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The vitality of new media and religion: Communicative perspectives, practices, and changing authority in spiritual organization

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Abstract
We are witnessing the growth of a distinct sub-field focusing on new media and religion as the relationship between the two is not just important, it is vital. I discuss in this article how this vitality is both figurative and literal in multiple dimensions. Mediated communication brings forth and constitutes the (re)production of spiritual realities and collectivities, as well as co-enacts religious authority. In this way, new mediations grounded within older communication practices serve as the lifeblood for the evolving nature of religious authority and forms of spiritual organizing. Further research to identify diverse online and embodied religious communication practices will illuminate a richer understanding of digital religion, especially as a globally distributed phenomenon.

The topic of religion has garnered increasing interest in communication scholarship in recent years. Researchers have investigated varied areas like the influence of various belief systems in coping with crisis and health issues, group spiritual identity and the links between meditation and communication training, although historically these inter-sections have been less examined (e.g. see special issue on Religion and Spirituality in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research,* edited by Laura Stafford & Prabu

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David, 2011). In particular, it is significant that we are witnessing the growth of a distinct subfield focusing on new media and religion as the relationship between the two is not just important, it is vital.

I discuss in this article how this vitality is both figurative and literal in multiple dimensions. Mediated communication brings forth and constitutes the (re)production of spiritual realities and collectivities, as well as co-enacts religious authority. In this way, new mediations serve as the lifeblood for religious organizing and animate religious activism, at local and global scales. I would like to begin by discussing the constitutive role of communication for spiritual organizing and then consider the communicative constitution of religious authority and agency of spiritual leaders, illustrating these key themes with examples from recent fieldwork.

Religious organization as emergent through everyday and mediated communication

Communicative perspectives provide a portal to studying the relationship between digital media and religion by starting from the premise that religious organization is constituted through everyday online and offline interactions. Here, the study of communication is understood not primarily as the transmission of religious ideas or symbols in particular channels (Carey, 2009). Instead, religion, in particular, religious organization is conceptualized as emerging *in* communication and living media practices, as discursive exchanges embedded in everyday mediation, transmediation, and remediation processes across different linked, mobile and networked platforms in our present convergence culture.

This communicatively constitutive view of religion draws upon prior communication research on the constitution of non-profit and spiritual organizations (e.g. Cheong et al., 2011a; Brummans et al., 2013; Cheong et al., 2014; McPhee and Iverson, 2009). It takes into account the distinctive role of language and other symbolic acts as forms of action as they compose representations of human and ecclesiastical relations, create meaning, and orient us to wider physical and supranatural worlds. In this way, the ideas are related to recent work on the mediation (Meyer, 2008) and mediatization of religion (Hjarvard, 2008 & Lundby, 2013) that focus on novel media technologies as intrinsic to religion and consequential for religious developments. Even so, the theoretical and empirical foci here is on the everyday practices of spiritual organizing and authority (re)construction through communication, with more cognizance of religious actors' and leaders' agency; a research lacuna identified in preceding discussions on the mediatization of religion (Lovheim, 2011) and society (Pallas et al., 2014).

Correspondingly, theorizing religion from a communicative perspective attunes the study of religious organizing not merely to their abstract and objective entities. The analytic foci are not on impressive telecommunications infrastructure, or whether churches and temples have a website, social media network, and other visible forms of online presence. Rather, religious organizations are understood to be co-"enacted" (Weick, 1979) in the ongoing, and often mediated, interactions between leaders, stakeholders, members, and non-members, which make these socio-material systems present as identifiable unities on a local and global stage. In other words, a religious organization is dynamically brought forth in everyday communication that allows the reproduction of a collective "self" with symbolic and material characteristics, such as a coherent discourse expounding a specific philosophy and recognizable artifacts (Cheong et al., 2014).

This communication-centered perspective implies that we have to pay attention to how leaders, members, and online interactants appropriate digital media alongside other traditional and interpersonal interfaces to communicate and by doing so, construct their organization. This is because communicative processes help a religious collectivity reproduce itself through the creation of linguistic and material boundaries with its environment and auto-communication practices (Broms and Gahmberg, 1983). Auto-communication or self-referentiality in spiritual organizing includes daily and customary online practices such as informing internal and external audiences about the organization's accomplishments and answered prayers or making spiritual leaders' mantras and teachings present on an iterative basis (Cheong et al., 2014).

Approaching religion as discursive, dynamic, and performative, informs fresh empirical investigations and grounded theory in digital religion, including a broadened understanding of new forms of spiritual organizing and religious authority. To be sure, some forms of spiritual organizing are changing and being restructured. Various faith institutions, chiefly in Western modern societies, have been pictured as waning and declining in numbers, importance, and prosperity (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). Yet their disestablishment in a mediated world is neither definite nor destined, and some spiritual outfits have instead experienced exponential growth and global extensions. Substantively, in vivo analyses of religion and new media within religious organizational contexts illuminate their synergetic, even harmonious although not necessarily friction-free concurrence.

Indeed, while newer media are usually perceived as being revolutionary in that they destabilize spatio-temporal orders and rankle institutional hierarchies (Sassen, 2008), digital and social media can afford the sustenance and reinforcement of a spiritual organization by enabling its internal and external stakeholders to coproduce it communicatively as an operationally closed social system in a competitive global context. This process is evident for instance, in the ways in which faith believers have appropriated digital media within their larger communicative ecology to build their church and temple brands as a distinct and recognizable organizational voice. Mediated communication facilitates strategic storytelling via the self-conscious use of corporate inspired narrative techniques (Twitchell, 2007) and brandversations (Musa and Ibrahim, 2012) to generate cultural capital in the religious marketplace of ideas. Research has also illustrated how various churches and temples have designed and constructed their multi-mediated web presence to compose geospatial data and visualizations of transnational community. This is in part accomplished through the combined use of images, audiovisuals, and interactivity in addition to maps, texts (e.g. description of upcoming festivals or sermon series), and numbers (e.g. membership size) that enables sight and sound to be connected to place that reinforces religious community building, both real and imagined (Cheong et al., 2009).

Moreover, the latest social media appropriations may play a vivifying role in religious organizations' ongoing adaptation and composition as spiritual communities. Congregants use Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube fora to engage in regular posting of updates to inform and celebrate their activities and accomplishments, and thereby legitimize the organization's *raison d'être*. Members also use social media to develop their own prayer icons and terms to promote organizational unity. They share and "like" intercessory requests to galvanize others toward communal interaction, and in doing so, participate in the coproduction of the organization's universe of meaning (Cheong et al., 2014). In this regard, what is particularly interesting is how essential seemingly trivial, even routine

practices like posting online updates are for the enactment of religious organizations. They can make a difference by "scaling up," one social media post at a time, to reproduce the unity of its more or less coherent linguistic and material domain. Put differently, new media play a vital role in diverse forms of religious organizing, but their role is not causally determined in a technologically deterministic mode. Rather, ongoing mediated communicative acts coproduce a "virtual self" (Varela, 1999), a social collectivity that acts as a coherent whole, and whose spiritual aspirations, operations, and success depends on communicatively constitutive forces.

Religious authority as communication

By conceptualizing religion as emerging *in* communication, religious authority is understood not only to arise from sacred tradition, appointment to a superior office, and perceived charisma of being instilled with divine or supernatural powers. Religious authority can be understood in more relational and emergent terms, as co-created and maintained in dynamic interactions between leaders and followers who acknowledge the asymmetric and consequential nature of their exchanges (Cheong, 2012a; Cheong et al., 2011a; Lincoln, 1994). In particular, a communicatively constitutive point of view highlights how authority is performed through everyday discourse and enables peoeple to work out a sense of negotiated order where role and status distinctions are contested and accomplished in continuous acts of authoring (Brummans et al., 2013; Cheong et al., 2011b; Taylor and Van Every, 2011). As such, depending on the context, contemporary religious authority and organizing not only involves but often depends on the appropriation of new media.

In line with this perspective, and contrary to popular depiction of clergy resistance to technology, the relationship between new media and religious authority is not ineludibly antagonistic as spiritual officials restructure their communication to incorporate online resources to inform and inspire their work. Religious leaders can practice forms of strategic arbitration between competing online and offline texts such that internet use facilitates the co-creation of information and expertise, and stimulates normative behaviors that do not destabilize the church. Christian pastors have done so by drawing upon scripture to support their own interpretations and reinforce trust via digital and face to face meetings to elicit laity cooperation and online civic conduct. Prior empirical investigations have also shown that clergy are engaging in pastoral care and spiritual support by sending prayers, embarking on new online ministries to debate with members and seekers, and promoting their voice online with the publication of blogs, vlogs and devotionals to strengthen congregational affective interest and organizational loyalty (Cheong et al, 2011a). Buddhist priests have recommended online teachings alongside interpersonal mentoring and corporeal rituals within perceived sacred spaces in temple grounds, thereby enabling them to influence epistemic dependence and perform ultimate arbitration (Cheong et al., 2011b). Thus, it is significant to recognize in what ways and to what extent clergy, despite their changing roles, pragmatically view communication technologies as a means to relegitimize their authority, and increase their personal charisma by employing pedagogic styles not possible before.

Accordingly, a central characteristic of new media in relation to religion is its complementarity with older forms of communication (Campbell and Lövheim, 2011). The

newest social media and mobile apps or application software oftentimes play an integral role in concert with existing communication landscapes and media ensembles, to augment and sustain pastoral legitimacy and power (Cheong and Ess, 2012). Furthermore, religious leaders worldwide have adopted twitter and other microblogging tools to create a personal branded identity and broadcast their activities and accomplishments to elicit member feedback and support (Cheong, 2014). Tweets have been appropriated by clergy to quote, remix, and interpret Scripture, for example, by combining Biblical passages with personal aphorisms and by capitalizing certain words to direct followers' attention on where their focus on a verse should be (Cheong, 2016). Members can also influence the co-constitution of religious authority by invoking clergy figures through their speech and online social media interactions, such that leaders become inscribed or voiced into members' authoring of the organization. By calling or writing revered figures into their daily multimodal and online practices, followers' communication brings religious authority into play and presentify their authority, even in their physical absence. (Brummans et al., 2013).

Consequently, while online interactions certainly allow for contestation and debate, it is not uncommon to find comparatively few contentious or disparaging comments on religious authority located within the discursive domain of an organization's digital and social media. For instance, multiple studies to date have highlighted discourse mostly supportive of religious leadership and ideology on interactive digital fora. Results from studies grounded in different faith systems have amply demonstrated how online interactivity helps facilitate operational closures on critical views, bolster informational gate-keeping practices, and support the viral circulation of memes affirming church philosophy (e.g. Burroughs, 2013; Cheong et al., 2014; Cheong et al., 2011a; Hutchings, 2011; Knowles, 2013). Certainly, this does not obviate the possibility that resistance to authority can surface elsewhere and in varied forms like the emergence of consensus-based authority on religious issues attributed to television celebrities (e.g. Clark, 2011). However, there are several plausible reasons for exhortative online echo chambers of a spiritual nature, not least because leaders and members seek to present a virtual, coherent self by communicatively reinforcing their distinctiveness and collective understanding.

This is not to assert that the communicative constitution of religious authority is without ambivalence or challenges. Dialectical tensions or the concurrent hybrid existence of opposing forces in mediated practices exists (Cheong and Ess, 2012; Cheong et al., 2012) and deserves closer inspection in the relationship between new media and religion (Cheong and Arasa, 2015). As Lomborg and Ess (2012) point out, even as Facebook friendships are moderately fruitful for pastors seeking to foster closer ties with their members, leaders experience tensions as they negotiate a delicate balance between presenting a relatable persona to laity and exhibiting professionalism in leadership within their community. Furthermore, far from being effortless and straightforward, the latest microblogging communication fueling the construction of a carefully crafted yet necessarily condensed version of branded identity simultaneously entails considerations of culturally and situationally appropriate disclosure and privacy. Clergy have to share and manage followers' evolving demands and expectations about if, when, and how leaders should connect with them, including the consequences of oversharing on social media (see, for example, Church of England officials' publication of nine social media commandments, Payne, 2014). Dialectical tensions ensue when clerics are pressed to

broadcast mediated updates without cessation, yet also encouraged toward quiet and humble acts of service and the maintenance of communicative limits with Sabbath rest (Cheong, 2012b; Cheong, 2016). These realities further underscore how contemporary religious authority is negotiated and enacted through mediated communication, in complex, even paradoxical ways.

Concluding thoughts and future research

In conclusion, this essay has briefly discussed the theoretical and empirical importance of recognizing mediated communicative acts and processes in constituting religious organizations and authority. Further conceptual and field inquiry into the (re)vitalizing role of new mediated communication, in play with existing face to face and older mediated practices within organizations in different cultural contexts will create more robust and holistic theories explaining the significance of new media for religion. Drawing from the above discussion, the following sections identify desiderata for research to further a more diverse and vibrant future for the burgeoning, if still nascent, literature on new media and religion.

Specifically, given that much of existing scholarship in this domain is nourished by studies rooted in the North American and European spheres (Tracey, 2012), the task in this respect is to encourage a healthy diversification in terms of the type of faith traditions, geographies, and communication processes explained. Considerable advances may be made by recognizing and supporting future studies centered in non-western cultural communities encompassing a wider variety of bodies, voices, and standpoints, to generate new insights in an age of dazzling human and congregational variety.

For one, the lion's share of cited research related to the mediatization of religion is articulated within the contexts of post-protestant western experiences and tendencies toward accelerated individualism, erosion of established religious traditions and skepticism of authority and its institutions, within democratic environments where media can or has served as the primary sources of information about religious issues in society. This means that social change and long term outcomes of mediation are not largely understood in contexts committed to collective values and participation, or where group solidarity and social harmony remain sufficiently important for religious communicative practices to support the familial and communitarian status quo or abide by government regulations or censorship of various media content about religion. A welcome step forward is further research in non-Anglo-Saxon cultures to fine tune understandings of distinct religious beliefs about media and the discursive mechanisms facilitating new media use in everyday organizing, like for instance, identifying the principles of *yuan* or karmic affinities in mediated global religious outreach (Cheong et al., 2014) and how *guanxi* or affective bonds operates within legal and political constrains in transnational religious networks (e.g. Cheong and Poon, 2009). Likewise, what would be useful is to explore how digital media use may facilitate communicative processes where religious symbols are not just disembedded but also re-embedded within institutional contexts, circulated and reinterpreted through organizations and purposes largely managed by formal religious and/or political leaders in the public sphere.

Related to the above, greater appreciation of the mediated and non-mediated communicative acts that constitute religious organizing will prompt further research to move

beyond online observational data collection and analyses per se. As the review on virtual communities by Hercheui (2011) points out, more integral methodological approaches are needed to help us understand how organizations influence online interactive spaces, particularly the motivations and incentives for online behaviors. Therefore, future research should consider a triangulation of mixed methods of research, including web-based, quantitative, and qualitative investigations (Cheong et al., 2015). The employment of mixed methods may necessitate input from practitioners outside academia, as well as the formation of multidisciplinary research teams with extended research timelines and increased tolerance for risk, to drive methodological innovation and discovery through collaboration. Further comparative research and persistent longitudinal analyses beyond one shot case studies will also elucidate insights into the tensions and paradoxes in religious organizing and authority overtime, to yield even finer, more complex understandings of new media and religion.

As this subfield grows and gains greater prominence, another welcome step forward is to consider how communicative processes may mobilize and enact religious activism toward prosocial outcomes. Given the salience of digital and social media in religious organizing, future studies could fine-tune understandings of the discursive mechanisms that animate faith inspired or oriented enterprises and social change. And furthermore, building on the insights already gained from research in this sphere, what would be useful is to explore the communicative accomplishment of religious authority for social healing, renewal, and restoration, even possibly to ameliorate the current cynicism some have about the future of religious leadership and institutions.

In sum, investigating the profundity of communicative experiences and its differentiated manifestation will enrich the subfield of new media technologies and religion. Future studies on religious communication, building upon the promising work already being done, will illuminate a richer and more comprehensive picture of the immense and constantly evolving vista of digital religion, especially as a globally distributed phenomenon.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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