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## **Authority**

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Before the contemporary advent of digital media, authority has historically been marked as having a contentious relationship with the development of newer communication technologies. Marvin (1988) illustrated for instance, how the then new medium of the electric bulb was accompanied by debates on the nature of authority and changing communication behaviors between the elites and masses. In the face of the television, Meyrowitz (1985) argued that “authority is weakened when information systems are merged” (p. 63), i.e. the authority of leaders diminish when a medium allows different people to have open access and gain greater control over knowledge and social information. With web-based technologies there has been growing attention to authority and a set of interrelated issues on intensifying mediation, digital divides, participatory democracy and grassroots activism.

While the topic of authority has been of longstanding interest to new media scholars and practitioners, the role of authority, including religious authority in faith communities, has received relatively less research attention and systematic analyses. This chapter discusses how religious authority has been framed in relation to the online context, and the ways, if any, the internet facilitates changes in practices of religious authority. There are of course, varied conceptions of authority. Thus it is instructive to probe a related set of questions including: What is “religious authority”? And how do scholars researching new media regard religious authority? What general propositions about authority and communication technologies lie behind these particular published works?

Accordingly, this chapter provides a thematic analysis of recent studies examining implications of the internet on religious authority. This critical overview observes much of the literature on this issue operates on two rather different logics. The first is more rooted in the earlier emphasis on the internet as a decentralized and free space. A dominant conceptualization is that forms of religious authority are altered by digital technologies, which are perceived to disrupt and displace traditional faith doctrines and domains, often embedded in forms of hierarchical communication. An alternative perspective is stimulated by the growing importance of situating religious authority among older media and faith infrastructures. The internet may have, to some extent, facilitated changes in the personal and organizational structures by which religious leaders operate. But active and accommodative practices by some clergy, and related to their engagement with digital media, may enable them to regain the legitimacy and trust necessary to operate in the religious sphere. This review demonstrates how emerging research highlights paradoxes in authority since clergy negotiate tensions in their online representations as they attempt to harness the interactive, dialogic capabilities of mediated social networks. Thus emerging practices of religious authorities facilitated by networked interactions may prompt updating our understanding of authority in increasingly mediated environments.

### **Considering Religious Authority and Mediated Communication**

Given its rich and variable nature, authority itself is challenging to define and study. Although the words “clergy” and “priests” are commonly used, in the west, to connote religious authority, the variety of related titles is immense (e.g. “pastor,” “vicar,” “monk,” “iman,” “guru,” “rabbi,” etc). Studies focused on religious authority online have been few, compared to studies centered on religious community and identity. Despite interest and acknowledgment of the concept, there is a lack of definitional clarity over authority online, and no comprehensive theory of religious authority (Campbell, 2007). It is not the intention here to investigate the origins of “authority,” but it is significant to point out that treatments of religious authority vis-à-vis communication and media studies have taken on varying forms.

For instance, religious authority can be descriptively categorized into different types, justified by varied forms of legitimation. As reflected in Weber's classic categorization (1947), authority is said to arise from sacred tradition, appointment to a superior office and perceived charisma of being instilled with divine or supernatural powers. Following this typology, four layers of religious authority have been identified; hierarchy (roles or perceptions of recognized leaders), structure (community, patterns of practice or official organizations), ideology (faith beliefs, ideas or shared identity) and texts (recognized teachings or official religious books), drawing from an exploratory study of Christianity, Judaism and Islam (Campbell, 2007). It has also been observed that layers like hierarchy and structure are intertwined and "related," where priestly roles and perceptions are derived and defined by their practices amid "structural power struggles" within Hindu temple management (Scheifinger, 2010). In this vein, recognition that religious authority is context-dependent complicates and enriches the varied forms of authority.

Authority can also be understood in more relational terms, maintained in dynamic interactions between two realities that manifest and acknowledge the authority. Accordingly, authority is conceptualized as emergent; the "effect of a posited, perceived or institutionally ascribed asymmetry between speaker and audience that permits certain speakers to command not just the attention but the confidence, respect, and trust of their audience,- or an important proviso- to make audiences act *as if* this were so." (Lincoln, 1994, p. 4) In this sense, authority is performative and discursive, involving persuasive claims by leaders to elicit an audience's attention, respect and trust. Religious authority thus can be approached as an order and quality of communication, which in an electronic age is media-derived and dynamically constructed (Cheong, Huang & Poon, 2011).

Hence, religious authority can be vested or constructed; constituted from various perspectives referring to a range of thinking on divinely-related control and influence; to exact obedience, judge, govern and make consequential pronouncements. Its nature is multidimensional and dependent on legitimating systems associated with different cultural expressions. This

interchange enables us to observe its wide-ranging and seasonal applications in multimodal worlds. In this, a growing number of studies have examined or referenced religious authority in the online arena. The next section presents a critical overview of these studies.

### **Mapping Religious Authority and Internet Research**

Past reviews on the state of internet studies have maintained that the field has progressed from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds into “three ages” or multiple stages that somewhat parallel the chronological and ontological development of digital media (Wellman, 2011). This review has similarly found related and overlapping clusters of concepts mirroring the growth of the field. Relationships between religious authority and the internet have been primarily characterized as one of dislocation or coexistence, this is mapped below under two general organizing logics; the logic of disjuncture and displacement, and the logic of continuity and complementarity. The former perspective refers to dominant approaches in which digital media is framed to be corrosive and disruptive to traditional religious authority, stressing an erosion of power for traditional institutions and leaders, to define and determine the meaning of religious symbols.. The latter refers to more recent thinking of digital media connections as being supportive and complementary of religious authority, whose evolving practices are restructuring the legitimacy of their symbols and work contexts, amidst creative and countervailing (re)presentations. Beyond these two themes the tensions in religious authority that are amplified by social media are discussed, followed by further observations about future research.

#### ***The Logic of Disjuncture and Displacement***

The dominant logic is that religious authority is eroded by online religious activities, inspired by initial studies of internet research. Here, the logic of disjuncture involves arguments which propose the relationship between religious authority and new media is characterized by upheaval and/or disconnectedness. Displacement refers to the acts of apparent change or

movement, including supplanting power and furnishing an equivalent authority in place of another. The mainstream conception linking religious authority and the internet is normative, taking hold in the shadow of utopian and dystopian thinking and research in the context of virtual communities. In tandem with the utopian rhetoric accompanying the pioneering stage of web-based developments, earlier research on religion online made extreme claims about religious authority in mainstream and new religious contexts. Early studies proposed that the internet is a distinct and conducive “third space” for spiritual interaction and new flows of religious information and knowledge posed corrosive effects on the influence and jurisdiction of traditional religious authorities. The dominant logic associates offline religious authority with more static models of legitimation, seeing the internet as promoting informational diversity and social fractures that are disruptive to the status quo. In alignment with this logic of discontinuity and displacement, new forms of web-based authorities have also been proposed.

One common view frames online religion as a viable and vibrant alternative, emphasizing its “revolutionary potential” for altering how religious faith is conceived and practiced. At the outset, virtual communities were often regarded as egalitarian, a cyber oasis apart from the practices of traditional and organized religion. For instance, online religious interaction is juxtaposed against offline realities as the internet is said to be a “cybersangha” (religious community or monastic order) with no physical home (Prebish, 2005) and “alternative spiritual sanctuaries with few speech restrictions” (Kim, 2005, p.141). In a similar vein, reports on new religious movements and the virtual church focused on interpretative textual communities, which functioned without a central leader or institution (e.g. O’ Leary, 1996). This emphasis on the disjuncture between online and offline realms implied circumvention of existing face-to-face connections with religious authorities.

Another prevalent view is that the internet challenges authority by expanding access to religious information that can undermine the plausibility structure of a religious system. Many commentators have noted the ways and depth in which religion online is growing in a variety of traditions, as sacred scriptures, expository and devotional materials are available online. Search

engines prompt the use of the internet by many as an online library of textual, audio and visual religious texts. This, in turn, opens up new spaces of persuasion arising from numerous sources of authority. Correspondingly, Soukup (2003) observed there is a shift from the church as “a locus of theology,” as viewers assemble religious guides of their own volition deferring to the authority of the webpage, which appears “completely self-contained” and “free of external certification and gatekeeping”.

As the internet allows access to information previously considered covert or only understood by elites who are certified and/or ordained, it is posited that religious authority may diminish as non-professionals gain greater control over access to religious knowledge. Numerous commentators highlight how many obscure, self-proclaimed religious guides have posted their teachings online, offering lay perspectives to expand their domain of religious discourse. In Islam for example, the ulama (trained Muslim scholars) have long held to the idea that it is not enough to recognize certain texts as authoritative (e.g. Sahih Bukhari, a hadith text from Sunni Islam), but to understand that the texts can only be properly understood by those who are “authorized” to interpret them (Zaman, 2007, p. 28). Commentaries are one of the primary ways that ulama have traditionally disseminated their authoritative views to audiences, but lay Islamist thinkers have co-opted that platform. Anderson noted the rise of new communities of discourse that reflect “creolization.” as commentators “cast religious talk in idioms of speech and thought previously or otherwise allocated to separate speech communities” (p.56). Specifically, it was argued that “what emerges with the Internet is thus a sphere of intermediate people, new interpreters, drawn from these realms and linking them in a new social, public space of alternative voices and authorities” (p. 56).

A related facet of displacement logic points out how the status of authorities and ecclesiastical structure is undermined when followers gain more access to relevant knowledge, since “to preserve status, knowledge is historically often protected by encoding it in jargon, or by restricting access to it in other ways” (Meyrowitz, 1985). In this vein, the internet is viewed as a danger to religious authority because it presents potentially oppositional information that

negatively affects the credibility of religious institutions and leadership. The spread of unorthodox teachings raises attention to the possible weakening of the status of religious leaders as spiritual mentors. For example, Fukamizu (2007) argued that the authority of Japanese Buddhists priests have eroded with electronic forum use, as their followers develop “critical attitudes” and entertain doubts about traditional doctrines and their faith systems from their chat interactions. He also predicted that in “postmodern faith,” “horizontal interaction among religious followers” will be more important than the “vertical, top down of traditional doctrines”.

The internet, by allowing schismatic leaders to emerge, also helps challenge more directly the ability of traditional authorities to define legitimate teachings and symbols. Turner (2007) stated “global information technologies and their associated cultures undermine traditional forms of religious authority because they expand conventional modes of communication, open up new opportunities for debate and create alternative visions of the global community”.(p. 120) He went so far as to propose that it is not difficult for a Muslim to quote some hadiths or issue a fatwa, as “in the modern global media, the ability to claim religious authority has been democratized in the sense that anybody can assume the role of an iman.” (p.120). With the rise of a multiplicity of online “experts,” seekers and believers may now experience increased access and abilities to initiate debates and even actively confront religious authorities with online information. The decline of a religious movement may ensue when leaders appear unwilling or inadequately equipped to deal with perpetrators of perceived deliberate misinformation and heresy online. For example, Introvigne (2005) observed religious leaders of a new Japanese religious movement were largely ineffectual in the face of online rumors, defamation or what was understood as “information terrorism”, it was stated that “the leadership’s reaction was from weak to non-existent.” In part, as a result of “the partially voluntary lack of legal and other reaction against attacks, “it was noted that this religious movement lost almost half of its membership in certain western countries” (p. 112-113). Along the same lines, Cowan (2004) argued that the replication of religious propaganda in countermovement sites, such as anticult and countercult movement sites, confer “the

semblance of authority” on those believed to be the originators of online materials, since these sites frequently refer to the operators of similar sites as “experts.” Because most religious organizations may face limited energies to respond to misrepresentations online, the web “favors the countermovement” and helps further the cause of critics if propagation of (mis)information is their primary agenda (p.266-268).

Furthering the logic of displacement where digital media is perceived to be corrosive and disruptive to traditional religious authority, online forum leaders and web masters have been portrayed as new authority figures. For example, Herring (2005) noted that notwithstanding criticisms and contested decisions, posters in an online Christian news group generally accepted the moderator as a “governing authority” and spiritual advisor. Campbell (2005) speculated that within Christianity, there would be shifts in “congregational power structures,” as formerly discounted “techies” find themselves in new leadership roles. The authority of Buddhist leaders is also displaced by non-monastic authorities like webmasters who are “conceived as the religious specialists or “virtuosi” (in Weber’s terms) for giving definitions and taking the place of monks as disseminators of knowledge” (Taylor, 2003, p. 294). Busch (2011) examined an online Buddhist message forum and concluded that the founder and global moderators discursively and structurally shaped the web environment. This process is said to elevate the authority of the online moderators, as it “inherently allows those in control of the site the authority to set the boundaries of religious orthodoxy and identity and hence, who can take part in the community” (p. 1).

Moreover, it has been anticipated that the internet helps create new mediators associated with new online services, altering the past hierarchical order of established religions. By allowing the conduct of “online ritual activities” functional solely in cyberspace, Helland (2007) argued that cyber-pilgrimages and long-distance ritual practices have enabled diaspora religious groups like the Hindus to develop connections among themselves and to India, although he maintained that it was indeterminate how the presence of puja wizards and scholars on ritual service websites were affecting the activities normally conducted by the temple in the diaspora



community. In a more recent analysis of puja ordering websites, Scheifinger (2010) argued that the puja service professionals were challenging the authority of the temple administration and priests in a “subtle” manner by “determining what should happen at temples and what is acceptable” (p.647), by restricting the participation of non-ethnic Indians, curtailing activities like animal sacrifices and selling the photographs of deities (where temple photography is disallowed). It was noted that the activities of puja service providers also undermined the financial position of priests by reducing the opportunities for them to receive extra monies from devotees visiting the temple, leading to the conclusion that “that those who have traditionally exercised authority are now being bypassed and that when it comes to the ordering of pujas online, it is the independent providers who are the ones exercising authority.” (p. 652).

Collectively, these and other studies highlight how the logic of disjuncture and displacement that undergirds religious authority operates across a spectrum of religious beliefs and backgrounds. Religious interpretation, texts, ecclesiastical structures and positions like webmasters and forum moderators (all framed as components of religious authority) are changed by online communication and the capabilities of the internet to expand resource access, facilitate new ritual practices and support new positions of power. As the internet becomes more popular among the religiously oriented, it is perceived to be a largely, though not universally positive resource for promoting social capital in online religious communication, which is seen by some offline religious leaders as disruptive or destructive.

### ***The Logic of Continuity and Complementarity***

There are alternative perspectives challenging the conceptualization that the internet leads to a decline or crisis of religious authority, mirroring the trajectory of internet studies that has moved away from a focus on online phenomena and its disembodied customs. The logic of continuity involves arguments which propose or reason that the relationship between religious authority and new media is characterized instead by connectedness, succession and negotiation.

Complementarity refers to the acts of interrelation of socio-technical developments that co-constitute and augment authority. The past decade has witnessed a more integrated perspective that grounds the significance of the internet in peoples' everyday lives, particularly the harmonization of online practices with local community building activities. More recently, scholarship has gathered toward investigating the synergetic relationships between online and offline faith beliefs and infrastructures. In this view, offline religious authority is reframed as shaping, sustaining and being sustained by online practices.

So rather than be threatened by the internet, some scholarship has recognized how religious organizations have addressed the presence of new online religious texts and controversial interpretations. For instance, the use of court orders against internet opponents on the basis of copyright infringement and defamation (i.e. false malicious publication) illustrates forceful reactions undertaken by the leadership of the Church of Scientology to address disparaging and hostile online rhetoric (Introvigne, 2005). Another case of a Baha'i oriented discussion group is interesting to note regarding its temporal sequencing of events. Piff & Warburg (2005) proposed that although the discussion group was initially allowed to function without the interference or supervision decentralized of Baha'i institutions, the eventual closure of the email list demonstrated how "American Baha'i authorities" could have "put pressure on individual posters to exercise restraint or self-censorship in expression of their views" (p. 98). As such, it was acknowledged that the chronicling of the rise and fall of this online group suggests that members do acknowledge and abide by the advice and instructions of their organizations. Therefore, "the much heralded bypass opportunity of the internet may be more of an ideal construction than a reality in many cases" (p.98).

In congruence with the logic of continuity and complementarity, Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai (2005) highlighted how ultraOrthodox Jewish elites in Israel controlled online information via censorship and supervision of websites that provided a platform for them to disseminate their teachings and provide counter-narratives to political criticisms. Internet usage, other than for those for professional and economic purposes, was banned as prominent spiritual leaders

issued proclamations that only allowed time for information technology training. It was argued that the process of “culturally shaping” the internet led to the preservation of the hierarchical order of their fundamentalist community and social stratification of their membership.

Campbell (in press) also noted how the Catholic Church has shaped the internet in line with its formal hierarchy and clerical caste led by the Pope via the generation of automated email responses on the Pope’s behalf and dismantlement of online interactive features like the ranking function and comment mode on the Vatican YouTube channel in order to preserve the Vatican’s image and control of new media.

Similarly, albeit in a different context, Kluver & Cheong (2007), in addressing questions of religion and modernization, underscored the logic of complementarity between authority and internet applications. Their study of religious leaders found instead of incongruence and criticism of new technology, cultural compatibilities were expressed between the development of new media and a variety of established faith traditions (i.e. Buddhism, Christian, Muslim, Taoist and Hindu) in the highly wired context of Singapore. Religious leaders largely framed the internet as a positive development for their community and embraced the internet as part of their religious missions and growth strategy. So as “not to subvert religious authority,” several leaders also stressed the tool-like capabilities of the internet to impute neutrality into the medium, “in order to reclaim net-based technologies for their religious practices.”

Still other studies highlight how online religious discourse may not necessarily be inflammatory, critical or damaging to established religious authorities. Cheong, Halverson & Kwon (2008), in a multi-method study of Christian blogs, hyperlinks on blogrolls and interviews, found that several blogs were affiliated with local churches or congregations and many blogged about their engagement with local religious activities and referenced customary religious texts. Drawing from a content analysis, Campbell (2010) also concluded that Christian religious bloggers utilize their blogs to frame authority in ways that “may more often affirm” than assault sources of authority in terms of hierarchy, structure, roles and text.

Furthermore, as an extension of the logic of complementarity, recent scholarship has proposed redefinitions of the constitutions and practices of religious authority to account for its perceived flourishing in increasingly integrated social media platforms (Cheong & Ess, 2012). Horsfield (2012) observed that as digital media have increased “the potential for a diversity of voices”, “the previously recognized criteria of religious authority such as formal qualifications or institutional positions are changing to more fluid characteristics applied by audiences, such as a person’s charisma, accessibility and perceived cultural competence.” Indeed, there appears to be changes in the modes of authority production as some religious leaders have expanded their scope of influence restructuring their communicative practices online, bridging and bonding forms of social capital to spur administrative and operational effectiveness (Cheong & Poon, 2008).

An emerging corpus of studies highlights how religious leaders are weaving social media into their vocation. Lee (2009) illustrated how Won Buddhist priests have created personal blogs on Cyworld for self-cultivation, empowerment and development of the relationship between leadership and laity. It was documented that some of the open diaries of monks and nuns were used to demystify the ideal life of a priest as pure and pious, depict their accommodation and loyalty amid the dominant and gendered norms of their organization, or used to “indirectly deliver” sermons to young Buddhists and potential believers. Fisher-Nielsen (2012) also stressed that Google, Facebook and YouTube have been integrated into the working lives of pastors. In an analysis of results from a survey completed by 1,040 pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, he found that 95 % of them are online daily and a significant proportion (94% of the pastors aged between 25 and 39 years) regarded the internet as having positive influence on their work. Two-thirds of the respondents reported that the Internet had “caused more frequent contact with parishioners” and most endorsed “flesh and blood,” “real church practice” in lieu of cyberchurch rituals and web-based services.

In this way, some commentators claim that the internet via social media platforms is an avenue of renewal, rejuvenating the life (and legitimacy) of religious organizations. Lomborg & Ess

(2012) noted how the presence of a Danish church on Facebook was praised in terms of its “progressive”, “brand value”. In another analysis of Muslim-oriented podcasts, it was asserted that leaders may expand their authority through self-promotion and representation on multimedia platforms where podcasts are utilized with older media. (Scholz, Selge, Stille & Zimmerman, 2008) In particular, it was argued Muslim groups may disseminate doctrine and reinforce existing power structures by extending of a group leader presence via podcasting technologies; “the authority necessary to legitimize this specific interpretation of Islamic belief and practice is generated by a set of acoustic and visual features signaling “Islamic” authenticity to the listener and by the bias of steady references to the high educational level (in terms of a traditional Islamic education) of the podcasts’ key speakers” (p.508).

Hence, to adapt pragmatically to an increasingly pluralistic spiritual sphere or “religious marketplace,” leaders and laity are encouraged to enter into agreements characterized not merely by offline dogmatic pronouncements, but increasingly also by clergy’s new competencies to connect interactively across a spectrum of media to persuasively reach congregational members (Cheong, Huang & Poon, 2011). Clergy are proposed to be adjusting their social identity from that of commanders and sages, to guides and mediators of knowledge and encounters both online and offline, an approach that Cheong, Huang & Poon (2011) have termed “strategic arbitration.” Such strategic arbitration online facilitates the co-creation of information and expertise under conditions where laity cooperation is elicited by retaining discretionary power among the leadership to determine informational and interpersonal outcomes such that they do not destabilize the organization.

For example, findings from a study of Christian pastors showed how leaders monitored their online communication (e.g. by selectively curbing email response) and justified the validity of their authority (e.g. by drawing upon scripture and stressing their own interpretations via new “online ministries” and branding activities) in order to reinforce normative regulation (Cheong, Huang & Poon, 2011). In another study drawing from in-depth interviews found Buddhist leaders also constructed their authority by promoting communication influence through offline-

online mediation that in turn restores trust and increases congregational epistemic dependence upon them (Cheong, Huang & Poon, in press). The study illustrated how Buddhist leaders principally rechanneled online resources and messages back to priest and laity relationships by a) stressing the benefits of Dharma classes and personalized real life mentoring connections, which in some cases were framed as sacred relational ties or “karmic links,” b) promoting sensorial ritual practices (e.g. meditation and blessings) and festivals (e.g. Vesak or Buddha’s birthday celebrations) enacted in the presence of monks and nuns within perceived temple sacred grounds, and c) enacting multi-modal outreach across digital platforms. Findings also showed that Buddhist clergy were actively involved in heightening their web presence to meet demands for cognitive coherence in “low and high tech” representations so as to strengthen congregational affective interest and organizational loyalty.

In contemporary times, therefore, an added dimension of the logic of complementarity includes transmediation, a process whereby authority practices are appropriated and remediated across different communication platforms (Cheong, 2011). Given new media’s affordances to amplify the religious leaders’ ability to reach faith seekers and believers, Lee & Sinitiere (2009) highlighted how media-savvy evangelical pastors or “holy mavericks” have attracted attention to their high-growth organizations in part by their vigorously adoption of corporate organizational branding in contemporary conditions of media convergence. Support for these religious authorities, who typically have a strong brand presence online appears strong, because they are generally believed to be able to reconcile a duality of concern with the “other-worldliness” of spiritual life and the “this-worldliness” of new media marketing. In parallel, inscribed in recent expressively titled publications like *The Reason Your Church Must Twitter* (Coppedge, 2009) is religiously tinted discourse that advocates for priests to adopt social media to advance their outreach and missions. There have been multiple ways in which churches have incorporated the use of Twitter and other micro-blogging practices into their daily institutional practices to create “ambient religious communication” and a sense of connected presence among members (Cheong, 2010). For example, in some cases, the creation of “Twitter Sundays” encouraged members to tweet their reflections and questions throughout the service, but it is

pertinent to note that tweets are typically reviewed by church staff and then posted as scrolling visual messages on a screen behind the preaching pastor.

In sum, a growing body of research points to the recurrent logic of continuity and complementarity of religious authority, situated in the contemporary zeitgeist surrounding internet use as incrementally and routinely incorporated within individual, collective and institutional norms, practices and orderings. As the literature demonstrates, while religious leaders are recognized to be increasingly dependent on online resources to a certain extent, overall, they are increasingly portrayed to be adaptive and exercising significant control by, for instance, curtailing the negative impact of false and inflammatory interpretations to reclaim their audience's respect and trust. Furthermore, religious leaders have also been portrayed as assuming expanded competencies as strategic arbitrators of online-offline religious information to restore relational bonds and credibility, important to the development of convergent multimedia and corporate promotional strategies.

### **The Logic of Dialectics and Paradox and other Future Research Directions**

This chapter offers a critical conceptual framework to articulate the multiple links between new media and religious authority. It is clear from the above discussion that the internet facilitates both the weakening and strengthening of religious authority, offering possibilities for conflict, yet also understanding and accommodation. This insight of the dual logics prompts further examination of a dialectical perspective in mediated culture. . The dialectical perspective to new media and culture recognizes the simultaneous presence of two relational forces of interaction of their seeming opposite, interdependence and complementary aspects, akin to eastern philosophies (like yin and yang) on the completion of relative polarities (Cheong, Martin & Macfadyen, 2012). Here, the logic of dialectics on religious authority would imply understanding the management of conflicting tensions, uneven gains, multiple opportunities, ambivalences and challenges that new media users like religious leaders face within their online and offline experiences (Cheong & Ess, 2012). As Schement & Stephenson (1996) noted, religion

has to be understood in terms of “endemic tensions”; localized and prevalent aspects of continuity and change, consumption and worship that constitute “unavoidable frictions” in the private and public spheres of religious practice within the information society. In effect, further research needs to investigate the ways religious leaders manage and resolve ambiguities in their ongoing negotiation of socio-technical tensions, for example, their negotiations of privacy and connectivity, over and under exposure with new digital, mobile and geo-locational media applications.

To be sure, a small but growing number of studies have already observed the countervailing tendencies and double meanings of mediated religious authority. For instance, Barker (2005) suggested that the Internet can undermine “the strong vertical authority structure” and provide “an alternative source of information to be disseminated by the movement’s leaders and enable this to be communicated through horizontal networks.” Cheong, Huang & Poon (in press) recognized how online competing resources can also serve as a source of education, serving to enhance a priest’s authority relating to and involving knowledge since the latter is able to move beyond dictating to that of mediating between texts. In other words, “a paradox of epistemic authority is that it may be more effective when followers possess some level of knowledge that enables them to evaluate the legitimacy of clergy’s knowledge”, for example, in instances when congregational members converse with leaders by referring to established and new religious texts, which allows clergy to display their proficiency and sophistication by addressing their specific concerns. Lomberg & Ess (2012) stated that Facebook friendships may be relationally rewarding for leaders seeking to build closer relationships with their members, but it is “a delicate balance to strike as this strategic presentation of the pastor as an ordinary person also possibly entails a risk of jeopardizing the professional respect and authority so important for a pastor in his work and leadership within the community.” Thus, these studies suggest the logic of dialectics and paradox as leaders struggle, negotiate and build tensions related to processes of digital mediation in their work as they attempt to reconstruct religious authority. This interesting, complex and somewhat counter-intuitive relationship warrants conceptual expansion and future-focused attention.



In a related manner, future research on religious authority should consider broadening the data repertoire to more accurately capture and archive overtime developments in clergy communication. Methodologically, earlier studies have drawn their conclusions mostly from participant observation in virtual communities, while more recent studies have employed the use of interviews, content analyses and case studies. A few studies have employed quantitative methods like surveys and hyperlink analyses, prompting further consideration of new ways in which qualitative and quantitative data collection could be deployed to investigate religious authority in research studies. For example, webliometrics which refers to a quantitative research method in information science used to analyze online patterns, could be used and triangulated with qualitative methods like interviews and content analyses, in order to more comprehensively understand the propositions of corrosion, maintenance and reconstruction of religious authority.

To conclude, in light of the scarce systematic attention to the topic of religious authority in digital contexts, this chapter performed an initial mapping of the broad contours of research developments to illuminate key relationships undergirding authority in an increasingly mediated era. While coverage within an article is necessarily limited, it is hoped that this overview identified significant themes that were illustrated across a range of studies and religious traditions. A meta-theoretical perspective to authority and communication technologies serves as a useful heuristic learning and discovery device for understanding emerging new media and its implications for religious authority.

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