

PRACTICAL PRIMER

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHM

Communicating Pastorally and Effectively in the Digital World

STUDENT WORKBOOK

Central Principle

We do not create content merely to please an algorithm. We create meaningful encounters for people in forms that algorithms can recognise and distribute.

Participant Name: _____

Institution / Ministry: _____

Date: _____

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HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

This workbook belongs to you

Write freely, test ideas, challenge assumptions and redesign real pastoral content. The goal is not to memorise technical vocabulary but to become a more attentive, ethical and effective digital communicator.

During the Session

- ☐ Complete each observation and reflection activity.
- ☐ Work with your group during the PASTOR redesign exercise.
- ☐ Use the checklists to evaluate your own content honestly.
- ☐ Mark one practical change you will implement after the session.

Session Journey

QUESTION	FOCUS
1	Why did I stop scrolling?
2	What is a social media algorithm?
3	What signals does it observe?
4	Why does good pastoral content sometimes fail?
5	How can we redesign pastoral content?
6	How can we remain effective and faithful?

My Starting Point

In one sentence, what do I currently believe an algorithm does?

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WHY DID I STOP SCROLLING?

Opening Observation

Open the social platform you use most. Scroll through about five posts. Identify the first post that makes you pause.

The Post That Made Me Pause

Platform	Type of post
_____	_____
_____	_____

What made me stop? Tick all that apply.

- ☐ A face or person I recognised
- ☐ Movement or visual beauty
- ☐ A strong question or opening
- ☐ Something useful or practical
- ☐ Emotion, humour or surprise
- ☐ Conflict or controversy
- ☐ A topic I had recently searched for
- ☐ A personal or local connection
- ☐ Other: _____

What I Did Next

- ☐ Kept watching or reading
- ☐ Liked or reacted
- ☐ Commented
- ☐ Shared or forwarded
- ☐ Saved it
- ☐ Visited the profile
- ☐ Scrolled away

My Discovery

The algorithm studies human _____ in order to predict future _____.

Key Idea

Every pause, click, replay, like, comment, share, save and scroll gives the platform information about what may interest the user.

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WHAT IS A SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHM?

Simple Definition

A social media algorithm is a set of automated rules and prediction systems that helps a platform decide which content should be shown to each user, in what order and at what time.

The Three Basic Functions

1. SELECTION

The platform gathers possible posts that may be shown.

2. PREDICTION

The system estimates what the user may do next.

3. RANKING

The platform orders content according to predicted relevance.

Complete the Flow

Millions of
Posts







Personalise
d Feed

The Digital Librarian Analogy

A librarian recommends books using clues. An algorithm recommends content using behavioural clues. List three clues each might use.

A LIBRARIAN MAY NOTICE	AN ALGORITHM MAY NOTICE

Personalised Feeds

Why might two people following the same parish page receive different posts or see them in a different order?

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THE SIX RS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHMS

Remember

The algorithm does not judge pastoral importance. It predicts what a particular user is likely to notice, watch, appreciate or respond to.

SIGNAL	ALGORITHMIC QUESTION	MY PASTORAL TRANSLATION
RELEVANCE	Does this match the person's interests or needs?	
RELATIONSHIP	Has the person interacted with this account before?	
RETENTION	How long does the person remain with the content?	
RESPONSE	What does the person do after seeing it?	
RECENCY	Is the content timely?	
RELIABILITY	Does it deliver what it promises, and is it trusted?	

R1 — RELEVANCE



Algorithmic Question

Does this match the person's interests or needs?

Pastoral Principle: Begin with the person's situation before presenting the institution's information.

INSTITUTION-CENTRED	AUDIENCE-CENTRED
The parish will conduct a retreat.	Feeling spiritually exhausted?
My example:	My improved version:

R2 — RELATIONSHIP



Algorithmic Question

Has the person interacted with this account before?

A parish account builds relationship when it:

- ☐ Replies to comments
- ☐ Acknowledges questions
- ☐ Features parishioners
- ☐ Shares testimonies
- ☐ Invites participation
- ☐ Responds compassionately

One way my ministry account can become less like a noticeboard and more like a community:

R3 — RETENTION

Algorithmic Question

How long does the person remain with the content?

Pastoral Principle: Begin with the message, not with a ceremonial introduction.

Rewrite this slow opening: “Dear brothers and sisters, today I would like to share a few thoughts regarding a very important topic...”

My stronger first line:

R4 — RESPONSE

Algorithmic Question

What does the person do after seeing it?

Do not merely ask for engagement. Invite participation.

GENERIC ENGAGEMENT	MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION
Like, share and subscribe.	Send this prayer to someone who needs encouragement.
Comment below.	Write one intention we can pray for.
My example:	My improved invitation:

R5 — RECENCY



Algorithmic Question

Is the content timely?

List three pastoral messages whose usefulness depends on timing.

What is one upcoming moment when my audience may especially need encouragement or information?

R6 — RELIABILITY



Algorithmic Question

Does it deliver what it promises, and is it trusted?

- ☐ The title honestly matches the content
- ☐ Claims are verified
- ☐ Quotations are accurate
- ☐ Images and testimonies have permission
- ☐ Audio and visual quality are adequate
- ☐ Mistakes are corrected openly

One reliability risk I need to watch in my ministry:

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DIFFERENT PLATFORMS, DIFFERENT BEHAVIOURS

Core Insight

There is no single universal social media algorithm. The same message may need a different format, length, title and call to action on each platform.

PLATFORM	STRENGTHS	GUIDING QUESTION
Facebook	Local community, groups, events, photographs, live video	Will the community recognise itself in this content?
Instagram	Visual storytelling, Reels, Stories, short captions	Can the message be understood visually and quickly?
YouTube	Searchable teaching, long-form video, playlists, evergreen resources	What question is the viewer searching for?
Shorts / Reels / TikTok	Rapid discovery, short video, strong openings	Is the value clear in the first few seconds?
WhatsApp	Trusted relationships, direct sharing, parish coordination	Is this useful and trustworthy enough to forward personally?

Match the Message to the Platform

MESSAGE	BEST PLATFORM	WHY?
A ten-minute catechetical explanation		
A parish feast photograph album		
A twenty-second youth retreat invitation		
An urgent parish closure announcement		
A detailed personal testimony		
A daily Scripture image		
A documentary about social outreach		

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WHY DOES GOOD PASTORAL CONTENT SOMETIMES FAIL?

Discussion

A message can be spiritually valuable yet digitally ineffective. Diagnose the communication problem without judging the value of the message itself.

- ☐ The audience is unclear
- ☐ The opening is too slow
- ☐ The message begins with the institution rather than the person
- ☐ Too many ideas are included
- ☐ The visual is crowded or unclear
- ☐ The audio is poor
- ☐ The title is generic
- ☐ There is no clear next action
- ☐ The timing is wrong
- ☐ The page does not build relationships

Content Diagnosis

Choose one recent pastoral post you have seen or created. What may have limited its effectiveness?

Improve the Title

GENERIC TITLE	AUDIENCE-CENTRED / SEARCHABLE TITLE
Sunday Reflection – Episode 26	What Should We Do When Forgiveness Feels Impossible?
Parish Announcement	
My example:	

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ALGORITHM AND PASTORAL MISSION

THE ALGORITHM MAY REWARD	PASTORAL COMMUNICATION MUST SEEK
Attention	Encounter
Reaction	Understanding
Speed	Discernment
Popularity	Faithfulness
Personalisation	Communion
Emotional intensity	Truth with charity
Visibility	Service
Clicks	Transformation
Followers	Community

Three Pastoral Temptations

VANITY

Believing that high views automatically indicate successful ministry.

MANIPULATION

Using fear, scandal, anger or exaggeration simply to attract attention.

IMITATION

Copying every trend without discerning whether it serves the Gospel and respects human dignity.

Discernment Question: Are we adapting the form to serve the Gospel, or adapting the Gospel to serve the platform?

My response:

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PRACTICAL ACTIVITY: FROM NOTICE TO PASTORAL CONTENT**Original Announcement**

The parish youth retreat will be held on Saturday, 22 August, from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. in the parish hall. All young people are requested to participate. Registration closes on 18 August.

The PASTOR Framework**P — PERSON**

Who exactly needs this message?

A — ACHE OR ASPIRATION

What are they experiencing, needing or hoping for?

S — STOP-SCROLL OPENING

What will create curiosity or recognition?

T — TRUTH OR TRANSFORMATION

What honest value or change is offered?

O — OPPORTUNITY

What experience are we inviting them into?

R — RESPONSE

What is the one clear next action?

Build the Final Content

Opening / Hook

Human Need

Central Value

Invitation / Experience

Event Details

Call to Action

Choose the Format

- ☐ 30-second Reel / Short
- ☐ Instagram or Facebook caption
- ☐ WhatsApp invitation
- ☐ Poster headline and caption
- ☐ Other: _____

Peer Feedback

QUESTION	FEEDBACK
Is the audience clear?	
Does the opening make us pause?	
Is the promise honest?	
Is the next action clear?	

Sample Completed Script

Opening

Do you ever feel connected online but alone inside?

Human Need

Sometimes we do not need another notification. We need a place to pause, breathe and listen.

Value and Invitation

Our parish youth retreat is one day to reconnect with yourself, with others and with God. Join us for prayer, music, honest conversation and friendship.

Response

Register before 18 August. Come as you are — and bring a friend.

The CARE Checklist

C — CLEAR

One central message; immediately understandable.

A — AUDIENCE-CENTRED

Begins with a real need and suitable language.

R — RETENTIVE

A strong opening and good pacing sustain attention.

E — ENGAGING

Invites a meaningful and clear response.

CARE Content Review

CHECK	YES	NOT YET	IMPROVEMENT NEEDED
The message is immediately clear.	☐	☐	
There is one central idea.	☐	☐	
The intended audience is identifiable.	☐	☐	
The content begins with a human need or question.	☐	☐	
The opening encourages attention.	☐	☐	
The pace and length suit the platform.	☐	☐	
The requested response is meaningful.	☐	☐	
The next step is clear.	☐	☐	

Pastoral Integrity Check

- ☐ The message is truthful and theologically responsible.
- ☐ The title honestly represents the content.
- ☐ Human dignity and privacy are protected.
- ☐ Images and testimonies have appropriate consent.
- ☐ The content encourages hope, communion or constructive action.
- ☐ Conflict, fear or outrage are not used manipulatively.
- ☐ Sources and quotations are accurate.
- ☐ I would be willing to explain publicly why this was created.

BEYOND LIKES: WHAT SHOULD WE MEASURE?

Important Distinction

A high number of views indicates exposure. It does not automatically indicate understanding, trust, participation or transformation.

MEASURE	WHAT IT TELLS US	WHAT IT DOES NOT PROVE
REACH	How many people encountered the content?	
RETENTION	How long did they stay?	
ENGAGEMENT	What visible interaction occurred?	
SHARES / SAVES	Was it useful enough to keep or pass on?	
CONVERSION	Did people take the intended next step?	
PASTORAL FRUIT	Did the content lead to conversation, prayer, service, community or deeper understanding?	

Which two measures would be most meaningful for one of your pastoral projects, and why?

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MY PASTORAL CONTENT AUDIT

Select one recent or planned post from your parish, institution or ministry.

Content / event

Intended audience

Human need or aspiration

Platform selected

Current title or opening

Central message

Call to action

Six Rs Audit

R	STRONG	NEEDS WORK	MY IMPROVEMENT
RELEVANCE	☐	☐	
RELATIONSHIP	☐	☐	
RETENTION	☐	☐	
RESPONSE	☐	☐	
RECENCY	☐	☐	
RELIABILITY	☐	☐	

MY NEXT PRACTICAL STEP

Complete the Sentence

In my next pastoral post, I will stop _____
and start _____.

My 7-Day Action

The content I will create or redesign:

The person or audience I want to serve:

The platform I will use:

The human question I will begin with:

The meaningful response I will invite:

Final Takeaway

Do not create content for an algorithm. Create valuable encounters for people in a form that the algorithm can recognise and distribute.

Three Questions to Carry Forward

- ☐ Will this person pay attention?
- ☐ Will this person understand and respond?
- ☐ Will this encounter move the person towards truth, hope, communion and Christ?

The Six Rs

RELEVANCE Human need	RELATIONSHIP Trust and community
RETENTION Clear opening and structure	RESPONSE Meaningful participation
RECENCY Right message, right moment	RELIABILITY Truth, credibility and quality

PASTOR

- P** — Person
- A** — Ache or Aspiration
- S** — Stop-Scroll Opening
- T** — Truth or Transformation
- O** — Opportunity
- R** — Response

CARE

- C** — Clear
- A** — Audience-Centred
- R** — Retentive
- E** — Engaging

My Notes
