expedite processes of (re)production.⁶ Adam4d allows us to examine how this tradition develops in the context of the internet and digital technologies.

In general, online mediation reduces the material barriers that limit access to information. In his essay about screens and religion, S. Brent Plate uses a historical analog to technology, paper, to explore the effect of digital technology on religious intake. Plate claims that the increasing thinness of paper contributed to the democratization of information and increased literacy⁷; as books became more accessible (in cost, size, and ubiquity), the consumption of information rose. Plate continues on to discuss the screen, one panel that allows the reader to access a trove of information. He writes, "the history of media technology is a movement of gradual erasure of itself; the more complex the media, the thinner the technology."⁸ This complex technology is quickly becoming more accessible; with the surge of digital technology, Ford's reader need not purchase and store a book containing

²Adam4d.com, "FAQ," <http://adam4d.com/faq/>.

³Patreon is a platform that allows people to subscribe to online content as a "patron" in exchange for a (usually) small fee.

⁴Adam4d.com, "Anxiety, depression, and the truth," <http://adam4d.com/anxiety-depression-truth/>.

⁵Adam4d.com, "I am a theology nerd," <http://adam4d.com/theology-nerd/>.

⁶Jennifer L. Bailey, "American Conservative Protestants and Embedded Literacy," in *Fundamentalism in the Modern World Vol 2 Fundamentalism and Communication: Culture, Media and the Public Sphere*, ed. Ulrika Martensson, Priscilla Ringrose, and Jennifer Bailey, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 150.

⁷S. Brent Plate, "Screen," in *Key Terms in Material Religion*, ed. S. Brent Plate, (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 191-192.

⁸*Ibid.*, 192.

hundreds of his comics⁹, but requires only *one* device (a screen) that can access the internet.

Besides material barriers, Ford's online mediation overcomes barriers to (re)publication. While books often require a financial sacrifice, the internet offers a method of free consumption. Ford deliberately operates within this democratized media landscape, reducing financial barriers and celebrating the accessibility of his content. His Patreon pages assures readers, "Please know that I'll continue to produce content and it will always be free for everyone to come and read. That's not gonna change."¹⁰ Besides alleviating financial barriers, free content also eases the process of republication. Adam4d relies heavily on sites like Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites to disseminate content and attract readers.¹¹ Ford intentionally makes comics easy to share, but promotes republication even beyond the internet, allowing translations of his work (with minor stipulations) and permitting his comic to be shared off-line in "sermons, Bible studies, handouts, church bulletins, tracts, etc."¹² The ease of republication allows Adam4d to saturate not only the online sphere, but to extend beyond the bounds of the internet.

The media form of the webcomic itself is also incredibly accessible. ACCW capitalizes on digital media's ability to combine bold text and art to concentrate important points into small spaces. Thus, each comic only takes (up to) a few minutes to read. Ford is sure to make his comics accessible in content as well (and will use a comic to explain theologically rigorous ideas). By using a webcomic *in particular* and utilizing the inherent accessibility of the internet, Ford reinforces Protestant ideas that scripture and scriptural interpretation are clear enough for an ordinary Christian to understand, even without theological or academic training.¹³

Finally, the internet not only decreases barriers to access but also reaches (out to) those who may not otherwise interact with Evangelical content. As aforementioned, ACCW mimics the style of classic webcomics like XKCD and The Oatmeal,¹⁴ which are progressive, areligious platforms. Ford recognizes this, stating his intention to "communicate Jesus through a visual, viable, popular medium lacking a distinct Gospel voice—the webcomic."¹⁵ By adopting this media form, Ford claims space in what appears to be an increasingly secularizing sphere. Further developing this tactic, Ford appropriates customarily progressive aesthetics, making his comic approachable, familiar, and relevant to modern internet users. This approach is reminiscent of Brian Larkin's discussion of Sufism in Nigeria and *bandiri* music, Bollywood songs that have been reworked into praise songs for the Prophet Muhammad. Musicians rely on their listeners' familiarity with and memory of Indian songs to make *bandiri* music emotionally relevant. Larkin writes, "*Bandiri* singers wish to maintain that intensity of emotion, to copy it."¹⁶ When reaching out to potential readers, Ford similarly capitalizes on the familiarity of digital media. Larkin continues on, however, to claim that the singers must divorce their music "from its original context, leaving only heightened state of being."¹⁷ To create a sacred form of religious mediation, work must be done to disassociate religious content from profanity contained in the media while maintaining the affective familiarity.¹⁸ Ford struggles similarly, utilizing the internet for evangelism while still warning against the profanity

⁹Though they can. Ford has recently published a few physical compilations of his comics.

¹⁰Patreon, "Adam4d," <https://www.patreon.com/Adam4d>.

¹¹According to Alexa.com, about 10% of visitors accessed Adam4d directly from Facebook. See <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/adam4d.com>.

¹²Adam4d.com, "FAQ," <http://adam4d.com/faq/>.

¹³The comic "Everything is theological" (<http://adam4d.com/theologic/>) expresses this principle explicitly, but I argue that the theme permeates the whole of the Adam4d.com webcomic.

¹⁴XKCD is a popular webcomic, usually of tick-figure characters, often utilizes sarcasm, and covers topics in math, language, pop-culture, and humor. The Oatmeal is a webcomic and comedy site.

¹⁵Patreon, "Adam4d," <https://www.patreon.com/Adam4d>.

¹⁶Brian Larkin, *Bandiri Music, Globalization, and Urban Experience in Nigeria*, (Duke University Press, 2004), 105.

¹⁷Ibid., 105.

¹⁸Ibid., 104.

present in modern digital culture.¹⁹ While online mediation provides vast possibilities for outreach and accessibility, there is clearly also risk involved in utilizing new forms of technology to disseminate religious content.

Online Mediation and the Maintenance of Religious Authority

Adam Ford relies on the increased accessibility the internet offers consumers and uses the technology to make his comics readily available and ubiquitous. That being said, Adam4d exists alongside multitudinous other websites with similarly increasing accessibility. As Jennifer Bailey describes in her essay “American Conservative Protestants and Embedded Literacy,” crowded media landscapes can pose a risk to traditions:

[L]iteracy poses dilemmas for the believer. Literate believers are potentially greatly empowered—they have in their hands the power to read and interpret the Bible at will. . . ‘authoritative’ interpretations of the text abound, and disagree with each other. . . Advances in communications, technology, from radio to the internet, have magnified the problem. Falling into error is a persistent danger.²⁰

In a landscape saturated with religious commentaries and narratives, Adam4d must carry the religious authority necessary to attract and maintain readership despite its theological strictness and moralistic directives. The question arises, how does a fairly anonymous internet personality like Ford, apparently disengaged from traditional establishments of religious authority, generate the authority necessary to attract and maintain a public? Moreover, how does Adam4d maintain its relevance in an overcrowded landscape of media competing for readers’ attention?

Little of the comic’s authority appears to come from Ford himself and he claims no specific qualifications or expertise. He purposely allows the comics to speak for themselves²¹ and, when looking directly at ACCW, one can see a variety of attributes contained within the comics help to maintain its authority. In focusing on the content of the comic, Ford creates authority that is apparently grounded in discourse and in its adherence to Protestant notions of textual authority. A closer look, though, highlights Ford’s use of non-discursive aspects of the webcomic and digital media itself that works to hold readers’ attention and maintain a public.

Both the words Ford uses in ACCW, as well as their clear citation, imbue his comics with textual, discursive authority. Ford often fortifies his commentary with textual citations. At times, entire Bible verse appear in the comic, either in dialogue or to provide additional context. Otherwise, verses are referenced parenthetically or below the panels. These citations extend beyond Biblical references; often Ford will use a comic to illustrate a theological quote or, less frequently, a comic will reflect a sermon or theological essay which Ford references at the end. Textual references sometimes stand alone, though Ford may use the comic to explore his interpretation of the verse. The insertion of text into the content and format of the comic works to increase the apparent authority of Ford’s commentary, a principle that is exemplified by a subseries of comics called “American Popular Version” (APV).²² APV comics take a real verse and juxtapose that verse with Ford’s interpretation of a liberal American Protestant reading of the same verse. The results are often ridiculous, but Ford’s use of direct quotations gives the impression of familiarity with the text

¹⁹“The war is raging,” one of the comics that discusses and admonishes porn, is a concrete example of this and suggests that computers and other digital media can be used for sacred or profane purposes. See Adam4d.com, “The war is raging,” <http://adam4d.com/war/>.

²⁰Bailey, *American*, 150-151.

²¹Adam4d.com, “FAQ,” <http://adam4d.com/faq/>.

²²This is the first of the APV series, though they change in style and pattern as the series continues. See <http://adam4d.com/john-316-18-american-popular-version/>.

and the infallibility of his cultural commentary despite his lack of traditional religious authority. Ford's authority would, perhaps, appear hollower if he did not make use of Biblical texts.

Ford's use of text not only adds to his credibility, but works to map his comic onto (and, thus, create authority within) aforementioned Protestant traditions of textual democratization. By adding Bible citations, he invites the reader to read for themselves, to personally explore the text rather than rely solely on Ford's interpretation. Many media forms can provide citations, but Ford utilizes the internet's ability to maneuver his readers easily to new information, providing links to credit original authors and invite exploration of primary sources. Ford not only creates an accessible religious commentary, but he suggests that primary religious content is also accessible to the everyday religious consumer. This grounds Ford in the Protestant tradition his comic upholds and imbues another measure of authority in the work.

I have defined this mode of authority as discursive, as it is rooted in Protestant discussions of textual authority and democratization. I would argue, however, that a large portion of Adam4d's authority is not derived from the words Ford uses, but rather in his use of non-discursive agencies, in the very way his website is designed and those words are presented. In *Orthodox by Design*, Jeremy Stolow writes that non-discursive agencies "include...spatial and temporal arrangements and the technological supports that make it possible to engage with texts in the first place."²³ While Stolow explores physically published material, the discussion extends to online mediation and can explain how the internet, screens, and digital art facilitate the way readers interact with content and increase the authority of ACCW's discursive elements. Ford himself recognizes that "There's something about this format, this visual medium, that resonates with people and affects them in ways words alone cannot."²⁴ While there are innumerable non-discursive, design aspects of this digital form, I will focus on two for the remainder of my paper, gauging the effect online mediation has on the reading experience and the creation of authority.

The first attribute regards the general layout of the website. Adam4d.com displays one comic at a time, above and below which are large red "random" buttons, with smaller gray "next" and "previous" buttons on either side. The placement of the random button makes selecting it a natural choice, meaning that as the reader maneuvers through the website, they are giving up a certain amount of agency. Readers do not choose what type of content they are presented with. A reader could consume a lighthearted comic deriding Joel Osteen²⁵ one moment and be confronted with a dark depiction of abortion²⁶ the next. The comic series can shift in tone rapidly so that readers, increasingly unable to mediate their intake or moderate the topics, are inundated with short, emotionally charged comics in rapid succession.

This aspect of the website layout creates an authoritative online space, or at least one that can compete with the plethora of other web spaces for the reader's attention. Ford effectively operates within an environment of media saturation by creating a website which *itself* inundates the readers with a large quantity of diverse media, effectively stripping them of their agency as they maneuver through the webpage and its vast array of content. Ford also seems to fundamentally understand how the modern consumer operating within media-saturated environments consumes information. In her essay about religion and technology, Kathryn Lofton describes how digital technologies have changed the very way modern humans process information. She cites the assertion that modern society has too little time for contemplation and that "Americans especially rush through life at such a speed that thought-seed planting is too rare and the development of thought into completion

²³Jeremy Stolow, *Orthodox by Design: Judaism, Print Politics, and the Artscroll Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 146.

²⁴Patreon, "Adam4d," <https://www.patreon.com/Adam4d>.

²⁵For example, see Adam4d.com, "This is how it work, right?," <http://adam4d.com/this-is-how-it-works-right/>.

²⁶For example, see Adam4d.com, "If you stand with Planned Parenthood," <http://adam4d.com/stand/>.

is still rarer.”²⁷ Ford has managed to capture this particularity of modern media consumption in the design of his comic and website. His website makes it easy to progress through comics quickly enough to hold the attention of the modern reader. Meanwhile, by virtue of the media form itself, his comics are short and emotionally charged enough to impart a complete idea in the few seconds it takes to consume them. The result is a website that maneuvers the reader through content in a way conducive to the modern mind, while still ensuring big ideas are imparted.

The second attribute I’ll discuss exemplifies how Ford shapes his religious message and art to integrate effectively into the functions of screens and digital technology. One specific comic exemplifies how Ford creates art that utilizes the scrolling function to elicit readers’ emotional responses. The comic “One simple question”²⁸ is made up of one long, gray panel, about four times the length of the screen on a laptop or digital device, and takes up the entire width of the screen.²⁹ Each fourth of the panel contains one piece of content, spaced apart far enough to be viewed separately. The first panel has a simple white box with small black words reading “I have one simple question for you: **Are you a Christian?**” The next quarter reads in the same style: “What’s your answer?” The third is clearly a dialogue box, with words in a much larger, bolder font. “I said, “Are you a Christian?” The final portion of the panel is in color, a simple picture of a handgun aimed point-blank at the reader with a blurred illustration of an apparently Middle-Eastern, “radical Islamic” fighter in the background, who the reader now understands has been interrogating them, a suspected Christian, ready to shoot.

The content is already emotionally intense, but Ford requires the reader to maneuver through it in a way which heightens the emotional response. The bland color and small font seems to initially indicate a benign question. Only by scrolling through the material can the reader interact with the expanding font and final, violent image. Requiring the reader to scroll also means that those final images are a shock that elicit the reader’s physical response, a recoil.³⁰ In *Hittin’ the Prayer Bones*, Anderson Blanton describes religious listeners’ physical interaction with the radio as an authoritative, non-discursive feature of Pentecostal radio. He describes the act of physically touching the radio and sensing the vibrations of the soundwaves as an experience that imbues religious authority into the act of listening.³¹ Like reaching out to touch the radio, scrolling requires the reader to engage with both the technology and content; Ford designs his comics in such a way that the reader is *required* to physically interact with his work and experience the visceral and emotional reactions it inspires. Though at the surface Ford’s authority appears to be grounded in his use of discourse, text, and citation, the groundwork for this authority lies directly in these other aspects: the ways in which the reader interacts with and maneuvers through the physical media itself. Through Adam4d.com, Ford has created an effective medium to deliver his content, ACCW, in a manner conducive to the particularities of the modern consumer and media landscape.

²⁷Kathryn Lofton, “Technology,” in *Key Terms in Material Religion*, ed. by S. Brent Plate, (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 248.

²⁸See Adam4d.com, “One simple question,” <http://adam4d.com/simple/>. I highly recommend viewing the comic online to understand the visceral and emotional reaction I discuss.

²⁹This makes viewing the comic an incredibly immersive experience.

³⁰Though “One simple question” elicits a reaction of shock or fear, Adam4d utilizes the scroll function (as well as corresponding uses of font and color) in many other comics. Here are a few examples: <http://adam4d.com/stand/>, <http://adam4d.com/eternity/>, <http://adam4d.com/say-something/>, <http://adam4d.com/keep-resisting/>. These may elicit disgust, awe, fear, and hope respectively. While these longer panels are obviously shaped to accommodate scrolling, other more traditional (multi-paneled) comics also benefit from scrolling. “A woman’s right to choose” (<http://adam4d.com/womans-right-choose/>), for example, uses the last panel to mirror the emotion that Ford, presumably, expects the reader to feel.

³¹Anderson Blanton, *Hittin’ the Prayer Bones: Materiality of spirit in the Pentecostal South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 25.

Conclusion

Adam Ford rather deftly uses the increased accessibility of content that the internet affords to situate his website and webcomic firmly in Protestant traditions of textual democratization. While Ford utilizes online mediation to increase the availability of his religious commentary, he also inhabits a media-saturated sphere and is conscious that he must compete for his consumers' attention and maintain his public by creating and retaining authority. Ford uses online mediation in novel ways to reinforce discursive authority, upholding Protestant notions of textual authority and availability. Below these discursive elements, though, is an underlying framework of the non-discursive aspects of his webcomic that manipulate the way in which his reader interacts with his text. Though superficially his authority appears to be derived from his relationship with Protestant discourse, this underlying framework of website design and digital technology creates an authoritative and affective reading experience that holds readers' attention and helps to maintain the webcomic's cultural and religious authority.

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